

Concept of nature in  
the works of marx  
and emerson  
philosophy essay



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Given the salience of current debates in the philosophy of social theory concerning the necessity or impossibility of grand narratives, or universalising theory, and the utility or dis-utility of the post-structural, relativist approach, I find it surprising that no one has yet stumbled upon the idea of comparing the works of Karl Marx and Ralph Waldo Emerson, the former the producer of the most influential grand-narrative in recent world political and economic history, and the later one of the more forceful exponents of experiential truth as elaborated upon by Nietzsche, and of historical relativism as practised by Foucault.

A comparison of the work of these two individuals is justifiable on more grounds than their respective contributions to the development of contemporary sociological thought. Both witnessed the modern age, what appears to many “ as the culminating point of human development... announc[ing] the secret of human history, hitherto concealed from the eyes of its participants,” (Kumar, 81) but both witnessed it from very different perspectives.

Both men were also deeply concerned to “ capture” the concept of nature: Marx wrote his PhD thesis on the concept ( entitled “ The Difference between Democritus’ and Epicurus’ Philosophy of Nature”) , and one of Emerson’s first works, published in 1932, was entitled quite simply “ Nature”.

A comparison of the concept is, however, confounded by the fact that their most forceful articulations of what the concept meant was made in their youths, and both are notorious for later deriving contradictory, and non-explicit definitions of this concept in their more mature works. This is hardly

surprising, given that the concept of nature is one of the more ambiguous concepts in any language.

An analysis of the texts of these two influential thinkers show that the concept of nature is central to understanding their political and social critiques of their contemporary societies and that these critiques, as well as their perspectives on the historical development of human society and political economy are based upon certain metaphysical assumptions that centre around the concepts of reality, truth, history, humanity, and nature.

It is tempting to view Marx and Emerson as being representatives of different sides of the ecophilosophy coin. Indeed Marx has been criticised by Adorno for “perpetuating a belief in economic growth that sees human emancipation at the expense of nature” (Hayward, 43), and by Porrit, who believes that “in the way that they (Marx and Engels) treat resources and the environment, adopted many of the assumptions of classical economics (and previous Western thought)”. (Porrit, 157) Donald Worster makes the distinction between Marx, who failed to see nature as anything more than a passive landscape, and thus primarily as an analytical category (Worster, 33) and Emerson, who saw the value of nature as being in the lived experience of it (Worster, 200)

Below, I will look at the ontological assumptions underlying their conceptions of nature; How man stands in relation to nature, how he is differentiated from nature, and thus notions of how man should act in relation to that which is not man; I will then ask by what means man can come to know nature, and whether or not he can control it; Finally I will ask what purposes nature can

fulfil for man, and what value it is to him. By asking these questions, I will attempt to ascertain how eco-, anthro- or techno- centric each of these thinkers is.

## **The Nature of Marx**

For Marx, Nature is non – living matter, consisting of material resources that undergo continual transformation. Humanity (“ man” ) is part of nature, and in essence material, and through productive labour partakes of this transformation of resources, and in this respect is always part of nature.

Man, however, stands apart from dormant nature by virtue of his consciousness, which brings rational intention to the process of production.

Production, facilitated through industry, which is never anything but natural as it is that which relates man to his inorganic body, is the driving force of history. Very importantly, man’s relationship to the forces of production shape the social relations of production. These social relations, manifest in the form of capitalism come into conflict with the forces of production.

Marx’s latter work goes into great depth explaining the nature of the contradiction between capitalism and nature, which always rests on the assumption that there is a harmonious state of egalitarianism, (communism) in which man works to fulfil needs which he himself determines, that the social relations of capitalism are in contradiction with. This ideal state which allows for individual, social and natural harmony, is the culmination of natural history, and will be reached inevitably. It follows that conflict is not unnatural, but temporal. This state of natural harmony is to be built on the advances of natural science, applied to industry, and assumes the fact that man can know nature. Rationality, however, can never overcome nature, and

man can never control it, but will just come to work with it once social conflicts have been resolved.

