

# Neither Beast Nor God: Marx, Sartre, and Aristotle on Freedom and Human Nature

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## Povzetek

Kot inherentno družbeno bitje lahko človek spoznava skozi svobodo le znotraj meja človeške skupnosti. V tem članku je dilema človeške narave obravnavana skozi dve moderni perspektivi, po eni strani sledeč Marxu, ki človeka opisuje kot materialno-družbeno bitje, po drugi Sartru, ki človeka opisuje kot svobodno bitje. Članek se osredotoča na Marxove zgodnje filozofske spise, v katerih svobodo označuje kot družbeno lastnost, medtem ko Sartre govori o svobodi kot bistvu človeškega bitja. Za Aristotela svoboda predstavlja smiselno delovanje znotraj okvira družbene skupnosti. Cilj tega članka je poskusiti uskladiti Marxova in Sartrova stališča z uporabo Aristotelove filozofije, da bi pokazali, da je človek nujno družbeno bitje in da se svoboda kot taka lahko uresniči le znotraj skupnosti.

**Ključne besede:** svoboda, skupnost, Aristotel, Karl Marx, Jean-Paul Sartre

## Summary

As an inherently social being, man's knowing-through-freedom is possible only from within the confines of the human community. In this article, the dilemma of human nature is examined from two modern perspectives, following Marx, who describes man as a material-social being, and Sartre, who describes man as free existence. The article focuses on Marx's early philosophical writings, wherein he characterizes freedom as a social attribute, while Sartre speaks of freedom as the essence of the human being. For Aristotle, however, freedom represents meaningful action within the framework of the social community. The goal of this paper is an attempt to reconcile Marx's and Sartre's views by

utilizing Aristotle's philosophy to demonstrate that man is necessarily a social being, and that freedom as such can only be realized within the community.

**Keywords:** freedom, community, Aristotle, Karl Marx, Jean-Paul Sartre

He who is unable to live in society,  
or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself,  
must be either a beast or god.<sup>1</sup>  
– Aristotle

## Terminological and Ontological Distinctions

### *Introduction*

In this article, I aim to demonstrate how Aristotle's philosophy can offer an ontological middle ground for reconciling Marx's notion of objective essence with Sartre's concept of free subjectivity. The first part discusses conceptual and ontological distinctions, outlining the positions of the three thinkers. The second part focuses on the nature of the human being and is followed by a conclusion in which I argue that a reconciliation between Marxian objectivity and Sartrean subjectivity is made possible through Aristotle. I begin with Marx's philosophical system as interpreted here primarily through *On the Jewish Question* and other early philosophical writings.

### *Marx's Understanding of Freedom, Society, Struggle and Resistance*

Marx's epistemology and anthropology highlight the social and historical conditionality of human nature, an evaluation of which will be significant to our further analysis of Marx's views. In asserting his epistemology, Marx applies materialism and certain aspects of Hegel's idealism, situating his theoretical framework somewhere between classical materialism and classical idealism. Marx's epistemological standpoint is the following: reality does not consist of mere objects extrinsic to man, but rather is formed by man's consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Marx holds there exists no natural substrate necessary for the functioning of human consciousness out in the world, nor does he limit human consciousness to cognitive operations, instead

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<sup>1</sup> Pol. 1253a25.

<sup>2</sup> Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thoughts of Karl Marx*, p. 68.

maintaining that cognitive operations signify processes of the development and evolution of reality in its entirety.<sup>3</sup> The interaction of man with the world, i.e., reality, is the main point of Marx's epistemology, for it is man who shapes reality. Marx tended to avoid idealistic, abstract explanations, focusing predominantly on materialism and action. Though man creates nature, the interaction with the world nonetheless affects, i.e., shapes, man and his relationships to others, resulting in a process of perpetual interaction of subject and object which shapes the world around us.<sup>4</sup> Marx's subject is man as an active being who constructs the surrounding world through action, while objects denote things which man creates, be they material or immaterial (e.g., society). In his works, Marx insists upon the historical conditionality of human nature. History is a representation of man's development and man as a being is a product of history.<sup>5</sup>

The thesis concerning man's creation of the world is closely related to Marx's idea of human emancipation.<sup>6</sup> Marx does not define freedom through individualism, but instead via reference to human community, holding that freedom and man's meaning can only be realized and achieved in a community. True freedom is achieved not in isolation, but only in interaction with others. Speaking about Jewish culture, Marx introduces a distinction between political and human emancipation. Despite Marx's prioritizing of human emancipation, it is important to note that these two forms of emancipation are not opposing forces but, in fact, mutually determined. Human emancipation cannot be realized without political emancipation, as every improvement emerges from prior, less favorable conditions. In political emancipation, the concept of justice is reduced to the safeguarding of individual security, which, according to Marx, serves to reinforce egoism:

