

PHILOSOPHY, HUMAN NATURE, AND SOCIETY

Jeff Noonan

Department of Philosophy, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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Summary

The chapter traces the development of critical social philosophy out of the speculative metaphysical tradition. It argues that left on their own, metaphysical concepts trap human thinking in conceptual circles that are blind to the needs and capabilities of people who find themselves at the bottom of social hierarchies. These concepts, however, are open to transformation in response to social struggles against oppressive hierarchies. Critical social philosophy emerges out of this dialectical interaction between metaphysical concepts and struggles for freedom. The process is complete once contingent institutional structures rather than human nature are understood as the cause of oppressively limited life-activity.

1. Introduction

Western philosophy's classical metaphysical aim— the comprehension and systematic explication of the principles of universal order and purpose— has had contradictory implications for critical social philosophy. On the one hand the assumption that the universe is a cosmos, a knowable rational order combining structure and meaning, promised to disclose objective standards according to which human social organizations could be judged. On the other hand, the concepts used to judge social organizations were not derived from reflection upon the social-organic nature of the humans that constituted the societies, but rather from the presumed perfection of higher-order metaphysical categories. Since these categories were presumed to comprehend essential reality as such, formally valid inferences made from them to a purportedly ‘necessary’ social order were taken to be true without further question, even in the case that the thus legitimated social order depended upon the subordination or oppression of the majority of its human constituents. Since the essential nature of reality was assumed to be

eternal self-identity (“the best state by nature ... admits least alteration by something else”— Plato, *Republic*, II, 381b) classical metaphysicians found themselves trapped within self-referring conceptual systems whose concrete result was legitimization rather than criticism of existing social hierarchies.

Thus the liberatory potential of objective standards of social criticism has generally been submerged beneath the justificatory function of conceptual hierarchies closed to the protest against the denied humanity of the groups in subordinate and dominated positions. Given the fact that the categories according to which society was understood were taken to be valid inferences from eternal truths it could only appear to classical metaphysicians that the fundamental forms of subordination that existed in the given society were “natural” and unchangeable. Nevertheless, those same categories, precisely because they were not inferred from the given social order but claimed to transcend it also always preserve a deeper critical potential. The idea of the human good as an ideal of full self-realization, for example, remains an indispensable ideal of social criticism even when, as in ancient Greece, the thinkers employed it to justify the exclusion of the majority of human beings from it. Thus the ideas of a potentiality not yet fully realized in given conditions, of intrinsically valuable capabilities, and of free self-development, categories which all derive from the traditions of classical metaphysics, endure at the conceptual foundation of critical social philosophy.

As this chapter will demonstrate, the process of transformation from justificatory to critical concept is a dual movement combining philosophical self-criticism and the social struggles of traditionally excluded groups. Those struggles were (and remain) vital ways of opening philosophical concepts to the lived reality of others. That opening up to lived reality produces the critical self-reflection necessary to transform the meaning and function of the concept. The gradual emergence of critical social philosophy from classical metaphysics is a product of this twin process. Critical social philosophy emerges from the cocoon of classical metaphysics once it has become clear that it is the social organization of need satisfaction and capability development, and not inborn superiority, that determines whether one lives a fully human or impoverished and inhuman life. Overcoming those social hierarchies was the result of social struggle; the legitimacy of those struggles, and the normative superiority of progressively more free social forms however, depends upon their being consciously anchored in the idea of creating the social conditions for the realization of a truly universal human good. The fully universalized expression of this idea re-interprets the ancient categories of metaphysics, potentiality and actuality, essence and existence, as the real social-organic capabilities of human beings. Social orders are legitimate or illegitimate according to the degree to which they satisfy fundamental human needs and enable the free and full development of intrinsically valuable human capabilities.

I will trace this development through five key moments: 1) the Greek origins of speculative metaphysics, 2) their medieval synthesis with Christian moral principles, 3) the early-modern critique of classical social and political thought, 4) the nineteenth century conceptual revolution that overthrew the metaphysical hierarchy between divine and human, 5) the social movements that gave concrete expression to the real social implications of this revolution and the life-grounded principle of unity that they reveal. (See *The Embodied Good Life: From Aristotle to Neo-Marxism, Philosophy, Human*

Nature, and Society and Philosophy and World Problems).

