

Theoretical Connotation and Practical Value of Marx's Humanistic Thought

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Abstract: As a cornerstone of Marxist philosophy, Marx's theory of human nature is grounded in the principle that "human essence is the totality of social relations," with the ultimate goal of achieving human freedom and comprehensive development. This framework carries profound theoretical depth and practical relevance. Distinct from traditional Chinese and Western humanistic thought, Marx's approach is rooted in historical materialism, viewing humans as actual social-historical entities. It emphasizes practice's fundamental role in human self-actualization and societal progress, demonstrating both theoretical transcendence and practical significance. By comparing Marx's theory with traditional Chinese and Western humanistic thought, this paper reveals its theoretical innovations and paradigm shifts achieved through critical inheritance, further highlighting its unique explanatory power and profound implications for contemporary humanistic reconstruction.

1. Introduction

The formation and development of anthropological thought have undergone a long and continuous evolutionary process, remaining an enduring proposition in the history of philosophy and constantly being endowed with new connotations as human society progresses. In this intellectual journey, the exploration of human issues by China and the West has also exhibited distinct characteristics. The traditional Chinese understanding of humanity is rooted in Confucianism, emphasizing the harmonious coexistence of humans and all things, while the Western understanding of humanity is more grounded in rationality, focusing on exploring the relationship between humans and all things through opposition.

2. The Tradition of Anthropology in China

The ancient Chinese concept of "human" studies had already developed to some extent during the Warring States period. As an important intellectual resource of China's traditional culture, the pre-Qin Confucian philosophy of human studies laid the foundation for later generations' understanding of human existence and value, and was inherited and promoted by enlightened scholars throughout history, continuously rejuvenating with new theoretical vitality.

In addressing the concept of human nature, Confucianism begins by examining individual character to deepen our understanding of humanity. Through the principles of "benevolence" (ren)

and "ritual propriety" (li), it advocates self-discipline to maintain social stability. The school further emphasizes the fundamental distinction between humans and animals: humans must exist within social groups, a sociality that defines humanity. As Mencius observed, "The difference between humans and beasts is slight. Commoners discard it, but the noble retain it. Shun understood worldly affairs and observed human relationships, practicing benevolence and righteousness—not merely performing them." ^[1]Xunzi asserted, "What makes humans unique? Their discernment." Hunger drives hunger, cold drives cold, labor drives rest, and profit drives harm—these innate traits exist independently, shared by Yu and Jie. Thus, humanity's essence lies not in two legs and hairlessness, but in discernment." ^[2]He further noted: "Humans can socialize, while animals cannot." These ideas aimed to guide people toward virtue, using moral principles to regulate behavior for social harmony. Confucius taught: "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire." Mozi added: "View others' nations as your own, their homes as your own, and their bodies as your own." Xunzi, on the other hand, used the moral education concept of "transforming nature to create artificial virtue" to educate and reform the "evil" in human nature, turning instinctive desires into conscious morality and transforming instinctive evil into moral good. However, the ancient Chinese philosophy of human nature was detached from the material conditions of specific societies. They focused solely on the transformation of human thoughts without truly understanding the essence of human nature, thus resulting in superficiality and intuitiveness.

In ancient China, people often understood "human" from a natural perspective, linking themselves to nature and forming a dependent relationship with it. In ancient times, nature was commonly referred to as "Heaven." During the Shang Dynasty, Heaven was considered the Supreme Deity, while Confucianism elevated the relationship between humans and nature to the level of moral cultivation. Confucius said, "What does Heaven say? The four seasons proceed, and all things grow. What does Heaven say?" He believed that Heaven nurtured the four seasons and all things, and humans should abide by natural laws and act in accordance with them. Mencius' main idea on the relationship between humans and nature was "the unity of Heaven and humanity," viewing "Heaven" as the origin of morality. He believed that human nature is bestowed by Heaven, and by fully understanding one's nature, one can connect with Heaven and Earth. That is, "benevolence, righteousness, loyalty, and trustworthiness, joy in doing good without tiring, these are the ranks of Heaven." Xunzi opposed the unity of Heaven and humanity, arguing that Heaven and humans are distinct. He advocated respecting and understanding natural laws, using nature to one's advantage, and thus gaining the ability to conquer nature. In the agricultural age, humans relied on natural climate changes for survival, so they had to learn to utilize and grasp natural laws, gaining experience from nature to better survive. Therefore, Xunzi proposed, "control the mandate of Heaven and use it," advocating the development of human agency, reducing damage to nature, and leveraging human initiative to achieve harmony between humans and nature. Although Chinese philosophers had different understandings of "human studies," they all emphasized the connection between humans and all things, valued the "collective" consciousness of society, and thus formed a unique Chinese system of human studies, which had a profound impact on later generations.

