

## **Marxism and Human Nature: a reply to Terry Eagleton**

*This reply to Eagleton's review of Marxism and Human Nature was commissioned by New Left Review and written in November 1999. After accepting it they mislaid the manuscript and then refused to publish it.*

Something about my book, *Marxism and Human Nature*,<sup>1</sup> seems to have provoked Eagleton's hostility and clouded his mind, but it is difficult to figure out what. All that is evident from his review is that he has not read the book carefully or taken the trouble to understand it properly.<sup>2</sup> He begins by saying that the book proposes an argument which is 'bold, graphic and firmly delineated' (150), but he immediately loses sight of this and launches into mockery and knockabout. Instead of engaging with what I have actually written he sets up a series of caricature examples and arguments of his own which he then charges with 'ambiguity', 'inconsistency', 'confusion' and 'unclarity'. The confusion and unclarity are entirely of Eagleton's own making. They are created by the crude and uncritical assumptions that he brings with him in advance – assumptions which it is a major purpose of the book to challenge and criticise.

The book presents a Hegelian historicist interpretation of Marx's philosophy. It spells out and defends a historical account of human nature and explores its moral and social implications. Two opposed positions have dominated recent controversy in this area. On the one hand, Marxism is sometimes treated as a form of 'anti-essentialism' or 'anti-humanism' which rejects the notion of human nature altogether. Others, by contrast, maintain that this leads to a disastrous relativism and that Marxism must hang on to the notion of a universal human nature in order to provide a grounding for its social theory and critical values. Often it is assumed that these are the only alternatives. But they are not: Marxism, I argue, involves a historical account of human nature distinct from either. According to this, human nature – our basic needs, powers and capacities – is not fixed and universal; it evolves and changes, socially and historically. Such change is not a merely contingent and accidental fact about us, it is fundamental to our character as human

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<sup>1</sup>*Marxism and Human Nature*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998.

<sup>2</sup>'Self-realization, Ethics, and Socialism', *New Left Review* 237, September-October 1999, pp. 150-161.

beings, it is part of our nature. And the specific course of such change is not a merely contingent matter either, it is governed by historical laws. These views, I show, lead neither to moral relativism nor to an untenable universalism, but to a historical form of humanism.

Eagleton completely fails to comprehend this position, it seems to be beyond his grasp. The very idea that human nature is historical is too much for him. From the outset, and apparently without realising that he is doing so, he adopts a set of assumptions which simply exclude it *a priori*. He presupposes that the two positions just outlined are the only possibilities. Either there is a fixed universal human nature, or human characteristics are nothing but a set of arbitrary socially constructed contingencies.

At first Eagleton simply asserts this view as if it were a straightforward fact of ordinary linguistic usage. By 'nature', he tells us, 'we mean those features of a thing which arise from the kind of thing it is ... not just from the contingencies it undergoes' (150). Eagleton does not pause to explain who 'we' are supposed to be here. In any case, it evidently excludes the whole Hegelian tradition and adherents to other forms of historicism besides. It is naive to imagine that philosophical issues can be settled by an appeal to 'what we mean' in this way, as the sorry history of ordinary language philosophy has shown; but that lesson seems to have passed Eagleton by. We Hegelians can only respond that we are using the term 'nature' differently, to express the theory that change and development arise from the 'kind of thing' that human beings are, and that this theory is perfectly intelligible to anyone whose mind is open to it.

Instead of engaging with what I actually say in the book itself, Eagleton tries to dismiss the historical account of human nature with a series of deliberately absurd and grotesque caricatures. 'Laying eggs belongs to a hen's nature, as tearing its feathers in a fight does not ... to claim that anything a hen does is of its nature is to empty the term "nature" of significance.' (150) True – but this example and these claims are Eagleton's not mine. 'If one holds that an empirical description of how things contingently evolve is all that we can stretch to, then one would be well-advised to drop the confusing use of the word "nature" altogether.' (151) True again – but to claim that human nature is historical is precisely to reject the assumptions that Eagleton is here making. It involves the view that social relations and historical change are not mere contingencies for us, they are fundamental and essential features of our character as human beings. Such change, moreover, does not occur in an arbitrary and purely contingent fashion, it

follows a path governed by historical laws and historical necessities.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar vein Eagleton accuses me of 'historicizing away' (151) any notion of universal human nature. He says that I do not 'see that "nature" refers to the way that our fellow creatures bear in on us ... in the very material constitution of our bodies.' (150)<sup>4</sup> This charge is unwarranted, as I argue at length in the book (chapter 9). To maintain that human nature is historical is not to deny that there are universal – i.e., transhistorical – features to it. Specifically, it is not to deny that we are also material, bodily beings. We are *both* historical and material beings, and we are the one on the basis of the other. It is not a matter of either/or. This is another thought which seems beyond Eagleton's grasp. Of course there are universal and relatively unchanging human characteristics, such as biological ones.<sup>5</sup> To take Eagleton's example, the need for drink is a human universal which we have in virtue of the facts of our constitution as biological organisms. However, such biological universals are only the most abstract and general aspects of our needs. There is more to be said about human nature than this. And this 'more' must be brought into the picture before human nature can play its proper role in grounding either social explanation or moral values, which is the essential role it plays in social theory and moral thought.