2. The Divine Grounds of Social Hierarchy: Greek Metaphysics

In *Negative Dialectics*, Max Adorno argued that the very categories that make thinking possible systematically blind thought to the concrete reality of the material particulars that are thought by being brought under those categories. The problem is inherent in the nature of thinking itself. The categories by which we think are universal but the things that are thought are material particulars. Without the universal concepts there would be no order or coherence to our experience of the world— every experience would be discrete and unique with nothing to connect it to past experience and no foundation from which anticipations of the future could be constructed. Yet, when we construct experience on the basis of universal categories we confuse the construction with the non-conceptual reality that forms its content but differs fundamentally in form. If we forget that conceptual reality is a construction that has the form of thought, rather than material being, we run the risk of treating the essential nature of things as identical to their thought-form, violating their nature as material particulars in the process. The employment of the fundamental categories of speculative metaphysics as justifications of given social hierarchies is a paradigmatic form of this confusion. Yet it is a confusion from which thinking can recover in so far as it is self-reflective and self-critical— the categories that cause the confusion are also its solution in so far as they can be transformed in response to new content generated by social struggles against hierarchical institutions and practices.

The historical development of critical social philosophy that this chapter will chart is driven by this dialectic between social change and philosophical self-reflection. Originally exclusive conceptualizations of human nature are expanded in response to changed experiences of those human beings initially denied their human potentiality by oppressive social hierarchies. For example, with the notable exception of Plato women were, until the twentieth century, normally conceptualized as naturally passive, emotional, dependent upon men, and incapable of self-determination. This conceptualization of women justified their subordinate status in different social organization. The situation was challenged by a series of struggles through which the equal human potential of women for self-determination was vindicated. These struggles changed the way in which women were experienced— if women organized and demanded their rights it could no longer plausibly be maintained that they were essentially incapable of self-determination. The idea of the human good had, as a consequence, to be expanded to include women. In other words, the implicit liberatory content of the idea of an essential self-determining capability emerges out of exclusionary restrictions of the concept in response to changed experiences catalyzed by changing social struggles and relations. The conceptual foundation of critical social philosophy is complete once all naturalistic ideas of necessary inferiority are supplanted by an understanding of subordination and oppression that locates its causes in the principles that govern the operation of major social institutions. In order to fully understand this claim the actual history of this process must be examined. The necessary starting point is the Greek origins of Western speculative metaphysics and in particular its most profound system, that of Aristotle.

Aristotle begins his *Metaphysics* with a brief discussion of the social conditions of scientific development. Since life is a presupposition of scientific thought, and human life depends upon the production of the means of life, the earliest forms of science are practical, concerned with the processes through which the necessities of life are produced. Success in the production of necessities results in the creation of surplus resources. The existence of surpluses means that a class of people can be freed from the immediate demands of material production in order to exercise their minds. The speculative sciences, mathematics and philosophy especially, emerge as soon as a class arises that has the leisure to think. Thus Aristotle argues that speculative science, in particular mathematics, arises first with the Egyptians because slave labor freed its priest-class to think. (*Metaphysics*, I 981b, 20-25) The interesting question for our purposes concerns how Aristotle interprets this social fact. Does he treat it as a corrigible social problem or a necessary reflection of a higher ‘natural’ order? Answering the question demands that we first examine the basic conceptual structure of his metaphysical system.

