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# Marxian Conception of Human Nature: A Rival Theory of Christianity

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**Abstract**

*Marxism and Christianity are often labeled as rival ideologies in the history of western philosophy. Both theories have given different interpretations of the goal of human life. The aim of this paper is to do a comparative study of Marxian and Christian views of human nature. Karl Marx has presented a materialistic account of human nature quite distinct from the traditional account as preached by the Christianity. He was more concerned about the scientific way of interpreting the nature of man. Marx should be regarded not merely as an economic and social theorist, he must be considered as a philosopher for advocating the idea of estranging men from a dominating society. But the method he employed to do so is economical in nature. We cannot deny the fact that economic conditions are extremely required while studying human history and social situations. And before Marx people are not much aware of this fact. Marx can be given a great deal of appraisal in view of the certitude that we are now at least aware of this without much difficulty. Although Marxian ideologies are extremely influential, his ideas are also open to some serious criticisms which will be addressed in the later sections of the paper.*

**Key Words:** Human Nature, Karl Marx, Marxian, Christianity, Rival, Human Life.

## 1. Introduction:

Born in 1818, Karl Marx, who belonged to a Christian family, abandoned his religion in a very early period of his life. The drifts of his ideas were mainly deterministic and materialistic. As a proposed social scientist, Marx aims to demonstrate each human phenomenon with the help of scientific methods, as he perceived them. It is a matter of fact that there are other philosophers who have employed the same methodology as Marxism, especially those of the Enlightenment tradition. But what is peculiar to Marx is that he has

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employed this scientific method to study the "historical development of human societies" (Stevenson and Haberman 135). Marx cannot be called a reductionist because he never claimed that every phenomenon could be described with regard to physical science. According to him, human history is operated also by the socio-economic laws which are prevalent in society. The socio-political changes that occurred in the human history can also be justified by employing these laws.

In the development of his philosophical ideas, Marx was largely influenced by the thoughts of Hegel. He was so inspired by Hegelian ideas that he even quit his legal education and dedicated himself to the philosophical queries. He has adopted basic philosophical methodologies of Hegel and proposed a materialistic account of human history. Similar to Hegelian thought, Marx argues that each period of history is characterized by a definite structure to which it belongs and the universal laws regulate the process of this historical development. But, unlike Hegel's view, the Marxian "laws are not mental but economic in nature" (Stevenson and Haberman 135).

The concept of human nature is very crucial in understanding most of the philosophical theories of Marxism. Here in this paper, I shall try to draw some of the basic features of the Marxian theory of human nature. While doing so I shall compare Marx's theory with the traditional Christian belief of the nature of man and God. This is so because Marx has presented, for a very first time, an economic and materialistic account of man, as contrasted to the traditional Christian beliefs which had once dominated the Western philosophical thought, especially in the medieval period. To begin with, I shall see how the Christian belief has depicted nature of man and his/her relation to a Divine Being. Later I shall proceed to the discussion on the Marxian conception of human nature and will make an attempt to collate these two thought traditions.

## 2. The Concept of Human Nature:

The desire of human beings to know themselves, to conceptually clench their true nature and the essence is a very old one. The concept of human nature is very crucial in understanding the true meaning of human life. The important philosophical questions like what are the goals of human life; what is the vision of human societies; what type of changes

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do we aspire to bring about in society; and so on can be properly addressed only if we assume that there exists some innate or real nature that belongs to human beings. Now if this is the case then we may ask further that: what is this human nature? Whether is it distinct for women and men? Or whether this nature is essential in human or can it be constructed by social, cultural and economic forces?

### 3. Christian Concept of Human Nature:

To the above questions of human nature, plenty of responses are available in the history of human thought tradition. The Bible treats human beings as God's creation which has a distinct purpose in life. In Christian thought tradition, God is regarded as an omnipotent, omniscient and all-loving being who is supremely good and benevolent. As God is the ultimate being in the entire Universe, it is His purpose that describes our human nature and behavior. In case of any kind of difficulty and worry, humans must approach Him for guidance and help. According to Christian tradition, humans are created in resemblance with the picture of God. Humans fate are decided by the fact that how they are related to God. People have free will either to trust or refuse the purpose of God. But they have to face the judgment after the death in accordance with the way they employ that freedom during their lifetime.