Security is the highest social concept of civil society, the concept of the police—that the entire society exists only in order to guarantee each of its members the preservation of his person, his rights, and his property [...]. [S]ecurity is the assurance given to egoism. Accordingly, none of the so-called rights of man goes beyond the egoistic man.<sup>7</sup>

Marx is committed to human emancipation. Even if he doesn't tell us much about it in his works, it is important to note that Marx is not wholly opposed to political emancipation, which represents significant progress in society and is a step that

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3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

7 Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," pp. 229–230.

must be overcome or corrected on the path to human emancipation. Marx writes that human emancipation begins when man recognizes his abilities and utilizes them as social as opposed to merely individual strengths.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, human emancipation is realized with man's synthesis with society, where true freedom is found and where man can actualize his meaning. Emancipation represents a social process within which each individual directs his or her strength and ability toward shared, communal goals.

Emancipation is a form of social influence upon the human being. Community shapes both the individual and his or her characteristics. In addition to social factors, there is also the historical conditioning of human nature, which I will turn to later in the text.

Marx undoubtedly prioritizes the community over the individual, but it is important to examine the distinction between the community as such and the individual person. A person's integration into the community and the necessity of living within it do not entail the loss of personal identity. On the contrary, Marx emphasizes the importance of balance between communal life and individuality. Society and the individual are not opposing concepts; rather, they mutually imply one another.<sup>9</sup> Marx does not support collectivism, which sees the individual dissolve into an abstract whole, and strives to once again join together these two modes of human existence.<sup>10</sup> We can observe that this is not a case of simple negation, but rather an intriguing methodological pattern in which two distinct—opposing even—concepts are brought into relation and integrated into a coherent whole without the exclusion of either. The introduction of collectivism does not negate individualism; instead, it renders them complementary. Collectivism is essential for the individual's self-realization—not a utopian collectivism, but one in which individual uniqueness is preserved. Marx's collectivism is not a denial of individualism for individual freedom becomes possible only within the community, which makes collectivism the condition for true individualism.

Alienation is another very important concept in Marx's philosophy. There are three interconnected aspects of alienation: alienation from nature, from one's self, and from society.<sup>11</sup> Criticizing capitalism, Marx speaks of alienation as something rather fatal for man and his life. An alienated man loses his meaning and his human nature, becoming a mere object. Alienation as such leads to fatal dehumanization.

8 Marx, "On the Jewish Question," p. 234.

9 Avineri, *The Social & Political Thoughts*, p. 87.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

Struggle represents the way and means whereby alienation is resolved. Marx's very concept of struggle, as well as struggle itself, appear in the form of revolution, with the most common cause of revolution being class difference.

### *Sartre's Understanding of Freedom, Society, Struggle, and Resistance*

Freedom is the central concept of Sartre's philosophy, representing the core of his ontology. Freedom is inherent to all human beings. As such, it stands for the essence of human existence, which implies that man is therefore responsible for all his actions. Sartre's understanding of freedom is very radical and controversial, carrying with it many difficulties that have spurred countless debates. There are no hidden or transcendental realities in Sartre's existentialism. Everything is transparent and apparent in the world which surrounds us. It is important to add that his philosophy emphasizes the primacy of existence: existence arises before any essence. Man first exists in a given world and only then builds himself up as a person with all his qualities.<sup>12</sup> There is no determinism in Sartre's existentialism; we come into the world free, and so our being is necessarily free.<sup>13</sup> We determine ourselves through our actions, such that man *becomes what he does*.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the responsibility to construct ourselves and our identity in accordance with our notion of ourselves lies with us.

However, our freedom and our choices affect both other individuals and society as a whole. Sartre frequently returns to the questions of human connectedness and mutual influence. Our freedom depends on the freedom of others and vice versa, the responsibility for ourselves is equal to that for others,<sup>15</sup> while another's freedom ought to be as important to us as our own.<sup>16</sup> Every human being contributes to the human community, which should be regarded as a coherent whole, where the presence of others affirms our own existence—and vice versa—while simultaneously excluding egoism. The affirmation of ourselves by others grants stability to our existence. Sartre's existential humanism stands apart in its centering of a human existence whose essence is freedom; a freedom that is so far-reaching that each is entirely responsible for the being of himself and others. Man's responsibility in Sartre's philosophical system is extremely significant because man