## **Nature as Material Reality and the Nature of Everything**

The concept of history is probably the most persistent in all of Marx's thought, and to understand the historical development of man, one must understand his productive relationship with nature

“ The first premiss of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature... The writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men.”  
(Marx, in Mclellan, 160)

The study of history is the study of natural history, of real productive man (as opposed to the Emersonian or Hegelian fascination with the history of ideas)

Man's productive processes are “ life processes as they really are, i. e. as they operate, produce materially and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will” (Mclellan, 164). That which is central to Marx's understanding of the historical development of man is his physical activity, production, always defined as engagement with the Earth, and thus : “ It is not consciousness that determines life but life that determines consciousness” (Mclellan, 164)

That this productive activity is to be the primary focus of Marx's empirical investigations is justified by the ontological assumption that man is part of material nature, and so that which is important is his material connection with the Earth. As Schmidt has pointed out that "The dialectic of subject and object is for Marx a dialectic of the constituent elements of nature" (Schmidt, 16)

Here, I would argue that the term "nature" is employed as a concept that can be translated as "reality", and that reality is material, and that which limits other aspects of man's being.

As Schmidt says: "The stuff of nature which Marx equated with matter is in itself already formed, i. e. it is subject to physical and chemical laws... in constant co-operation with material production... Marx's own concept of matter, the dialectical materialist view that men, whatever historical conditions they live in, see themselves confronted with a world of things which cannot be transcended and must be appropriated in order to survive." (Schmidt, 63)

This ontological "truth" is essentially what allows Marx to develop his "grand narrative". It is only possible to talk of Capitalism's eventual demise due to inherent contradictions that the system creates between man and man and man and nature because Marx believes that the nature of nature and the nature of man are material and that these material natures and the relationships between them are ultimately knowable empirically.

## **Nature as Unconscious, Passive,**

### **Man as Active**

There is, however, a second usage of the term “ nature”. It is also employed as the starting point of history, i. e. that state from which mankind progresses, and to which he is contrasted. It is here that one sees in Marx many of the dominant themes circulating around Europe in the mid nineteenth century, themes that: “ ...Presupposed the doctrine of human exceptionalism: that humans are fundamentally different from and superior to all other species; that the world is vast and presents unlimited opportunities; that the history of human society is one of unending progress” q1

In the German Ideology, Marx says: “ The satisfaction of the first need (the action of satisfying, and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired) leads to new needs; and this production of new needs is the first historical act.” (McLellan, 166)

Before this production of new needs, “ consciousness of nature, which first appears to men as a completely alien, all-powerful and unassailable force, with which men’s relations are purely animal and by which they are overawed by beasts; it is thus a purely animal consciousness of nature .” q2”. In this early phase of human history “ the restricted relation of man to nature determines their restricted relation to one another...just because nature is yet hardly modified historically” q3. But it is only at first that man exists in a state of nature, as passive, unconscious, and not directing his own future, and this is a state from which man progresses.

Marx is of the opinion that man is only truly “ of nature” when he is not in control of it (as is the case with savages and animals), and he appears superior to it when he begins to become conscious of the productive process:

“ Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence” (Mclellan, 160)

History is thus the history of man developing away from a dormant and passive nature. This is characterised by, first and foremost, a developing technology. History is, however, not one of unending progress, as it will eventually come to end in harmonious communism.