Now if God exists, then why sometimes things go wrong with mankind and how can we explain the problem of evil in the world or life. According to Christianity, the relation between God and human is sometimes disrupted for the reason that people misuse their freedom by rejecting God's testament, and are, therefore, contaminating themselves with sin. Only God's will and power can save humans from this situation of sin. In Jesus' life and demise, the astonishing declaration made by Christianity is that God has involved Himself to redeem the humankind and the world. And humans must believe the divine forgiveness by God and only after that they can start a regenerated, new life. Until people are transformed as thus, human society is unlikely to be redeemed in the actual sense. This means that according to the Christian belief system, human's life can be regenerated and redeemed to the extent that God wishes for them, to the extent that they freely love and carry out the commands of their Creator. A new life is generated subsequently after the acceptance of God's salvation by

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individuals and when they agree to join the Christian coterie. But the procedure has to be accomplished beyond death, since humans are, either individually or in community, always imperfect during the lifetime.

But Christian belief of the existence of God is undoubtedly opened to a lot of skeptical questions. For instance, the problem of evil and suffering is one of the most prominent charges against the God's existence. The problem goes thus: if God is omniscient and all-knowing, then He must be aware of the evil; if God is omnipotent or all-powerful, then He must have the ability to remove the evil; and if God is perfectly good and all-loving, then He must remove the evil. But such is not the case. Evil and sufferings are prevalent in the world. This is the problem of evil which has been traditionally conceived by many. To this problem, many Christian believers have offered different solutions and interpretations, but unto the present date, no one could ever present an absolutely satisfactory reply.

**4. Marxian Concept of Human Nature**

Marxian concept of human nature is set side by side with human society and the materialistic development of human history in society. According to Marx, humans are essentially social in nature. People's activities define their social nature, as all of their actions occur in a social setting where they stand in certain connections to other fellow beings and thus confirm the actuality of other people's existence. "The real nature of man is the totality of social relations". Besides the social nature, Marx also recognized the biological aspects of human nature. But apart from the biological nature, man has no fixed individual nature. The truth of people in a society may vary from place to place and from time to time. "All history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature".

Marx pays attention to the material circumstances of human society and treats man as a part of these circumstances. The economic condition of human situations also presupposes their social nature. The economic production is actually a social enterprise which requires co-operation in many possible ways. And the nature of an individual and the kind of activities he/she is engaged in are completely determined by the type of society he/she belongs to. But the nature of society varies from one another. For Marx, man is a conscious being. He has regarded humans as truly active beings whose conscious activities grow within the society.

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This conscious nature of humans is what distinguishes them from the animal and also from the other fellow humans. Man performs activities and produces things in order to survive. Humans make conscious arrangements to provide for their livelihood. It is a part of their nature. Humans produce to meet their needs but they generate production even after the fulfillment of their primary physiological need. Animals, on the other hand, produce just at the time of their need. Regarding the difference between human nature and animal nature Marx writes:

> [Animals] produce only themselves, while man reproduces the whole of nature; their [animal's] products belong immediately to their physical bodies, while man freely confronts his own product. Animals produce only according to the standards and needs of the species to which they belong, while man is capable of producing according to the standards of every species and of applying to each object its inherent standard; hence man also produces in accordance with the laws of beauty. (Marx, Early Writings 329)

The contradiction between animals and humans is one of the basic features which grounds Marx's proposition about the nature of man. As living beings, both share some common features like hunger, reproduction, and urge to avoid death. However, apart from these basic features, humans possess certain other characteristics which transcend beyond the animal nature. To clearly sketch this demarcation, Marx differentiates between the two concepts of 'species-man' and 'natural man'. The concept of 'species-man' consists in those human features which are peculiar to the humans only and which are designated as of higher qualities. On the other hand, the 'natural man' includes those features which are common to both humans and animals.