At a very high level of generality, Aristotle’s metaphysics can be understood as a two-principle system of universal order and harmony. Nature is understood as a multi-level dynamical system in which change is essentially understood as a movement from potentiality to actuality. The major levels of reality are, from highest to lowest, infinite reason (the divine), finite reason (human beings), self-active living nature (the world of non-human life), and non-living matter (the rest of the natural world). These levels are distinguished from one another in terms of the degree of actuality (expressed perfection of activity) that characterizes them. At the highest level is the divine, pure actuality, the perfect being whose existence is always a complete realization of its essence. At the lowest level is mere matter, pure potentiality lacking any inner principle of self-determination which becomes what it is only through the imposition of form from an external cause. In the middle are non-human animals, which can act but not rationally determine their activity, and humans, who can rationally determine their activity (and thus consciously emulate the divine life) but which are also subject to the limitations of their material element (their bodies). Because the divine life is assumed to be a life of pure actuality or fully realized essence, it functions as an objective standard against which the perfection of the different levels of being, including human being, may be judged. Human life is good to the extent that it realizes the potential for activity that lies within us.

In human life the life of thought is judged best because it is closest to the divine life. Whereas bodily capabilities (such as sensation) require an external cause to activate them and are limited to use in relation to particular things corresponding to particular senses, thought can think anything at all whenever it chooses, since thought, unlike the senses, is self-activating. Moreover thought is reflective and projective, it can test itself for coherence and truth; it can formulate and deliberate about life-plans and rules; in short, thought can govern human life in a way that the senses or other bodily capabilities cannot. The metaphysical hierarchy between actuality and potentiality is thus replicated in human nature between our self-activating thought and our passive matter (bodies).

If that is all Aristotle said he would perhaps have said nothing of any *social* interest. He

does not, however, limit himself to this claim. He also maintains that the universal hierarchy of actuality over potentiality, of thinking over matter, also manifests itself in a complex social hierarchy of free men over children, women, and slaves. Aristotle's justification of this structure is of the greatest significance for the present analysis.

For Aristotle the universe is neither inchoate nor contingent. The universe that he observes is a universe essentially characterized by order. That order *is* the order explained by his metaphysical categories. If the order is identical to its categorial explanation, and that categorial explanation is judged necessarily true (because validly inferred from true first principles) then no realm of being could coherently exist and yet not be subject to the essential form of order that characterizes the universe as a whole. Hence it is a requirement of the coherence of his system that human social order reflect in its institutions and relationships the same type of hierarchical rule of actuality over potentiality and thought over matter that characterizes every other level of existence. What grounds could there be in such a theory for anomalous forms of organization at the social level? In other words, what a particular human life is cannot be judged on its own terms, i.e., by developing the categories of explanation from the lived reality of definite people. Instead, what the lived reality of those people *must be* is understood by inference from the principles that govern every form of organization and therefore, by extension, every being within them. I will explain this claim in more detail by examining Aristotle's justification of slavery and the exclusion of women from public life.

It is testimony to Aristotle's greatness that he is aware of the potential ethical problems involved in slavery. Since slaves appear to be full human beings the fact that they are the property of other human beings forced to do their owner's bidding contradicts the ethical demands implied by the human potentiality within them. While Aristotle does consider counter-arguments to the legitimacy of slavery none are allowed to expose the central contradiction in his view. Instead of seeing that slaves must be human because they are capable of understanding direction and consciously carrying out projects, Aristotle's categories simply confirm the legitimacy of the actual institution of slavery. Thus he concludes that "there is no difficulty in answering this question [of whether slavery is just] on grounds of both necessity and fact. For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient." (*Politics*, I, ch. 5, 1254a, 20-25). As soon as one looks at this argument from the vantage point of subsequent historical development it becomes clear that Aristotle confuses expediency and necessity. It is true that slavery was expedient, but is proven necessary only to the extent that the higher level metaphysical categories form a closed conceptual circle that rule out from consideration any countervailing evidence stemming from the actual activity of the slaves. Had Aristotle derived his arguments about slavery from an open experience of what slaves actually do and are, he could not have concluded that it was necessary, even if it was expedient.