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12 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, pp. 20–22.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

literally creates everything independently. There is no determinism nor a creator to give us meaning, just like there is no meaning inherent to us. According to Sartre, man will occasionally attempt to flee such a massive responsibility and will turn in those moments to “bad faith.”<sup>17</sup> Infinite freedom carries with itself great responsibility, which evokes an uneasy feeling in the subject. Authenticity is a significant concept in Sartre, representing a person’s acknowledgement that what he is, as well as what all human life is, is in harmony with freedom.<sup>18</sup> Struggle, or conflict, is considered by Sartre to be a necessary occurrence in dealing with others.<sup>19</sup> Conflict is considered necessary because other people affect our freedom and can threaten us. However, in the same way in which conflict is necessary, so too is human interaction. The presence of the other confirms and affirms my own presence, my essence, and myself as a subject, which lends a firmer ground to our existence.<sup>20</sup>

In comparing Marx and Sartre, we can note certain rough similarities between their philosophical ideas and systems. However, this article is mainly concerned with their ontological differences. Marx sees man as a socio-material being which is historically, economically, and socially conditioned, while his essence is to be found in labor and contribution to society, whereas Sartre sees man as a free existence which creates itself and determines its own being.

## On Human Nature

### *Marx’s Understanding of Man*

Marx’s interpretation of human nature is marked by social and historical conditioning. Viewing human nature through historical lenses accounts for the specificity of Marx’s philosophical system. There is no fixed, universal and extratemporal essence of human beings. Instead, human essence changes throughout history and societal developments. History holds a different meaning for Marx than it does for other philosophers: it represents a view of human progress, and as such, history produces human needs, which in turn can only be seen as historical.<sup>21</sup> Needs are produced historically by developing in accordance with the circumstances of

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17 Christine Daigle, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, p. 59.

18 Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 50.

19 Daigle, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, p. 93.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Avineri, *The Social & Political Thoughts*, p. 79.

a given time. Human needs cannot be determined *a priori*, as they are historically and socially determined. Thus, Marx sees human needs, other than those which are primary and physiological, as structural positions which are determined by external factors, which are in turn themselves shaped and defined by social and historical conditions. Therefore, man himself is variable and the ways in which he changes hinge on historical events and social conditions. Historical and social conditioning exert distinct forms of influence upon the human being. Social conditioning pertains to one's embeddedness in community; the human beings are not independent entities but are shaped and formed by the social context in which they dwell. Historical conditioning, on the other hand, refers to the specific historical moment in which a person is raised. Each period in history has exerted different influences on individuals, shaping them in accordance with the circumstances of the time.

Labor is also a central concept in Marx's philosophy, as it shapes the human being and constitutes his essence. Labor represents a specificity unique to the human being, and as such—when cultivated—it becomes the means through which the individual both forms and transcends himself.<sup>22</sup> The development of labor refers to the development of one's individual work, the tasks we perform; the progress of labor leads to the refinement of our skills and, by extension, of ourselves. We may thus conclude that, amid the variability of human nature shaped by historical and social circumstances, labor remains the one constant component of the human being and his essence. Although work is a fundamental aspect of human activity, Marx emphasizes that its form depends on the historical and social context. The ontological interpretations offered by Marx and Sartre differ in key respects: Marx sees the human being as a social entity attaining freedom through autonomous labor within society, whereas for Sartre, the human being is an absolutely free subject with no pre-given essence—freedom is the starting point of existence.<sup>23</sup> We see that in Marx, freedom is a possibility, whereas in Sartre, it is a necessity. Sartre holds that human essence is not predetermined but is something the subject must arrive at autonomously; for Marx, essence is constituted by a set of social and historical relations. At this point, we are justified in asking: does this mean that Marx attributes an innate essence to the human being? The answer, however, is negative. Even in Marx, the human being has no innate essence—but he does possess certain predispositions, such as the capacity for labor—while in Sartre, the human being emerges as nothingness, a being necessarily free.

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22 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

23 That is not to say that, for Marx, the (formal) freedom (of entering a labor contract) is not the starting point of the subject's (capitalist) existence. The point is, rather, to stress that labor (as man's species-being, *Gattungswesen*) becomes alienated labor, which then undermines man's species-being.

### *Sartre's Understanding of Man*

Sartre sees man as a being without meaning, because freedom, as man's existence, precedes essence. Freedom itself is more important than man's essence and internal sense of life's meaning. In Sartre, there are two ways of being: "being in itself" and "being for itself."<sup>24</sup> *Being in itself* is beyond our phenomenological experience, and so we cannot say much about it besides that it exists, that it is timeless, complete, and unchanging. On the other hand, *being for itself* represents the way of being which man possesses.<sup>25</sup> It represents a single variable project which comes into the world completely empty and shapeless, and through his experience, man shapes all essences.<sup>26</sup> Transcendence is the constitutive unit of a *being for itself*.<sup>27</sup> Sartre rejects a dualist ontology; through this dual way of being he makes clear the coherence of the world as such. The relation between the two ways of being is, according to Sartre, intertwined and causally conditioned: in order for a *being for itself* to exist, there must be a *being in itself*.<sup>28</sup>

