

LOOKING FOR A HUMAN ESSENCE

Eric A. Nilsson
Department of Economics
California State University San Bernardino
enilsson@csusb.edu

January 1, 2004

But in time, both in philosophy and politics, new ideas become old ideas; what was once challenging, becomes predictable and boring; and what once served to focus attention where it should be focused, later keeps discussion from considering new alternatives. This has now happened in the debate between the correspondence views of truth and subjectivist views.

Hilary Putnam¹

Introduction

Some institutions and social customs hinder human flourishing. For instance, I think that capitalism (or at least some aspects of it), racism, and sexism hinder human flourishing.

On the other hand, other social institutions and customs promote human flourishing. Much disagreement exists, of course, over which institutions and customs best promote human flourishing. For instance, in the realm of economic institutions, does democratic capitalism promote human flourishing best? Or, does market socialism? What about communism with central planning? Or, does some as-yet unconceived economic system best promote human flourishing?

Agreement does exist, though, that we want to eliminate institutions and customs that hinder human flourishing and replace them with institutions and customs that promote human flourishing. Any critical social theory worthy of acceptance places this agreement at its core.

But what is human flourishing? Since Aristotle, human flourishing has been linked with a life that fully expresses the “human essence.” In its crudest form, the human essence is a list of characteristics we consider as necessary if we are going to consider someone’s life as being “fit for a human.” If we consider characteristics X, Y and Z as necessary for a human life then human flourishing is achieved when

¹ Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, page x.

a person's life fully displays X, Y, and Z.

Among those who followed this Aristotelian tradition is Karl Marx. Marx believed that creativity was part of the human essence. When a person expressed this creativity, he/she achieved human flourishing. Marx criticized capitalism because it hindered the achievement of human flourishing.²

Unfortunately, a problem with the notion of human flourishing exists. In recent decades the notion of “a human essence”—and, so “human flourishing”—has been rejected as being philosophically and politically untenable. These attacks have come from those operating with quite different philosophical frameworks.

Leading the charge against a notion of a human essence is postmodernism. The postmodernist attacks against essentialism are simple and powerful. To some they appear undeniable.

If the postmodern attack on essentialism is valid, the rug has been pulled out from under those—such as me—who would like to place a notion of the human essence at the center of their social theory. Further, if this postmodern attack is valid, many people working within Marxian political economy are engaged in a philosophically empty activity because they presume that capitalism is bad because it hinders human flourishing.

Luckily, though, the postmodernist attacks are invalid.

In this paper, I argue that we can identify a “human essence” using a procedure that does not run afoul of the criticisms made by postmodernism. This is an important finding and one that I hope can contribute to a revitalization of heterodox economics by putting once again notions of human flourishing on the agenda.

The Modernism/Postmodernism Debate

Modernism has provided the philosophical foundation for much of Western culture since the Enlightenment. Modernism reaches its highest form in “science” although this approach arguably influences all of Western culture.

Inherent in modernism is the notion of an essence: the truth behind the appearances we see around us. Science is about discovering these essences as science slowly reveals the truth about the world around us. Postmodernist attacks on essentialism have taken aim at this modernism version of essentialism.

These postmodern attacks on essentialism have made it difficult to articulate support for the modernist notion of a human essence. Those who have continued to support the existence of a human essence in the face of these attacks appear as though they are stubbornly clinging onto a discredited philosophical notion. The modernist response to the damaging attacks on essentialism has most often been to

² Marx offer an equally strong moral condemnation of capitalism based on Kantian notions: people should not be treated simply as means (as they clearly were in capitalism) but as ends.

scoff of these attacks and, then, to simply loudly reassert essentialism as “obviously true.” This is a poor defense.

Modernism’s Search for a Human Essence

Modern holds to what has been called “the correspondence theory of truth.” According to this theory, a statement is worthy of belief if it is “objectively true.” Moreover, a statement is objectively true if it “accurately represents reality.”

Linked to the correspondence theory of truth is the “fact-value” opposition. In this perspective, among statements that are *not* objectively true are those that are based on subjective values. That the colors seen at sunset are caused by light being scattered by particles in the atmosphere is objectively true; that a sunset is beautiful is a value statement.

Modernism sees reality as something apart from human interpretation and values. Modernism believes that, in principle, reality can be seen “in itself” shorn of all human interpretative frameworks. In any case, human interpretations do not alter—or makeup—reality; rather interpretations are seen as either true or false representations of reality. The existence of interpretive frameworks just makes it harder—but not necessarily impossible—to get at the truth.