Marx's understanding of human nature cannot be adequately studied without addressing his concept of *alienation*. But his notion of alienation is neither religious nor ontological; rather he talks about alienation in social and economic situations. According to Marx, all history is the history of class struggle. In a capitalist society, labor is alienated from the laborer. Marx defines labor as, "a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between

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himself and nature" (Marx, Capital 283). But in the system of capitalism, a laborer works for the interest of someone else rather than himself/herself. The capitalists command the procedure and then own the resulted goods as their private property. And in this way, the worker becomes alienated from his own works and from nature. Marx describes the alienation of laborer and its economic and political consequences as thus:

> The *estrangement of the worker in his object is expressed according to the laws of political economy* in the following way: the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more values he creates, the more worthless he becomes; the more his product is shaped, the more misshapen the worker; the more civilized his object, the more barbarous the worker; the more powerful the work, the more powerless the worker; the more intelligent the work, the duller the worker and *the more he becomes a slave of nature*. (Marx, Early Writings 325)

It is important to mention here that Marx did not completely disapprove capitalism. He recognized that capitalism has permitted the growth of economic productivity to a great extent. According to him, it is an essential stage for social and economic development, but the fact is that society must go beyond this stage of capitalism in order to progress. We cannot skip this stage in the course of development, according to Marx.

In some of his writings, Marx seems to hold the idea that the elimination of private property will lead to the eradication of alienation. Private property is the basic cause of alienated labor. But he is often seen to hold the alternative view that private property is the consequence of the alienated labor. Regarding the relation between private property and alienated labor Marx writes:

> Private property as the material, summarized expression alienated labor embraces both relations—the relation of the worker to labor and to the product of his labor and the non-worker and the relation to the non-worker to the worker and to the product of his labor (Marx, Early Writings 334).

According to Marx, the alienation of labor means that the work of the laborer does not belong to his/her true nature, as he/she does not feel the comfort and satisfaction by performing it,

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rather he/she feels disconsolate, depressed, and exhausted both physically and mentally. The works are imposed upon him/her in order to fulfill the needs of others. Even the products of his/her own work seem alien to him/her since the pieces of equipments he uses are unfamiliar to him and belong to someone else.

**5. Marxism Collated with Christianity**

Marxian conception of human nature is distinct from that of Christianity. According to Marx, the real human nature lies in the "totality of social relations". Marx did not believe in the existence of God. He claimed that an individual is a result of a particular economic state of a society where s/he lives. Now, if each individual is a product of human society, then there will be no possible solutions to the problems of life until there is a real transformation in society.

Rival theories on human nature lead to the adoption of different forms of lifestyle by people in their socio-economic and political systems. Some versions of Marxism are so dominating in the 20$^{th}$-century countries with communist-rule that the public life became chaos, that if anyone would raise questions and express their doubts against it then it could lead to the serious consequences of the person. Similar domination is also visible in the traditional western society of past times by Christianity. The non-believers of Christian ideology were often seen to be discriminated against the believers; they were harassed and even executed. Even now, there are instances of such domination present in different countries or societies. United States, which is one of the most developed countries in the world of recent times, is also not free from such situations. The authority of informal protestant Church still interferes in public debates, in spite of the fact that there is an official order to separate the state affairs from the Church ideologies.