Historical man is thus distinguished from nature by at least three factors. Firstly, by his superior consciousness (Putting it explicitly, Marx is quite clear that “ man is a thing, but a living conscious thing” q4); Secondly, by . his control over the productive process, through planning, (“ man [unlike animals] constructs also in accordance with the laws of beauty” (Schmidt, 80); and thirdly, his self control (man is unique in that “ no other animal can suppress his needs”, (Mclellan, 521)

## **Productive Man?**

Marx had nothing against the projects of science or industry, seeing them as emancipatory, believing that: “ the celebrated unity of man with nature has always existed in industry” (The German Ideology, 84)

It has been argued that in Marx’s later work, he “ shifted his focus from the emancipation of mankind through labour to emancipation from productive



labour by an even greater productivity.” (Rabinbach, 73) Rabinbach even goes so far as to say that “ He became a productivist” arguing that in his later work: “ Freedom is redefined as the rationalisation of nature under the law of energy: “ freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, regularly regulating their interchange with nature, bringing it under common control instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of nature, and achieving with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature” (Rabinbach, 73)

Marx was indeed a productivist, and he did apply a rational, scientific approach to the study of “ the dynamics of the capitalist mode of production- an analysis he referred to as an “ objective” and “ scientific” study of the unfolding of history” (Eckersley, 79), and it is true that: “ Marx’s view of history and his particular notion of humanity as homo faber... perpetuate[s] an instrumentalist and anthropocentric orientation to the human world” (Eckersley, 82)

However, that Marx placed ultimate faith in industry, (he also believed that the communist future would be built on the back of technological advances made in the present age) is one thing, but to argue that he is simply an instrumentalist and anthropocentric is another.

There is no doubt that one can find in Marx certain anthropocentric elements, when one reads statements such as: “ man through his own acts mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature” (Scmidt, 82); and it is clear that nature has no intrinsic value when

Marx says: " as far as possible, human labour transforms the in-itself of nature into a for us" (Scmidt, 76), yet I believe that commentators such as those that criticise Marx for not escaping from the " discourse of the dominance of nature" overemphasise certain definitions of nature, without having fully explored the complexity of the concept. These tendencies are qualified consistently in at least three major respects.

To take the first of these: Man may appear as superior to " nature" in certain of Marx's paragraphs, but these notions of superior man are always qualified with paragraphs about man's natural being. For example, having distinguished man from nature, and from animals by this quality of self awareness, Marx still explicitly states that this process is still " a step which is conditioned by their material organisation". (Mclellan, 160)

And, as Mclellan points out: " Marx started from the real man of flesh and blood; standing on the solid round earth and breathing in and out all the powers of nature.... [and] defined his position as a consistent naturalism or humanism.. " (Mclellan, 25), reminding us that the relationship between man and nature is dialectical, and that " the external world was part of mans nature and it was vital to establish the right relations between man and his environment" (Mclellan, p107)

## **Natural Communism,**

## **Unnatural Capitalism**

Society, that is the social relations of production, develop in the course of history. It is social relations, of religion, politics and ideology, that come to

conflict with the natural productive relationship that exists between each individual man and his relationship with nature.

Marx sees capitalist relations of production are unnatural in that they tend towards a situation in which man's production is not directly involved with satisfying his own needs, and under which men are producing to fulfil a social need, that of capitalism.

It is clear that when Marx criticises capitalism, he is not criticising the technological basis of capitalism, but the social relations of production. What is specifically unnatural about capitalism is that wealth is not derived directly from the harmonious metabolism between man and nature:

“ value is an alienated form of use value because here use values are only produces as a means of obtaining exchange value, not of satisfying human needs.” (Burkett, 342)

A system based on exchange value is seen as leading to overproduction, and Marx explicitly criticises capitalism for the fact that “ capitalist production... disturbs the circulation of matter between man and soil, i. e., prevents return to the soil of its elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; it thereby violates the conditions necessary to lasting fertility of the soil.” (Burkett, 349)

Marx believes that this is bad as it is not linked to fulfilling human needs, and that an economic system that was geared towards this function would be based around use values. This does sound like gross utilitarianism, as under communism, man is to transform nature's raw materials in order to satisfy

his own needs. It follows that communist man is rational economic man. However, this does not mean that Marx has an instrumental view of nature, and neither does it mean that he has an anthropocentric view of nature, because he dares to question the validity of human needs that are not derived from an in depth (all be it analytical and atomistic) understanding of nature.