3. Definition and Interpretation of "Human" in Western Society

Exploring the formation and development of Western anthropological thought cannot bypass the ancient Greek myth—the Sphinx's riddle: "What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs at night?" This riddle essentially embodies the core concept of "know thyself," marking the first philosophical inquiry into human nature in Western society and initiating humanity's quest to define what it means to be human. Alaxander, a pioneer in exploring human origins, posited that "life emerged from the sun's evaporated moist elements, and humans were born from another

creature—specifically, fish, as early humans bore a striking resemblance to aquatic beings."^[3] Parmenides, another Greek philosopher, examined human existence through metaphysical reasoning, asserting that being is eternal, undivided, and continuous; that existence is immovable, real, and subject to thought; while material objects in the sensory world are non-existent illusions beyond conceptualization. Protagoras of the Sophists, however, redirected human inquiry from the natural world to society itself. His proposition that "man is the measure of all things" established humanity's central role in the world, demonstrating that human existence is inherently rational. Although Protagoras' perspective overlooked objective reality, it sparked humanity's self-awareness and made groundbreaking contributions to Western anthropological thought.

Socrates' "Know Thyself" philosophy separated human concerns from natural phenomena. The virtue-based human nature theory it pioneered enabled ancient Greek philosophers to focus on secular social life, thus establishing human-centered philosophy. Plato proposed the soul theory, asserting that when reason transcends physical constraints to conquer desires and attain the highest knowledge—the Idea of the Good—humans enter the ideal realm of perfect life characterized by truth, goodness, and beauty.^[4] Aristotle clarified the essence of rational humanism, declaring: "Man is a rational animal,"^[5] emphasizing that reason is uniquely human and absent in other species. German classical philosophy, represented by Kant, Hegel, and Feuerbach, made groundbreaking contributions to human studies. Kant argued: "All progress has a goal; yet among the objects he can utilize, the most important is man, for man is his own ultimate end."^[6] Here, Kant replaced the God-centered anthropological theory with a human-centric philosophy, asserting that reason represents humanity's fundamental attributes. Hegel, however, approached human activity through rationality, arguing that it is not aimless, ruleless, or unconscious. On the contrary, humans are governed by consciousness, forming necessary relationships with others and the world to satisfy psychological needs. While Hegel's perspective was progressive, he erroneously equated individual self-consciousness with human essence, falling into idealism. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx criticized Hegel's view of human self-creation as a process, objectification as deobjectification, and externalization as its sublation.^[7] He argued that all things establish necessary connections under the guidance of consciousness. Although Marx was deeply influenced by Hegel's "self-consciousness" concept during the early formation of his philosophical system, through further analysis, he promptly broke free from Hegel's idealist errors. Grounded in reality, He scientifically examined the development of human society and gradually shifted focus to Feuerbach's anthropological thought. Feuerbach, based on humanism, established a humanistic anthropological theory, "replacing the rational, real, and sensible man with the rational essence devoid of sensation."^[8] He explicitly stated: "The highest and absolute essence of man and the purpose of human existence are will, thought, and sensation."^[9] This fundamentally distinguishes humans from animals. While Marx affirmed Feuerbach's materialist stance and his reduction of human essence from religious theology, Feuerbach still failed to escape traditional constraints. His abstract and one-sided interpretation of the human essence treated humans as mere entities capable of sensations and emotions, neglecting their subjectivity and practicality. Engels once remarked that Feuerbach's "man" had escaped the embrace of the religious God. Thus, Marx rejected Feuerbach's view of human essence and pioneered a new approach to exploring and revealing human essence through reality.

4. The Revolutionary Turn and Connotation of Marx's Humanistic Thought

The formation of Marx's anthropological thought was not only a critical inheritance of traditional anthropological ideas but also catalyzed by historical conditions. Between the 1830s and 1880s, capitalism experienced rapid development with abundant material resources, yet the working class—creators of material wealth—still faced existential crises. The Industrial Revolution, ostensibly aimed

at reducing workers' labor burdens, ironically became a tool for the bourgeoisie to further exploit their value. Early in his career, Marx was profoundly influenced by German classical philosophers, absorbing the doctrines of Kant, Hegel, and Feuerbach. However, he recognized these philosophers' ideas were limited by their era and failed to address contemporary issues. Grounded in materialist perspectives, Marx systematically analyzed society, placing particular emphasis on human-centered studies, which ultimately gave birth to his anthropological thought.