It follows that, in modernism, we find the characteristics that make up the human essence by looking into reality. Not surprisingly, modernism instructs us to set aside as much as possible all interpretive frameworks in order to find this essence. Some modernists hold that biology and, perhaps, evolutionary psychology reveal the true human essence. The essence found by these scientific procedures would be ahistorical and universal.

Mainstream economics presumes such a universal and unchanging human essence: people maximize utility regardless of who they are or when they live. Mainstream economists generally hold that anyone who denies such a human essence is being unscientific.

Postmodernism’s Retort

Since Kant’s time, Western philosophers have looked with suspicion on the correspondence theory of truth. This suspicion comes from the perspective that it is impossible to observe reality without using *some* interpretative framework. Some set of words, concepts, and beliefs are required in any attempt to “represent” anything. If we are unable to observe reality without some interpretative framework then we cannot say for sure what is “objectively true” apart from these frameworks. Rather, we might have a multiplicity of different notions of what the human essence is, many of which can be validated within its own interpretative framework.

Postmodernism starts with this suspicion of the correspondence theory of truth. However, what distinguishes postmodernism from other philosophical critiques of modernist thinking are three aggressive claims.

First, they claim that the notion of a human essence is necessarily linked to the correspondence theory of truth. And, as the correspondence theory of truth is easily rejected (and has been rejected by a wide range of philosophers), we must reject any notion of a human essence. Simply put: no correspondence theory of truth; no human essence.

Second, postmodernists assert that the articulation of a human essence within a society has a necessary consequence. When some group articulates some claimed “human essence” this enhances the power of this group and contributes to the oppression of others within society. For instance, if a group of men articulate a human essence they likely see traditional male characteristics as essential to being human. As a consequence, those in society who do not have these characteristics (males displaying nontraditional characteristics and most women) find themselves being situated in a less powerful social position as they are “less human.” In the eyes of postmodernism, essences are revealed as social constructions with detrimental consequences for those without power in society.

Third, postmodernists assert that because no interpretative framework can be objectively shown to be true or false, the choice of interpretative framework is purely relativist and subjective. We are in the world of subjective values. That is, anything goes.

This postmodern perspective provokes astonishment among those working within a modernist framework. For the most part, such people merely scoff at postmodernist attacks and believe no response is needed—or possible—to what is seen as irrational anti-scientism.

In truth, there is little that modernisms can do to rebut the simple and powerful postmodern critique. Often the only response is to restate loudly the modernist perspective that they are searching for the truth and that they are really trying their best to avoid the bias introduced by any interpretative framework. This response totally misses the point of the postmodernist critique.

Postmodernism’s Goofs of Logic

Postmodernism’s attack on modernism has undercut modernism’s pretension to scientific objectivity. Yet postmodernism’s success is actually very narrow and their devastating critique of modernism does not carry over to non-modernist perspectives on essences. Despite the great confidence of many postmodern thinkers, postmodernism makes sense as a general critique only if you accept two flaws of logic.

A False Dilemma

Statements such as, “Which is your most favorite animal, dogs or cats?” embody false dilemmas. In this case, this statement creates a false dilemma because someone might believe that bunnies are his/her favorite animal and the original statement does not permit this choice.

Despite its claim that it represents a radical break with modernism, postmodernism

shares with modernism many a key characteristic. This characteristic is responsible for both modernism and postmodernism accepting the same false dilemma.

To both modernist and postmodernist thinkers we face a choice between (a) objectively true statements that “correspond with reality” and (b) statements that are not true. Only statements that are objectively true legitimately make a demand that we believe them.

The only difference between modernism and postmodernism on this point is this: modernism believes that it can find objectively true statements while postmodernism rejects the possibility that it—or any other perspective—can find objectively true statements. Postmodernism then concludes that—because statements cannot be found to correspond with reality—no statement can have any greater claim on our belief than any other claim. All non-objectively true claims about the world are equal: none correspond with reality. Therefore, if objective truth does not exist and we are left with statements that are not true (and all are equally not true), then anything goes and any belief permitted.³

Postmodernism relies here on a false dilemma: we must choose between

- Objectively true statements (which correspond with reality) or
- Anything goes (subjectivism).