Let us make a comparison between the Marxian and Christian theories of human nature. Although both the theories presented fundamentally different contents, there exist some basic similarities between them too. L Stevenson in his work *Ten Theories of Human Nature* has given some basic points of similarities between two different thought traditions. First, he has pointed out that both the theories take "the nature of the universe as a whole" (Stevenson and Haberman 5-6). But Christianity believes in the existence of an omniscient,

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omnipotent and all-loving God who is the Maker, Ruler, and Justice of everything in this universe. Marx denied the existence of such God and regards religion as "the opium of the people". It is an imaginary network of belief distracting people from the actual problems of society. He is of the opinion that the universe is radically material in essence. It exists without anyone above or behind it. Moreover, both Marxism and Christianity have seen and accepted the patterns in history and try to predict meaning out of them. Christianity gives meaning to the history by its connection to God who is eternal, that God is the moving power and the director of that historical pattern. But Marxism sees the pattern as a process of "development from one economic stage to another so that just as the economic system of feudalism had been superseded by capitalism, so capitalism would have to give way to communism" (Stevenson and Haberman 6).

According to Christianity, people have to face their judgments after the death in accordance with how they employ the free will during their lifetimes. Whereas, Marx denies this Christian view of life after death and didn't advocate any kind of eternal judgments. But it also undermines individual freedom by claiming that human attitudes and moral ideas are molded by the type of society they belong to.

Marx replaces Christian idea of sin with his notion of *alienation*. There exists some best possible standard in life that human beings fail to meet. But such is the alienation of man from his/her own real nature. Humans have the potential to achieve the ideal standard of life but the socio-economic situations of capitalism prevent them from developing it. Again, Christianity suggests that only the will of God can save humans from their exposure to sin and evil. On the other hand, Marxism believes that the individual human life cannot be improved until the political and economic scenario of a society is not radically changed. According to Marxism, an ideal and perfect society is one where people can develop their original nature. They are not alienated anymore by economic circumstances and can freely co-operate with each other. This is the purpose of historical evolution, which is taking place not rapidly but gradually.

**6. The Problems of Marxism**

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The Marxist assumption that "there is an inevitable progress in human society through stages of economic development" (Stevenson and Haberman 11) is open to certain criticism. L Stevenson has criticized Marx by claiming that it seems unreasonable to admit that such type of progress cannot be escaped. He takes the example of political emergency and war to demonstrate that many human situations are not established by economic factors. He further adds that, in certain cases, the communist revolutions did not take place in the capitalist system. "The United States and the industrialized countries of Western Europe—and the communist regimes of Eastern Europe collapsed in the late twentieth century" (Stevenson and Haberman 11). Stevenson takes such cases as direct corroboration against Marxian viewpoint.

Again Marxian understanding of human nature gives rise to the philosophical doubts too. The question of human freedom is very fundamental in the history of philosophical literature. Are humans really free? Whether they are responsible for their actions? If we accept the Marxian view then does it mean that our human nature is predetermined by the social conditions where we live and interact? That human life is absolutely determined by the circumstances presented by one's upbringing, heredity, and environment. As Stevenson has again pointed out, "But can the materialist view that human beings are made of nothing but matter be true, in the light of our distinctive mental powers to perceive and feel, think and reason, debate and decide?" (Stevenson and Haberman 11)

## 7. Conclusion

Marx has been designated as a materialist thinker. But by this one should not misunderstand that Marx is committed to ontological or metaphysical materialism. According to this form of materialism, human consciousness is nothing but a product of brain processes. We may interpret the Marxian theory in a way that consciousness is regulated by the material conditions of life. We cannot deny the fact that economic conditions are extremely required while studying human history and social situations. And before Marx people are not much aware of this fact. Marx can be given a great deal of appraisal in view of the certitude that we are now at least aware of this without much difficulty.

Again, when I took up this matter of comparing the Marxian and Christian understanding of human nature as a subject of my interest, I did not aim to offer an alternative

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theory other than these two. My only aim was to have a better understanding of human conditions by employing their views on it. But I must mention here that, each of the theories have some positive implications towards the comprehension of human situations; knowing our true human self and also the place of man in the world. They may appear to give rival interpretations but are not absolutely incompatible with each other. A closer study of their ideas reveals that each thought tradition has emphasized the different facets of a complex and whole image of human nature. Thus we can say that these two theories are only adding up to our complete understanding of the true nature of man.

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