4.1 On the Reconstruction of the Subject Status of Human

During his university years, Marx was profoundly influenced by the Young Hegelians and developed a strong focus on self-consciousness. In his doctoral dissertation, he explored human issues from a novel perspective, highlighting the significance of self-awareness and emphasizing the meaning of human freedom and liberation. Although his theoretical views were not yet fully mature, they laid the groundwork for future research on Marx's anthropological thought. In October 1842, when Marx became editor-in-chief of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, he began shifting his attention from the realm of human consciousness to material interests, addressing the harsh living conditions of the lower classes and the oppressive, overly privileged, and hypocritical practices of the Prussian government. A notable example was his article "Debate on the Law Against the Theft of Forest Trees," where Marx, speaking from the perspective of ordinary people and through legal analysis, publicly expressed his political stance for the first time, fiercely criticizing feudal rule. Through this process, Marx gradually recognized the crucial connection between human freedom and material interests, prompting him to move away from his previous philosophical concepts and transition from Hegelian idealist legal philosophy to historical materialism. In 1843, Marx published two articles in the *German-French Yearbook*: "On the Jewish Question" and "Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," which first introduced the concept of human emancipation. The creation of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (hereafter referred to as the *Manuscripts*) further deepened Marx's understanding of human emancipation and enriched his anthropological thought system. In *The Manuscripts*, Marx elaborates on the concept of human essence through the lens of alienated labor. He meticulously analyzes the plight of the working class under capitalism: "The more wealth workers produce, the greater the quantity and power of their products, The poorer they become. The more commodities workers create, the more they transform into cheap commodities." ^[10] This reveals how capitalism systematically alienates humans from their labor products, labor practices, human nature, and their own potential. Under capitalist systems, people labor like livestock—devoid of human essence. Labor becomes a means of survival rather than a spontaneous, free, and conscious pursuit. In this process, individuals experience no happiness, satisfaction, or joy. Such social relations breed constant competition and conflict, exacerbating contradictions and hindering human development. Marx emphasizes that abundant material wealth serves as the foundation for humanity's essential return. Crucially, this wealth belongs to the working class itself, not a few capitalists. Only by abolishing private ownership can labor alienation be eradicated, allowing people to reclaim their true essence. True realization of human essence and the free, comprehensive development of individuals can only be achieved in a communist society.

4.2 The Practice Turn from "Abstract Man" to "Real Man"

The publication of *Theses on Feuerbach* in 1888 marked the birth of a practice-oriented new materialism. Grounded in historical materialism, Marx critically examined the old materialist doctrines of Feuerbach and others from a practical perspective, proposing the seminal thesis that 'human essence is the sum total of all social relations.' This work became a milestone in the development of Marx's humanistic philosophy.

In addressing the question of human essence, Marx advocated transcending Feuerbach's abstract conception of humanity through the lens of "real human beings." He argued that Feuerbach's interpretation of humanity consisted of abstract, sensory, and detached individuals. Marx maintained that humans exist within specific social environments and relationships, evolving continuously with societal progress. He emphasized that replacing abstract notions with concrete human realities is crucial for understanding human nature and comprehending the historical development of human society. Grounded in material production practices, Marx posited that humans are productive beings capable of labor in real life. His theory posits that human essence exists through practical engagement within social relations, rather than the isolated, abstract existence Feuerbach described as "species." In the sixth thesis of his "Theses on Feuerbach," Marx stated: "Not the abstract qualities inherent in a single individual, but in their actuality, he is the sum total of all social relations."^{[11]45} This marked his first scientific exposition of human essence, signifying a new historical milestone in Marx's understanding of human nature. Furthermore, Marx rejected Feuerbach's view of human essence, criticizing his interpretation of human essence as religious alienation. He pioneered a new approach to revealing human essence through practical realities, completely distancing himself from Feuerbach's old materialism and laying the philosophical foundation for establishing historical materialism. This work laid the groundwork for the development and construction of humanistic thought in his later work, "The German Ideology."