A strictly analogous argument is used to justify the subordination of women by men in the state. Just as the state is divided into active free men and passive slaves, so too the family is divided into active men and passive women. It is the natural duty of women to govern the household so that the active man can concern himself with the affairs of business and politics. (*Politics*, I ch. 5, 1254b 5-10). Notice that in both cases the nature

of women and slaves is understood by inference from the universal principles of Aristotle's metaphysics. If it is true that the universe is a multi-level dynamic system governed by the interaction of an active and a passive principle, it is certainly coherent to conclude that, where one observes passive and active roles in social life, the occupants of those roles are fulfilling their 'natural' function. The problem is, however, that this universal order is purely a function of Aristotle's own categories. Refuting evidence from the outside— from actual life-activity— is not allowed into the conceptual circle. No part of the argument ever refers us to anything other than another concept in the metaphysical system itself. Social reality, the way it constructs definite forms of activity as coercively "natural", never enters into the argument. This form of understanding can only be overcome once the explanatory concepts are tied down to the actual ranges of life-activity that different groups are *allowed* to engage in, and these limitations are grasped as functions of oppressive institutions, not in-born incapacity.

Aristotle cannot theorize the oppressive nature of these social roles precisely because he consistently infers them from his metaphysical principles. The goal of philosophy, to systematically comprehend the truth at all levels of being, unconsciously merges with the quite different aim of justifying the basic forms of social hierarchy as metaphysically necessary, natural, and unchangeable. Once the excluded evidence from life-activity is brought back into philosophy, however, a profound illogic in Aristotle's argument emerges. The categorization of some groups' restricted life-activity as "natural" does not follow from the facts or evidence. Since it is impossible to demonstrate by argument that women and slaves are not human (because they speak and think and laugh and are capable of all the other distinguishing activities of humans), it is equally impossible to prove that the restricted range of life-activity that characterizes their life in ancient society is *all* that they are capable of. To maintain that the social is in essence natural, that what people in fact do is all they are can do even if in different circumstances, is, moreover, inconsistent with the ideal of the human good that orients Aristotle's understanding of human life. The resolution of the inconsistency cannot be purely formal, that is, restricted to the conceptualization of social forms, but must extend into changes in social organization itself to enable the human ideal to be realized. However, understanding the need for social changes requires concepts to understand other humans whose life-activity is illegitimately restricted to traditional roles which oppress their humanity - or, in Aristotelian language, their human essence. The inconsistency between the idea of the human good as full and free self-realization of defining human capabilities, and naturalized social hierarchies which systematically prevent this free realization, continues and is sharpened in medieval Christian philosophy. Here again the very fact that people occupied passive or inhuman roles was, within ruling conceptual system, ample proof that they were doing what they were suited to do by nature. The argument will now turn to an examination of the sharpening of this contradiction as it manifests itself in the work of Thomas Aquinas.

3. Medieval Christian Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy: Aquinas

Aquinas' work combines in an unstable tension the categorial blindness of Aristotle's metaphysics to the social causes of oppressive hierarchies and a new openness to the concrete life-horizons of others' that is central to the morality of the Gospels. I cannot

enter into any detailed treatment of Aquinas' interpretation of Aristotle or his attempt to unify Aristotelian science and Christian morality. Instead this section will focus on the tension that necessarily arises between these moments and how it intensifies the problems engendered by the speculative approach to understanding human nature and social order.

The core moral principles of Christianity are summed up in Jesus' explanation of the ancient laws of the Jewish prophets: "whatever you would have men do to you, do the same to them, is what the Law of the Prophets means." (Matthew, 8:12). The principle contains two essential elements of general significance. First, it is a principle of moral reciprocity that focuses moral consciousness on the relations between human beings. In order to know how to treat others, we must ask ourselves how we would allow them to treat us. Contrary to appearances it is not ego-centric but is essentially directed towards the life of the other person. It is not saying, 'treat anyone anyway you want provided that you are willing to suffer the consequences.' Rather, it is saying that "you know that some ways of treating others are harmful, because you would be unwilling to suffer that harm. Therefore do not treat others in that way, because you know that it would harm them too." Second, it is a principle of moral concreteness. By this term I mean that it does not reduce moral action to a set of rules that can be consigned to memory. In each case it demands that we pay attention to the person with whom we are interacting and attend to the actual demands of that specific person and context. Both these elements of the principle stand in very sharp tension with the metaphysical system and mode of reasoning essential to Aquinas' philosophy.