Thus, to explain why people act as they do in particular circumstances we must take into account not only the bare universal need to drink which they have as biological organisms, but the historically developed form of this need which they have as specifically located social beings. Similarly, in order for an appeal to human nature to function as the basis for the distinctive critical and moral values of Marxism, human nature must be conceived in its historically developed form. In saying this, I do not deny that there are many – all too many – situations in the world where even people's most basic physical needs are not met and where these therefore can serve as a standard by which to criticise such conditions and the system which gives rise to them. What I do argue, however, is that the distinctive moral vision of Marxism involves more

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<sup>3</sup>See *Marxism and Human Nature*, pp. 159-63.

<sup>4</sup>Eagleton mistakenly equates this materiality with Marx's 'species being'. In fact, Marx means something very different by this phrase: the human capacity for self-conscious and free activity. See *Early Writings*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1975, pp. 327-9.

<sup>5</sup>I say 'relatively' unchanging because biological characteristics are also subject to change, but on an evolutionary rather than a historical time scale.

than the minimum notion of a society in which basic and universal needs are met. Beyond that, Marx envisages a society which promotes all-round development, the human being 'rich' in needs,<sup>6</sup> 'the absolute working out of [human] creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the prior historical development.'<sup>7</sup> This whole way of thinking, as Marx here says and as I show, is based upon and arises out of a historical conception of human needs and human nature. The values to which such an account leads involve a naturalistic and eudaemonistic morality of self-realization. Eagleton is more receptive to this aspect of my position and his discussion of it usefully points to some of the problems and issues with which such an account must deal (Should all potentialities be realised? Is self development always good?). However, when I go on to locate this approach within the context of recent debates in analytic philosophy about Marxism and morality, Eagleton is soon flaying around and floundering again. For the historical approach, I argue, avoids the standard either/or alternatives which both Eagleton and these analytic philosophers presuppose *a priori*. It grounds values neither on a universal conception of right or human nature, nor is it a mere relativism. Instead, I argue, the values of Marxism are founded on a theory of history which regards historical development as a progressive process.

Eagleton has a particular aversion to this theory. He dismisses it as a 'teleological' theory, which it is not. Just as a biologist may see evolution as progressive yet understand it in causal terms (as did Darwin), so too with history. Eagleton also charges the theory of progress with being a form of historical 'determinism', which it is. But so what? What is wrong with determinism? Eagleton does not say, as if the very name were enough to damn it ('we' don't talk that way presumably). Anyway, Eagleton simply dismisses the notion of historical progress out of hand, even while acknowledging that it is a central feature of both Hegel and Marx's philosophies.

According to Marx, history must be seen as a progressive development through successive stages. This theory of history constitutes the overall framework of Marx's moral thought. There are considerable problems with this theory and there are other, conflicting, strands in Marx's historical thought, as Eagleton points out. These are to the fore when Marx is engaged in the detailed analysis of particular historical situations and events. I readily acknowledge this. However, I do not explore these issues in the book. My primary aim in it is to clarify the larger

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<sup>6</sup>Marx, *Early Writings*, p. 356; cf *Grundrisse*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 409.

<sup>7</sup>*Grundrisse*, p. 488.

philosophical form of Marx's concept of human nature and his moral thought. These, as I show, can be understood only in terms of a progressive account of history which Marx, like Hegel and many other of his contemporaries, held.

Nor do I deal at any length with the important question of how tenable such a theory of history remains today. My primary purpose in the book is theoretical. It is to explain the Hegelian and historicist interpretation of Marxism in philosophical terms and develop an account of human nature and moral values in terms of it. I do this mainly in the context of contemporary currents of philosophy, both analytical and continental, rather than in relation to current events.

It may be that the whole historical approach is inconsistent and my presentation of it unclear as Eagleton charges. But he has not shown this. Rather he has come to it with a set of stock theoretical prejudices which render it incomprehensible and exclude it *a priori*. As Eagleton says, the Hegelian historicist line of thought is deeply 'unfashionable' at present. Nevertheless it constitutes a fundamental part of Marx's own intellectual formation and it is a major strand of the Marxist philosophical tradition. It is regrettable that it should receive such careless and ignorant treatment in *New Left Review*. It offers a way of resolving some of the central problems of contemporary philosophy – problems which remain insoluble on the basis of the either/or assumptions which run through so much of this philosophy and which are accepted so uncritically by Eagleton. Hopefully your readers will sense that where there is smoke there is often fire, and that behind this cloud of caricature and incomprehension from Eagleton there may lie a way of interpreting Marx's philosophy which Eagleton has simply failed to grasp.

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