In *The German Ideology* (hereafter *The Form*), Marx adheres to the materialist conception of history established in *Theses on Feuerbach*, using the "real person" engaged in practical activities as the starting point to critique the erroneous ideas of "abstract person" proposed by Bauer and Feuerbach. Marx states: "The first premise of all human history is undoubtedly the existence of living individuals." Therefore, the first fact to be confirmed is the physical organization of these individuals and the resulting relationships between individuals and other natural elements.^{[11]146} Humans are products of nature. "For survival, they first need to eat, drink, live, wear clothes, and obtain other necessities. Thus, the first historical activity is producing the means to satisfy these needs—that is, producing material life itself."^{[11]158} This elucidates the essence of humanity and human development, highlights the subjectivity of the historical process, and reveals the pivotal role of material production in human historical progress. In *The Form*, Marx systematically expounds the materialist conception of history for the first time, demonstrating his new philosophical perspective and thinking, completing the transition from idealism to materialism, and clarifying that the ultimate goal of anthropological thought is to achieve the free and comprehensive development of human beings.

4.3 Constructing the "Union of Free Men" to Achieve the Liberation of Man

The "free and all-round development of human beings" constitutes both the starting point and ultimate goal of the ideal social vision envisioned by Marx. In *The Communist Manifesto* (hereafter referred to as *The Manifesto*), Marx explicitly states: "The old bourgeois society with its classes and class antagonisms will be replaced by a community in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."^{[11]647} This statement not only reveals the essential characteristics of future society but also provides a clear direction for building a community of free individuals and achieving the liberation of all humanity.

In *The Manifesto*, Marx and Engels, grounded in historical materialism, expounded from the perspective of human and social relations, asserting that humans exist within specific social contexts rather than being mere natural entities. As Marx stated in *The Manifesto*: "People's ideas, views, and concepts—in short, their consciousness—evolve with changes in material living conditions, social relations, and social existence." Humans are no longer products of nature but real, practical, and living beings, shaped by production methods and all social relations, thus becoming social beings. Sociality

embodies the human essence, and in class societies, it primarily manifests as class identity. They emphasized: "All social history to date has been the history of class struggle," and "In past historical epochs, we could almost everywhere observe society completely divided into distinct classes, with multi-tiered social hierarchies formed by various social statuses." Marx and Engels meticulously analyzed how capitalists in capitalist societies occupy specific individual and social positions during production, while workers become tools for the bourgeoisie to extract profits. To achieve value appreciation, workers endure oppression and exploitation, reduced to mere appendages of machines, deprived of free and comprehensive development. Under such conditions, capital clearly enjoys freedom and individuality, whereas active individuals remain excluded. Marx recognized this fundamental truth. He opposed the capitalist system's suppression of human potential, arguing that the bourgeoisie stifled individual development while the proletariat remained trapped in limited freedom. Only through united struggle can the proletariat achieve true emancipation. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx systematically dismantled the abstract concept of human nature in traditional philosophy. He condemned this detached notion as absurd and detrimental to the proletariat, asserting it merely served bourgeois interests. Marx emphasized that developing proletarian humanity required overthrowing the capitalist system that sustained this artificial human nature. The proletariat must revolutionize through violent means to dismantle bourgeois rule, "step by step seize all bourgeois capital," establish a free association of people, reform the means of production, and vigorously develop productive forces. This process would create socialist wealth and ultimately realize humanity's free and comprehensive development.

The free and all-round development of human beings represents the ultimate goal of human value as articulated by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*. To realize the ideal communist society, the first step is to abolish capitalist private ownership—specifically, to eliminate the enslavement of people by capital and the bourgeoisie's exploitation of workers' surplus value. Marx and Engels emphasized: "Communists can summarize their theory in one sentence: abolish private ownership."^[11] Only by starting from the "real person" and through genuine revolutionary movements can we completely eradicate private ownership, class distinctions, and class antagonisms. Only then can a free association of equals be established among people, enabling the realization of communism and human liberation. This allows individuals to assume a dominant position, freely pursue self-improvement and transformation, thereby achieving the free and all-round development of human beings.

5. Conclusion

Marx's anthropological philosophy carries profound significance that not only deepens our understanding of human nature, freedom, and development, but also represents a revolutionary transformation in anthropological thought rooted in historical materialism. It reveals the intrinsic connection between human practical activities and social-historical development, providing a powerful ideological tool for understanding and transforming the world. Furthermore, by establishing "the comprehensive and free development of human beings" as its fundamental value pursuit, Marx's anthropological philosophy lays a theoretical foundation for scientifically understanding humanity. Today, this philosophy remains highly relevant, offering indispensable theoretical resources and fundamental value guidance for advocating human-centered principles, advancing social equity and justice, building harmonious and inclusive societies, and guiding human civilization toward higher stages of development.

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