The above is a false dilemma: statements might exist that are *not* objectively true (in the sense of the correspondence theory of truth) that still make a claim on our belief. Over the past few decades epistemologists (and those who might be labeled as “post-epistemologists”) have considered the conditions under which statements might be believed (or deemed reliable) without these statements being “objectively true” as is demanded by modernist and postmodern thinkers.

Faulty Generalization

Consider this pair of statements: “This cat has stripes. Therefore, all cats have stripes.” This pair of statements embodies a faulty generalization.

Postmodernism’s version of this logical flaw is, “those social theories that we have considered—which have been based on a notion of a human essence and which generally have some from Western Enlightenment thought—have facilitated (in our subjective interpretation) the domination of some over others in society; therefore,

³ According to Sartre, writing of God when he could have been writing about objective truth,; “when we speak of “abandonment” we only mean to say that God does not exist, and that it is necessary to draw the consequences of His absence right to the end The existentialist finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There can no longer be any good a priori, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. It is nowhere written that “the good” exists, that one must be honest or must not lie, since we are now upon the plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky once wrote: ‘If God did not exist, everything would be permitted.’ That, for existentialism, is the starting point.” (*Being and Nothingness*, 352-3). The starting point for postmodernism is this: if objective truth does not exist, then everything is permitted.

all such essentialist theories promote domination.”⁴

Indisputably, some forms of domination have rested upon a vision of a human essence. Yet postmodernists’ assertion that all notions of essences create—or are created by—domination goes far beyond any evidence or argument they have offered. The postmodernist generalization that social theories based on a notion of a human essence is nothing but an unsupported assertion.

If any generalization is possible, it is this: we must be very carefully not to accept as an essence something that contributes to domination. However, such a generalization does not force us to reject all theories of society premised on the existence of a human essence.

Falling into the Fact-Value Abyss

Postmodernism denounces any attempt to find an essence. According to them, therefore, all we are left with are pure subjective assertions of values. And none of these can be praised above the others.

Postmodernists have used these assertions as effective cudgels against the pretenses of modernism. In particular, the “anything goes” claim has so flummoxed many commentators that defenders of modernism have often been left speechless.

This effective rhetorical strategy often obscures a very interesting fact: postmodernists have very strong subjective values. But, to be internally consistent, postmodernists do not attempt to justify these values in any way. These values appear to be the following: people have a right to decide what to believe, oppression is bad, and diversity of interpretive frameworks is good. Because postmodernists believe these values are unsupportable, they feel it is not necessary to linger over them and to argue for them. Postmodernists just assert them without any support.

This refusal to scrutinize its own claims about what is good for people represents postmodernism’s gravest weakness. All sorts of intellectual and political mischief can enter a theory that refuses to consider its own vision of the good. Most notably, this situation leaves wide open a door for the importing of ethnocentric and regressive notions of right and wrong.

At the core of this situation is that postmodernism falls into the abyss of the fact-value distinction. Postmodern thinkers can’t seem to imagine that certain ideas might have a claim on our beliefs without these notions being objectively true. In this way, postmodernism clings to ways of thinking that are quite passé.

⁴ Within the logic of postmodernism, it is not clear why anyone should accept this claim. Postmodernism cannot say that it is an objective fact that essentialist social theories cause domination as postmodernists reject objective facts. Postmodernists are then left with saying that they subjectively assert such a link exists although such an assertion is no truer than the assertion that essentialist theories have stopped domination.

An Alternative Resolution

Both modernism and postmodernism subscribe to the false dilemma discussed above: we face a stark—and necessary—choice between the correspondence theory of truth and the subjectivist approach.

Once we reject this false dilemma we can consider a range of alternative answers to the question, “What ideas are reasonable to believe?” In particular, we can consider the question, “What notions about a human essence are reasonable to believe?” Now perhaps we decide that no notion of a human essence is worthy of acceptance; but if this is the decision it should be the result of an attempt to find such a notion and just not something assumed as true at the beginning as in postmodernism.

Here I present one alternative approach to the search for a human essence. I present this approach neither as the “best approach” nor as the “true approach.” I do think, however, that this approach is worthy of being accepted.

*Where to look for a human essence*⁵

It is incoherent to speak of an essence “out there” shorn of all interpretative frameworks. Postmodernism are right about that. Nevertheless, postmodernism is wrong to presume that “out there” is the *only* place to look for a human essence.