The essential tension is grounded in the opposite forms of relation to the other person that Jesus' principle and speculative reasoning imply. Jesus' principle, as I argued, demands that we develop principles of action by paying attention to the concrete situation of the other person. Speculative reasoning, on the other hand, deduces the relevant features of the other person from its structuring principles and therefore does away with any need to *experience* them openly. Aristotle does not and cannot (from within his system) ask, "Would I want to be enslaved? No. Therefore, I will not enslave." That sort of question presupposes that Aristotle could open his experience to the state of the other person and find in it some sort of human identity existing between them. But just that identification is ruled out by the use to which the fundamental categories of his system are put. The exact same blindness affects Aquinas.

Aquinas follows Aristotle in thinking that the universe is a divinely caused hierarchy of different levels of being. The universe as a whole is governed by divine law. The natural world is governed by natural law, which is a reflection of the divine law adapted to the goal of preserving life. Human law is a conscious construction, reflecting both divine and natural law, and geared both to the preservation of life and the conduct of human beings towards the highest good (God). (*Summa Theologica, I-II*, 94, 2.c.) However, human beings cannot be conducted towards the highest good in a disorderly society. Just as in Aristotle, so too in Aquinas, society must be divided into a ruling part and a ruled part. Since Aquinas was no longer living in a dominantly slave economy, that issue is not so pressing as it was for Aristotle. Given the fact that Aquinas is interpreting Aristotle's works, however, he actually employs the problem of slavery as a test case of the application of divine and natural law to human life. Perhaps

surprisingly, given the moral reciprocity central to Christianity, he sees no contradiction between a divine and natural law designed to enable humans to realize the good and a human law that reduces some human to the mere tools of others.

Aquinas of course does not explicitly recommend slavery as a necessary mode of social organization. What is problematic is the way his argument simply accepts it as legitimate if it happens to exist in a given society. As he says, “the end which benefits a multitude of free men is different from that which benefits a multitude of slaves, for the free man is one who exists for his own sake, while the slave ... exists for the sake of another.” (*On Kingship*, I, ch. 1, p. 3) Like Aristotle, the conceptual limits of his metaphysical system (drawing logical inferences from the definitions of the proper elements of society *a priori*) takes precedence over the *critical* implications of the Christian moral reciprocity he asserts (arguing that it can ever be morally true of other humans that they are nothing but instruments of the ends of others). The *a priori* structure of the conceptual order he presupposes blinds him to the social structures of oppression he cannot see from within its ordering logic. The apparent perfection of its order blinds him to its oppressive nature, that Christian reciprocity would itself disclose if it were the real basis of his social philosophy. However, a reciprocal and concrete focus on the actual life-conditions of others is otiose in a metaphysical system that judges every part in terms of an overall order that does not depend for its goodness upon its concrete effects on actual human beings, but rather on its conformity with a pre-established conceptual harmony.

The point of this analysis is not to juxtapose a principle of non-harmful reciprocity of treatment and concrete attentiveness to actual life-conditions to the fundamental categories of speculative metaphysics in a disjunctive argument. On the contrary, the principle of non-harmful reciprocity of treatment and concrete attentiveness to actual life-conditions begins the process of expanding the idea of the human good to include those whom speculative metaphysics had condemned to congenital inferiority and sub-humanity. What this claim means, precisely, is that the metaphysical idea of the human good and its related idea of the human essence fully expressed in existence become critical social concepts as soon as they enable philosophers to comprehend institutional orders as oppressive when they systematically impede the free realization of defining human capabilities. It is not a matter of abandoning these universal categories for the ungrounded particulars of ‘lived experience.’ How can we determine what any experience means, what its value is, whether it is good or bad, or what is good or bad in human life, unless we appeal to fundamental conceptual frameworks that order, organize, and allow us to contrast one sort of experience with another? Rather, it is a matter of grounding the meaning of these metaphysical categories in the actual life-necessities of human beings required to realize themselves, and relating these to the ranges of existing and possible social conditions which respectively prevent or enable this realization of their human life capacities. The next key philosophical step in this process of conceptual opening and grounding occurs in the early modern period, and in particular in the work of Spinoza.

