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Anarchist-Socialist Praxis and Embodied Human Nature

Abstract:

The idea of human nature can be wielded to justify exploitation and domination, but drawing on the work of Noam Chomsky, Murray Bookchin and others, I argue consideration of our embodied nature can help humans thrive. The anarchist tradition encompasses people's tendency to reject unnecessary authority, and it invokes the sociality inseparable from human beings. I explain why Chomsky claimed our needs and capacities, like language and creativity, are rooted in biologically endowed scopes and limits. For Chomsky, conceptions of justice emerge from aspects of our nature irreducible to power. For him, dismissing intrinsic nature is nonsensical and useful for those who would exercise control over others. Murray Bookchin advocated a dialectic emphasizing our unique moral reasoning, and he saw the social as the ecological realm of freedom and responsibility. Anarchist-socialist praxis can be understood as defense of our distinctive capacities to recover valuable aspects of suppressed humanity.

Keywords:

anarchism, anarchist-socialist praxis, human nature, Noam Chomsky, Murray Bookchin

Introduction

In this essay, I will attempt to do justice to the following claim made by Noam Chomsky: “Any serious social science or theory of social change must be founded on some concept of human nature.”¹ While engaging relevant scholarship and ideas about our nature, I will try to show why the work of the two anarchist-socialist thinkers, Noam Chomsky, 96 at the time of this writing, and the late Murray Bookchin, especially with added insights drawn from others, offers rough justification for what I call anarchist-socialist praxis. That praxis, I will explain, appears inextricable from consideration of human nature. I also hope to show why concern for what it means to be human might imply and refine theory and action – praxis – oriented toward displacing ossified modes of domination that widen the gap between our underappreciated potential and our actual existence.

A Few Words on Anarchism

The sort of praxis alluded to above could reasonably be situated within the anarchist tradition. A word of caution is needed here to preempt unnecessary knee-jerk reactions. The definition of “anarchy” denotes an absence of rulers. That can connote people acting and coming to decisions together freely without any persons or groups governing or ruling over others. The term, “anarchy,” is also interpreted with the assumption of disorder baked in, however, due most likely to certain historical uses as well as the presupposition that havoc always ensues in the absence of ruling authority. Thus, the mere mention of “anarchy” or “anarchism” – like the word “socialism,” albeit for different reasons – often scares the bejesus out of people or elicits automatic dismissal. Anarchy can conjure up images of self-interested humans concerned only for their own survival in an apocalyptic hellscape with no regime to enforce laws or use violence to maintain the would-be purported peace. The lasting association with community-lacking chaos is somewhat ironic since anarchists of many persuasions have long championed, and to different degrees have practiced, various forms of complex organization *sans* enduring authority.

1) Wilkin, *Noam Chomsky*, 61.

Still, the tradition of anarchism has been robust, varied, and admittedly at times contradictory. Per Chomsky, “many styles of thought and action” have been called “anarchist,” and trying “to encompass all of these conflicting tendencies in some general theory or ideology” would be futile.² But, following the anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker, Chomsky, the linguist, dissident, and author of more than 100 books, prefers to think of anarchism as a

broad tendency in human development [that] seeks to identify structures of hierarchy, authority, and domination that constrain human development, and then to subject them to a very reasonable challenge: Justify yourself. Demonstrate that you are legitimate, either in some special circumstances at a particular stage of society, or in principle. And if they cannot meet that challenge, they should be dismantled.³

For Chomsky, that dismantling ought to be accompanied by the cooperative creation of other forms of voluntary organization.

Chomsky invoked a quote from the nineteenth century Russian anarchist, Mikhail Bakunin, as illustrative of one of the more significant ideas in the anarchist tradition. In the quote, Bakunin professed his love of genuine “liberty,” distinguishing it from the “formal liberty” meted out “by the State, an eternal lie which in reality represents nothing more than the privilege of some founded on the slavery of the rest,” and he differentiated it from “the individualistic, egoistic, shabby, and fictitious liberty” associated with bourgeois liberal schools of thought. Bakunin professed a love of “liberty that consists in the full development of all of the material, intellectual and moral powers that are latent in each person,” a liberty restricted only “by the laws of our own individual nature,” by the “immanent and inherent” parts of humanity “forming the very basis of our material, intellectual and moral being,” which “do not limit us but are the real and immediate conditions of our freedom.”⁴ Bakunin’s

2) Chomsky, *On Anarchism*, 1.