Human interpretative frameworks are necessarily a part of any attempt to “see” something. These interpretative frameworks should not be shunned as they obscure reality. Rather, we should embrace these interpretative frameworks because they *produce* reality as we understand it. While we can ignore what rocks think when we study a field of rocks, we cannot ignore what people think when we study a group of people.

Therefore, I would argue that we should look for a human essence by examining the various local narratives people have produced using their own interpretive frameworks. But we should not do so in a naïve manner.

The raw material used in this search for a human nature are all the local narratives people have produced to “make sense” of human experience. The raw material includes the words, concepts, myths, poems, stories, and other constituent elements of local narratives that people in various cultures see as defining for them “what it means to be human.” These words, concepts, myths, poems, and stories *constitute* reality for humans in an active way; they are not passive tools for representing reality.

Debate would obviously ensue over which particular narratives are proper to use as the raw material in our search for a human essence. In the case of Western culture, do we look at *Paradise Lost* or do we look at the “reality program” *Survivor*? Do we look at both? How do we look at them?

One can grant that significant debates will exist about the appropriate raw

⁵ The work of Charles Taylor has strongly influenced this section of my essay.

material for our search for a human essence but at the same time affirm the premise that actual local narratives are the appropriate place to look for a human essence.

Of course, the narratives considered as raw material in this search for a human essence cannot be limited to those produced by Western culture. A truly trans-cultural search for the human essence must take place if we are to find what we could legitimately claim is the human essence.

How to Look: Procedure

We can find a large number of different interpretations of the human condition. I believe, however, that an investigation of the local narratives offered by these different cultures will convince people that there is indeed a consensus between these different local narratives on the core characteristics of a fully human life.

But, some might reasonably ask, how can we find a consensus on what constitutes human flourishing when we are forced to compare our understanding of life with that of, say, ancient Romans who barbarically cheered gladiators as they fought to the death. The key here is that these ancient Romans likely saw the gladiators as being “less than human” and so not treated according to the dictates of their notion of a fully human life. Our concerns, however, are with a culture’s notion of what a fulfilling life is for those it considers as humans.

A consensus will not exist in cultural details but in generalizations. For instance, perhaps one culture believes that a cell phone is necessary for a human life while another believes that a daily communal meal is necessary for a fulfilling life. The common ground between these two beliefs is that connection with others—however maintained—is necessary for a fulfilling human life.⁶

This implies that a fulfilling life in one culture might differ dramatically from what represents a fulfilling life in a second culture. This might be true even if both these cultures accepted the same basic notion of the human essence; they just have different ways of living a life that provides for these essential characteristics.

The search for the human essence within the raw material provided by the narratives of many different cultures is obviously no easy task. Nor is it an “objective” task to search for “the true essence.” The search itself necessarily involves interpretative interactive with the raw material as the interpreter seeks for commonalities across different cultures and narratives.

This raises a further problem. Must a single interpretive framework be privileged as we search for a human essence among different cultures? After all, the searcher for an essence necessarily interprets what he/she sees through his/her own

⁶ Such a procedure might, in a very loose sense, be similar to the process described Lakatos. To Lakatos a research program is “theoretically progressive” if predicts novel facts. While I have doubts that successful prediction is the best standard for theory choice, one way to conceive the search for a human essence across cultures and time involves is that is involves seeking a generalized notion of human flourishing that “accounts for” or “predicts” the particularized human essence within as yet unconsidered cultures.

interpretative framework. A simple way to address this situation is to have many different people working from within different interpretative frameworks all engaged in the same activity.

Any differences between these different interpreters could—I hope—be resolved through a give-and-take process of discussion.

Open-ended and does not aspire to finality. It is the best that people can do with the material they have. Although this best account is not the truth, that is okay: we do not seek the sort of truth required by the correspondence theory of truth.

The result of the above process would be a list of what a fully human life requires. The interpretive frameworks of many different cultures would contribute to the formation of this notion of a human essence. It would represent consensus across different frameworks. This consensus would not mean this account is true but that is okay. What is the best account would be the outcome of a conversation involving an attempt to find a consensus among perspectives that might have many small, even maybe even large, differences of opinion about the human essence. But “practical reason”—the sort based on legitimate logical arguments and not on manipulative activities—might be a tool that can give us what we are looking for. Once we give up “truth” we do not need to lower ourselves to anything goes sophistry. We do not have eternal and universal laws that guarantee us the truth; we have eons of traditions—both western and nonwestern—of legitimate ways of trying to come up with the best answers of difficult questions.