4. Divine Indifference and Human Power: Spinoza

In the case of both Aristotle and Aquinas their conceptual systems suppressed a

contradiction. The contradiction lies in the conclusion that realization of humanity's higher nature can be possible in a society that prevents this very realization for most humans by reducing them to mere tools at the service of a ruling stratum. The contradiction is suppressed, however, by re-definition of the human so as to exclude the dominated orders. Redefinition of the majority of people as subhuman does not, of course, change their nature. Hence the contradiction remains latent, ready to be exposed in changed social conditions. The conceptual circle closed to refuting experience opens once social change has undermined the old institutional orders. In these transitional moments the critical implications of the metaphysical ideas of the human good and self-determination emerge to replace their traditional conservative and legitimating function.

The early modern period in Europe (1600-1700) is one such moment of transition. The growth of new scientific methods exposed medieval philosophy and its classical sources as moribund. Hierarchical society began to give way to new conceptions of equality as the feudal order disintegrated. Philosophy registers and consciously defends these transformations through radical rethinking of the nature of being and human knowledge. The most important early modern philosopher in the history of development of critical social philosophy is Spinoza. His significance is established by the clarity with which he exposes the political interests that lie behind metaphysical defenses of established social hierarchies. By exposing these political interests Spinoza opens up the possibility of a social philosophy focused on the way in which human power is organized by social institutions. By retaining the concepts of classical metaphysics, however, Spinoza at the same time avoids the dangers (represented by Hobbes) on collapsing his social philosophy into a mechanical empiricist theory of the cunning exploitation of human nature. In order to understand his importance for social philosophy it is important to first survey briefly his metaphysics.

Spinoza's essential argument, that God and nature are synonymous, was profoundly controversial, both in Amsterdam when he first propounded it, and almost a century later, in Germany, when key figures of the German Enlightenment like Lessing took it up. Spinoza was expelled from the city of Amsterdam because the elders of the Jewish community feared reprisals lest his purportedly atheistic doctrine spread. It was also this supposed atheism that generated interest in his work in eighteenth century Germany. Here I am not interested in whether Spinoza's doctrines lead to atheism; indeed, beyond necessary prefatory comments the analysis is not concerned with his conception of God. What does concern the present purposes is the new form of relationship between human and divine life that Spinoza's arguments make possible. Hence I will focus upon this relationship, and in particular upon its human side. In the tradition of speculative thinking from which Spinoza proceeds the category of "substance" designated being of the highest type. To take a simple example, if we observe "walking" then there must be a being that walks, "walking" being an activity of the being who walks. If there were no being that walks, there would be no walking. In the language of classical metaphysics the being that walks is the substance, and walking is one its properties or accidents. The same substance is capable of undergoing all sorts of changes while remaining self-same (the being who walks is also the being who sits, laughs, eats, etc.). Thus we could say that substances alone are properly real, in the sense that the existence of substances are presupposed by the existence of their

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Biographical Sketch

Jeff Noonan was born in 1968 in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada. He received his BA (Philosophy and Social

and Political Thought) from York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada in 1991, his MA (Philosophy) and Ph.D (Philosophy) from McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, in 1993 and 1996, respectively. He taught as a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Alberta from 1996-1998 and is currently Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, Canada. He also serves on the Coordinating Committee of the Centre for Social Justice, University of Windsor, the Academic Advisory Board of the Humanities Research Group, and the Coordinating Committee of the Labour Studies Program. He is the author of Critical Humanism and the Politics of Difference (McGill-Queen's University Press), 2003 (short-listed for the Canadian Philosophical Association's Book Prize, 2005) and more than twenty articles and reviews that have appeared in peer-reviewed journals such as The Canadian Journal of Philosophy, ReThinking Marxism, Res Publica, and Social Theory and Practice. He is co-editor with John McMurtry of Philosophy and World Problems section of the Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems.

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