### **Human Needs as Nature's Needs**

On examining the concept of human needs in Marx, it appears that they are often found to be the equivalent of the means of subsistence. In *Capital*, Marx lists needs specifically as the strength needed to work the next day, for the upbringing of children, for education and “ natural wants”, defined as food, clothing, shelter, and whatever needs are defined as in a particular historical reality. q5

One could take this later to mean that man has free reign to decide what his needs are and thus use nature to fulfil them, however, in *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx makes the statement that: “ after labour has become not only a means of life, but life's prime want...only then from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” (McLellan, 569), giving an indication that, although needs are socially defined, Marx's moral position on the concept is that capitalism leads to excess production, and thus to too many needs.

It follows that there are “ right” and “ wrong” needs, wrong needs being those needs of capital, leading to a situation in which the worker overproduces. Under communism, there is a definite feeling that needs will

be harmonised, so that they can be met by necessary labour, which is “ what should be a limit to the exchange value of living labour power” q6, and “ that which is needed for the sustenance of living labour power” q7. Critically, a system of production and exchange that has as its source of wealth use value can be met by necessary work, “ in the sense that it is living, and produces the means of subsistence which are its value”. q8

Necessary labour is the crucial concept in the refutation as Marx as an anthropocentric instrumentalist,. Man, remember, is natural, and so is of nature, man’s human nature appears in Marx as production... It is in man’s nature to produce... to change nature, and to be changed by it (the dialectic). This is man as adapting to nature. This is his true nature, which is exemplified through necessary labour. The value of products, the use value comes from their contribution to maintaining this balance, this process. Man has no control over this process, he is part of it, he has no stable human nature, and thus any basis from which he tries to give value to nature other than its intrinsic processual value leads to alienation. Use Value is thus derived from an intrinsic view of nature as it is.

## **The Nature of Emerson**

For Emerson, Nature is not wholly material, and neither is man. The primary dualism that exists in his thought is that between body and spirit. Nature is characterised as man’s body and other objects of a material nature. “

Nature”, however, is also employed romantically as that which is untouched by man (Forest, as opposed to settled land). It is here that man can come closest to God, or universal spirit, it is here that man can join his tiny mind to the great unknowable universe. Nature, as opposed to society (the realm of <https://assignbuster.com/concept-of-nature-in-the-works-of-marx-and-emerson-philosophy-essay/>

men) is where man can be close to God. Because Nature contains God, it is essentially unknowable analytically, and the true value of nature lies in man's experiential awareness of it. Freedom is to be reached individually, by a unique joining with the spirit in untouched nature. Thus nature has a timelessness to it that never changes. Nature is constant, and always there to fulfil human emancipatory needs. Emancipation is cast in intellectual terms, and there is no need to adapt the productive relationship between man and nature to achieve human equality. Nature is characterised by inequalities and tensions, and this is seen as being natural and acceptable, tension being conducive to the intellectual perfection of the self.

Emerson was a very different thinker to Marx, there being nothing in his thought that classifies him as especially modern. Indeed, his approach to philosophy is, if classifiable at all, post-modern. While Marx developed his historical materialist approach through a radical critique of *The German Ideology*, Emerson wrote shorter Essays on a much broader range of topics. After decades of thinking, Marx had developed a grand critique of an economic system based on a radically new ontology, whereas Emerson had produced a huge amount of poetry, prose and essays discussing the problems of the salient themes of modern life, leaving his audience with the message that these problems, these tensions of modernity, were here to stay, because there was no possible way of knowing what the nature of reality and thus the source of these problems were, and, even more significantly, that any one perspective on modern life was as valid as the next.

## Nature as Spirit

Emerson's concept of nature is very different to that of Marx. Nature, which includes "all other men and my own body" q9 is opposed to the concept of "soul". Thus, in Emersonian metaphysics "reality", consists of a Cartesian dualism, which distinguishes between mind and body.