I do not suppose that any list of essential human characteristics would gain 100% agreement across different people. Nor do I presume that the human essence “found” would be unchanging and not subjected to changes across time.

Finally, postmodernism has an essential role to play in the above task. Postmodernism is unable to offer its own list of essential human characteristics but postmodernism does provide a powerful critique to intellectual constructs that intentionally or unintentionally embrace ideas that might justify oppression of one group by another. They should play this role for any notion of the human essence found by the above procedures and the human essence offered must be able to defend itself satisfactorily against postmodernist criticisms. Although postmodernism provides little help in the search for an acceptable critical society theory it does provide a powerful, and helpful, critique of any attempt to provide a theory of society.

Can This List be Reliable?

Suppose the above activity is successfully accomplished and that we have before us a list of characteristics that, so it is claimed, a human life must have to be fully human. Would we be justified in believing this specification of the human essence?

As I cannot think of a more reliable process for coming up with this list, I think we would be justified in accepting this list.⁷ We cannot say that this list is “true” in

⁷ Alvin Goldman, among others, has proposed the beliefs can be justified if based on processes

the way the correspondence theory of truth impossibly demands. But we can say with Aristotle, "...it is the mark of the educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits."⁸ The nature of the search for a human essence must be more open-ended and uncertain than the search for other types of knowledge (say, the chemical properties of wood). What is wanted is not "truth" but the "best account" of the human essence today. Of course, we might find a better account tomorrow and, indeed, we should expect our account would change as society changes. This fact does not mean that all accounts of the human essence are equally reliable. It just means that what is seen as the best account changes.

Examples

Although no one has sought the human essence using the above process in its entirety, two writers have followed procedures that are very similar to that proposed: Charles Taylor and Martha Nussbaum.

Charles Taylor's *The Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* investigates Western thought in an attempt to uncover implicit and explicit notions of "the good" which can guide people to a fully human life. His raw material is the words, interpretative frameworks, and interpretations of Western thinkers from ancient to modern times.

Although his raw material includes the personal subjective interpretations of important writers he attempts to "surmount subjectivism"⁹ by looking for commonalities between different writers that suggest underlying agreements about "the good." He sees language not as a personal creation but as implying community and, so, the study of language and the narratives made out of language are community creations and not based on individual subjectivity. Narratives go beyond individual subjectivities. They can represent shared subjective understandings of the world.

What Taylor found in his search for "the good" is not important for my purposes here. Rather what is important is that he sought "the good" and a vision of the fulfilling human life not "out there" but *within* human history and human meaning(s). His work provides an example that shows such a procedure is possible.

Martha Nussbaum argues that a human essence exists and she proposes to find it. Most notable is her attempt in *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* to find the characteristics that make up the human essence. Her approach follows closely that I presented above. Her search for an essence is not limited to Western ways of life but gives extended consideration of non-Western perspectives. She is also particularly concerned with not imposing any Western bias by consulting—albeit in a limited way—the perspectives of those not sharing her

deemed reliable. I am not wedded to this approach but it does seem reasonable.

⁸ *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1, Chapter 3.

⁹ Taylor page 510.

Western background.

Again, what Nussbaum found as the human essence is not important. What is important is that her work supports my contention that such an essence can be found using the approach similar to that I detailed above.

Conclusion

Some things are good for people and some things are bad for people. Aristotle thought this. Karl Marx thought this. Most current-day political economists think this.

Unfortunately, this claim does not receive much support in most recent schools of philosophy. Those who want to accept the claim that some things are better for people than other things find their only recourse is to assert that they believe this claim as a matter of subjective value or taste.

This is not a fulfilling approach.

Any critical social theory worthy of believing must be based on the claim that some institutions and customs promote human flourishing better than do other institutions and customs. And support for this must go beyond mere subjective value or taste. In turn, the notion of human flourishing requires a philosophically defensible notion of “the human essence.”

This essay has argued that a human essence can be found that does not fall into the fact-value abyss that has swallowed up modernism and postmodernism. But arguing this is not the end of the story. Much of modern economics—both mainstream and heterodox—is based on crude notions of what it means to be human and what the human essence is. Both approaches to economics will likely be found as inadequate once an acceptable notion of a human essence is found that satisfactorily specifies current-day notions of what it means to be human.