3) Chomsky, “Lecture III: What is the Common Good?,” 687–88.

4) Quoted in Chomsky, *On Anarchism*, 7–8. The quote comes from Bakunin’s “La Commune de Paris et la notion de l’état.”

anarchism associated liberty with the free actualization of the latent and incipient powers residing in us all. In other words, he connected liberty to some conception of our nature.

Although it has been appropriated by those who favor organizing society through market exchange (i.e. market governance), and who somehow see wage labor under relations of coercion and subordination as compatible with freedom, the label “libertarianism” has nevertheless long been synonymous with anarchism, as the Bakunin quote attests. Chomsky explained on more than one occasion that in the US, unlike in other parts of the world, “the term ‘libertarian’ means the opposite of what it always meant in history,”⁵ and that the US “is off the spectrum in this respect: what’s called ‘libertarianism’ here is unbridled capitalism.”⁶

For him, genuine libertarianism has meant

an antistate branch of socialism, which meant a highly organized society, nothing to do with chaos, but based on democracy all the way through. That means democratic control of communities, workplaces, of federal structures, built on systems of voluntary association, spreading internationally. That’s traditional anarchism. You know, anybody can have the word if they like, but that’s the mainstream of traditional anarchism.⁷

Chomsky gravitated toward that anarchism from the time he was a young lad paying attention to the short-lived libertarian socialist revolution that took place during the Spanish Civil War, around the time he would take the train by himself to stay with his aunt and uncle in New York City, where he would chat with adults in anarchist book stores near Union Square and Fourth Avenue.⁸

To be a “consistent anarchist,” according to Chomsky, one must not only oppose the concentration of power that is part and parcel of the state, but one should also oppose “private ownership of the means of production and the wage slavery which is a compo-

5) Chomsky, *On Anarchism*, 107.

6) Ibid., 30.

7) Ibid., 107.

8) Ibid., 106.

nent of this system, as incompatible with the principle that labor must be freely undertaken and under the control of the producer.”⁹ His preferred anarchism involves opposition to the private control of capital compelling those who do not own wealth-generating assets “to rent themselves in order to survive,” as that is antithetical to liberty. The idea that people “rent themselves freely,” Chomsky added, is “a joke,” given the prevailing conditions of coercion.¹⁰ “The consistent anarchist, then,” Chomsky explained, “should be a socialist, but a socialist of a particular sort.”¹¹ While his preferred anarchist-socialist praxis opposes “alienated and specialized labor” and seeks appropriation of social wealth, it is an appropriation “not exercised by some elite force acting in the name of the proletariat,”¹² as might be found in a more authoritarian regime proclaiming to be socialist. Social wealth should instead be shared in common.

Bookchin, for his part, took what often passes for libertarianism to task too. He bemoaned the preemption of libertarian values by reactionaries and shills for corporate power. In his view, those he referred to as “propertarians,” like the “acolytes of Ayn Rand, the ‘earth mother’ of greed, egotism, and the virtues of property,” had co-opted “expressions and traditions that should have been expressed by radicals but were willfully neglected,” given the prerogatives and functions of power-concentrating governance (erroneously) associated with socialism.¹³ Bookchin opposed bureaucratic and, per his critique, anti-ecological, state-centric socialism at odds with the ever-evolving processes of human decision-making he believed could be more in concert with the organic world, which includes us. He advocated “Libertarian Municipalism,” a praxis predicated upon participatory decision-making in popular assemblies and ongoing “effort to work from latent or incipient democratic possibilities toward a radically new configuration of society itself – a communal society oriented toward meeting human needs, responding to ecological imperatives, and developing an ethics of cooperation.”¹⁴

9) Ibid., 10.

10) Ibid., 30.

11) Ibid., 13.

12) Ibid., 13–14.

13) Bookchin, “THE GREENING OF POLITICS.”

14) Bookchin, *The Next Revolution*, 85.

Both Chomsky and Bookchin devoted ample thought to how human nature might influence how we think and go about realizing those better ways of being. I want to show below how their attention to embodied human nature not only informed their own theory and practice but also affords us insights germane to anarchist-socialist praxis. Before we broach all that, though, we would be remiss not to engage with similar and competing conceptions of human nature in relation to how people relate to each other and the rest of the world.