Although Emerson recognises that the term "nature" can be used as a term to represent the static side of reality, saying that "nature, in the more common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man, space, the air, the river, the leaf" (Emerson, 36), it is more significant that "nature always wears the colors of the spirit" (Emerson, 39) The crucial relationship is still that existing between man and nature, but between spiritual nature and spiritual man, not between material nature and material man. This nature is also somewhat ephemeral and unknowable:

"What is nature to him (the scholar)? There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always a circular power returning into itself...so entire, so boundless" q10

Because Nature appears as God, or pure spirit, it is, unlike Marx's concept of nature as essentially material, amenable to rational and analytical scientific investigation, as can be evidenced in Emerson's attitude towards the study of history:

"along with the civil and metaphysical history of man, another history goes daily forward,- that of the external world" (Emerson, 169), but, in complete contrast to Marx, he says of this: "Here also we are reminded of the action of man on man. A mind might ponder its thoughts for ages and not gain so  
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much self-knowledge as the passion of love shall teach it in a day" (Emerson, 171)

Whereas for Marx, the study of natural history reveals the laws of nature, and the physical limitations of human social arrangements possible within those laws, Emerson's study of history is not to be employed as a means of realising the limits of human social reality. It is not the painstaking scientific study of the relationship between the forces and relations of production and the political ideology, it is not a project of the discovery of the necessary conditions of particular social forms Emerson does not give primacy to the study of the material aspect of history, and any study of history is certainly not to be limited to the study of man's productive activity.

For Emerson, at least as much significance is to be found in literature, architecture, and sculpture (Emerson, 156), and in the works of the Greeks and of religious spiritual figures such as Moses and Jesus. The study of "advancing man" consists of finding how much "property he has... in fable as well as in history" (Emerson, 166) indicating that for Emerson, the study of ideas, and of literature and myth, are a valuable occupation for the historian. This places his ontology closer to that of Hegel than to Marx.

"...the thought is prior to the fact; all the facts of history pre-exist in the mind as eternal laws.... Each law in turn is made by circumstances predominant, and the limits of nature give power but to one at a time" (Emerson, 149)

Further, in the American Scholar, Emerson says: "so much of nature is he ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess. And, in fine, <https://assignbuster.com/concept-of-nature-in-the-works-of-marx-and-emerson-philosophy-essay/>



the ancient precept, “ know thyself,” and the modern precept, “ study nature,” become at last one and the same maxim” (Emerson, 87).

Nature is the whole, the universal mind, and man is only a part of this. Any knowledge which man cannot himself experience holistically is worthless knowledge, as any knowledge other than this involves splitting up that which is universal. Experience, or being in nature is the only valuable form of truth: “ Who hath access to this universal mind is a party to all that is or can be done, for this is the only and sovereign agent.”(Emerson, 149).

Emerson’s perspective is to accept that there is a multitude of perspectives, (given the complexity, and nature of reality), and is thus wary of grand narratives such as those found in Marx, and of totalising theories, that explain the causes and solutions to man’s problems.

## **Emerson: A Post – Modern Perspective in the Age of Modernity?**

There is no harmonious end-point to Emerson’s work. He is not an end-of history theorist, and his ontology of Nature as spirit, and belief that the significant part of man is his spirit, forces him to accept that he cannot know the whole truth of this ephemeral reality.

“ truth is our element of life, yet if a man fasten his attention on a single aspect of truth, and apply himself to that alone for a long time, the truth becomes distorted and not itself, but a falsehood ” (Kateb, 3)

In Emerson’s thought, the individual is mandated to take what he sees fit from his own study of history, to find what is relevant to him and to use it as

a source of inspiration in his project of self reliance. As Kateb points out, Emerson is always “ a theorist of self reliance and of democratic individuality” (Kateb, 9),

Practically everything for Emerson can and should serve the purpose of the direct emancipation of the individual. This is certainly true of the study of history:

“ Civil and natural history, the history of art and of literature, must be explained from individual history, or must remain words. There is nothing but is related to us that does not interest us” (Emerson, 158). Also, “ The student is to read history actively and not passively; to esteem his own life in the text... the world exists for the education of each man. There is no age or state of society or mode of action in history to which there is not something corresponding in his life.” (Emerson, 142)

“ the world,- this shadow of the soul, or other me,- lies wide around me. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me aquatinted with myself” (Emerson, 92)

## **The Concept of Self Reliance**

One of the central tenets of the Emersonian philosophical system being that the individual should be free to find his own way, and to create his own unique identity.