The question that arises is whether existentialism can in fact be considered an ontological theory. I argue that it is—though not in the typical sense. When we speak of existentialism as an ontological position, we see that it concerns itself with the question of existence, human existence in particular. The central proposition of Sartrean existentialism that "existence precedes essence" is itself a classical ontological claim. Ontology concerns the study of the nature of being, existence, and reality; accordingly, existentialism, in its focus on the problem of human existence, is a form of ontology. Although existentialism does not offer a general theory of being or reality as such, it does investigate the nature of existence—and that alone places it within the domain of ontology. Sartre's ontological theory has often been characterized as dualistic. Dualistic theories rely on two fundamentally distinct substances to explain the existence of one world, one reality, or one being. However, Sartre does not speak of substances or fundamental principles, but rather of two modes of being that together constitute a single being.

Sartre's human being is defined as a necessarily free existence that autonomously constitutes itself and, as such, bears full responsibility for itself, its life, and its community. Existence precedes essence and all other attributes typically

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24 Daigle, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, p. 32.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 32–34.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 33.



associated with the human being. Marx, by contrast, historicizes human nature and anchors it within the socio-economic context—thus, the essence of human nature becomes variable, depending on historical and societal conditions. In Sartre, freedom precedes essence and is central to one's inner meaning, whereas Marx views freedom through the lens of the social context, defining it as the capacity of individuals to develop within the community. The divergence in their respective conceptions of freedom stems from their differing views on human nature—in other words, from distinct ontological postulates.

### *Zóon politikón*

Aristotle sees man as a social being, hence neither as wholly given nor wholly constructed. Society itself is necessary and needed for the realization of telos, i.e., purpose. The individual within a society is not absolutely determined by the society to which he belongs, although an individual could not exist without society. The aim of a political society is harmony and life in accordance with the virtues. Resistance and struggle are constitutive elements of every society, and so too are they found in Aristotle's. Aristotle explicitly emphasizes that man is a social being with an inborn drive toward life in society. More specifically, Aristotle speaks of man as a political animal. Although the term 'political' can be interpreted in different ways depending on the context, here the term is meant in a biological sense. Similarly to Marx, Aristotle emphasizes that life in society does not tend toward complete unity and that individuality and smaller groupings ought to be preserved within society. Since everything tends toward the good, so too does society tend toward the good and harmony, and so its members live in accordance with the virtues. When we compare Sartre and Aristotle, we see that the essential difference is that in Aristotle there exist a predetermined purpose and order, while Sartre does not allow for any predetermination. Although Aristotle is an essentialist and Sartre an existentialist, both describe the human condition through certain lacks. For Sartre, reality represents a negation of what is, while Aristotle holds that it is what we lack that helps us see the broader image of that reality. Both authors arrive at their respective conclusions via lack. Marx and Aristotle see man as a necessarily social being with a determined purpose. The fundamental difference between Aristotle and Marx lies in the starting points of their respective philosophical systems: Aristotle's system is teleological, characterized by purpose-driven action that is predetermined in advance, whereas Marx's system is structural, interpreting the human being through concrete historical and social relations.

The first difference between the two concerns the notion of justice. Aristotle considers justice to be an important virtue, while Marx considers all appeals to justice trivial as there exist different perspectives of what justice means. For Marx, disagreements over the concept of justice at the individual level lead to discord, and the very notion of justice can be sustained within the community only through the abolition of human inequality, unlike Aristotle, who regarded slavery as natural, good and just. Action as movement is an important component with both philosophers.

As we can see, Aristotle makes it possible to reconcile Marx's historical and Sartre's existential conception of the human being as two sides of a shared social ontology. Aristotle's ontology, therefore, provides a framework through which these two positions can be brought into harmony: the human being is both free and necessarily social, requiring life in community, where action, through interaction with others, shapes the individual and serves as the means through which freedom is expressed. Through this synthesis, the human being can be understood as a necessarily free being that is inherently social, and as such, forms itself through community. In other words, the synthesis of these perspectives allows us to conceive of the human being as a potentiality—one that can shape itself through action in multiple ways.

## An Ontological Middle Ground (Conclusion)

Based on everything put forth in this article, we can conclude that Aristotle's standpoint can be understood as an ontological middle ground between Marx's concept of objective essence and Sartre's concept of free subjectivity. This then provides us with a basis and a bridge between Marx's socio-materialistic viewpoint and Sartre's existentialism. In this register, the notions of freedom, struggle, and resistance can be reinterpreted as different forms of the realization of a common social nature. The differences between Sartre and Marx are not oppositions but rather complements, provided they are read through Aristotle's idea of man.

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