This freedom of thought is embodied in the concept of self – reliance is defined as:

“ the steady effort of thinking ones thoughts and thinking them through. It is intellectual independence, reactive and responsive self possession”, but this definition must be qualified with the fact that “ self reliance... must find its location elsewhere than in worldly activity. Self-reliance must then refer primarily to the life of the mind” (Kateb, 31)

It is significant that Emerson makes a “ distinction of realising oneself and engaging fully with life intellectually and forcing oneself on the world, which may be doomed to failure.” q10

What are we to make of this? It is true that Emerson believes that the whole truth cannot be told in a few, or even in a plethora of abstract principles, and thus concludes, logically, that each man should be free to think his own thoughts. When it comes to acting out alternative ways of thoughts, to reforming existing social practice, however, he seems to think this to be a pointless exercise, doomed to failure:

“ He sensed a new tension in modern society between the moral imperitives of calling, self-improvement and public service. If the issue was pressed, he was willing to sacrifice the reformer to the man” (Rose, 116)

(A similar feeling can be found in his refusal to partake in the Brook -Farm experiment. While he spoke of this admirably, his praise remained verbal. Emerson rather preferred his servants to do the less spiritually rewarding manual work.)

Emerson, unlike Marx, distinguishes between mental and active self reliance (Kateb, 17). Kateb interprets this by telling his readers that Emerson

believed that self reliance was only possible in a holistic way, and that it could only be achieved in contemplation, as it was impossible for any man to act out all possibilities. (Kateb, 28):

Thus Emerson celebrates diversity in principle, believing that people should be free to think as they please, preferring to leave the progress of humanity to its own unfathomable development. The reason that this mental self - reliance is so much more important to Emerson than practical self - reliance is that man is in Essence moral. Emerson believes, unlike Marx, that there is not a material determinacy to society, or to consciousness.

## **Individualism**

Self-trust and independent thinking should lead to the refutation of the majority (rep men, 19) and anti-conformity, yet he is against conflict.

Emerson is anti violence through radical identity, with each individual as a source of raging conflicts. He believes that is each individual can develop his own faculties to the best of his abilities, then there may be argument, and a healthy tension between men, but life should be satisfying enough for the avoidance of violence. q12

There is no radical critique of capitalism, Emerson sees this as the result of a healthily antagonistic individualism. Property is central to democratic individualism, and there is nothing unnatural about the ensuing inequalities that derive from this.

There is no belief to be found in the work of Emerson that man's relation to the forces of production determine man's relation to nature. Emerson is, like

Marx, concerned for the emancipation of the individual, but there is no <https://assignbuster.com/concept-of-nature-in-the-works-of-marx-and-emerson-philosophy-essay/>

pressing need for the contradiction between society and nature to be overcome for this to happen. Social inequality, in other words, is not a prerequisite for the emancipation of the individual. Emancipation for Emerson is to be found in the experiential awareness of the fleeting moment.

Kateb has pointed out that self reliance is not be found in worldly activity, it is to be found in nature. Indeed, active self reliance verges on the inhuman. Nature is distinguished more radically from society than in Marx, nature being a place of serene mental reflection, and society being a place of overcrowding, and cities being places that were characterised be being populated by beggars. q11

There is no belief to be found in the work of Emerson that man's relation to the forces of production determine man's relation to nature. Emerson is, like Marx, concerned for the emancipation of the individual, but there is no pressing need for the contradiction between society and nature to be overcome for this to happen. Social inequality, in other words, is not a prerequisite for the emancipation of the individual. Emancipation for Emerson is to be found in the experiential awareness of the fleeting moment.

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