Critical Reflections on Human Nature

With repeated rationalizations for brutality in mind, Chomsky has cautioned that “our understanding of the nature of man or of the range of viable social forms is so rudimentary that any far-reaching doctrine must be treated with great skepticism, just as skepticism is in order when we hear that ‘human nature’ or ‘the demands of efficiency’ or ‘the complexity of modern life’ requires this or that form of oppression and autocratic rule.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, any political stance, according to Chomsky, will be “based on some conception of what is good for people,” and that “will tacitly presuppose a certain belief as to the constitution of human nature – human needs and human potential,” so we ought to flesh out the understanding of our nature underlying the politics at play.¹⁶ Moreover, he has repeatedly maintained, full-on denial of human nature is nonsensical. Others, as we will see, disagree, or reject use of the term.

Not unlike anarchism and socialism, many chafe at the very idea human nature. The chafing is understandable. Avarice, aggressive assertions of dominance, hierarchical control, possessive individualism, and other traits in and aspects of the prevailing order are chalked up to natural, ineluctable human tendencies, thereby justifying existing social arrangements, at least superficially. To the point, by the end of the nineteenth century the anarchist Peter Kropotkin was debating social Darwinists, namely the market enthusiasts Thomas Huxley and Alfred Russel Wallace, who deployed particular aspects of naturalist evolutionary theory to rationalize social relations characterized by cutthroat competition and personal success at the expense

15) Chomsky, *On Anarchism*, 2–3.

16) Chomsky, “On Human Nature.”

of others.¹⁷ Kropotkin, for his part, was at pains to note Charles Darwin himself suggested intra-species cooperation displaces interpersonal struggle, as it facilitates intellectual and moral development. The fittest tend to be those who embrace their innate sociability and practice mutual support for community uplift, as both Darwin and Kropotkin understood.¹⁸

Waving the cautionary flag, Francis Dupuis-Déri noted there are tendencies within the anarchist tradition to adopt, implicitly or otherwise, an overly optimistic conception of human nature. Those tendencies, Dupuis-Déri added, have been rebuked by thinkers who study and identify with the varied and sometimes contradictory current in human societies to reject undue, repressive authority.¹⁹ Overly sanguine assumptions about humanity tend to cast us all as inherently good and naturally social but tragically corrupted by institutions that normalize domination, subordination, exploitation, and the routine exercise of power over others, per the criticisms. In contrast, Dupuis-Déri stressed anarchism's compatibility

with a pessimistic conception of human nature: human beings are fundamentally corruptible and power corrupts. It is precisely because human beings are not good by nature that hierarchical structures cause moral and political disasters: abuse of power by people in positions of authority, non-accountability of individuals in subordinate positions who go so far as to imprison, torture, and kill others simply because they were ordered to do so by a hierarchical superior.²⁰

Dupuis-Déri added, accurately enough I suppose, as any cursory critical look at the present-day political landscape seems to corroborate, that a person “in a position of authority within a hierarchical structure very easily becomes conceited, pretentious, arrogant, irresponsible, authoritarian and corrupt,”²¹ but I want to recast that a bit.

17) Graeber and Grubačić, “Introduction.”

18) Ibid.; Dupuis-Déri, “Anarchism and Human Nature.”

19) Dupuis-Déri, “Anarchism and Human Nature.”

20) Ibid., 3.

21) Ibid.

Positions of enduring authority that confer the ability to incessantly usurp other's agency and squelch people's self-determination may attract and enable people already prone to displaying the traits Dupuis-Déri listed. Being in a position to exercise a near-monopoly on organized violence and give orders one expects others to obey, enthusiastically, with obsequious gratitude, probably exacerbates inclinations toward enactment of the aforementioned traits. Yet the person who is so inclined to seek or exercise that power could be encouraged under and by different circumstances characterized by different social relations to practice mutual aid and refrain from attempts to routinely assert dominance over others.

Still, I entreat the reader to remain curious as to why many frequently chafe not only at talk of human nature but also at attempts to be subjugated by would-be rulers in positions of power. Importantly, for our purposes here, the pessimistic position Dupuis-Déri explained, without wholly endorsing, contains implicit acknowledgment that one justification for anarchist organization rests on an understanding of what people are capable of, which implies some notion of our nature.

Attention to the oft-present yet underappreciated volitional collaboration and shared decision-making that we inevitably engage in much of the time brings ostensibly intrinsic capacities into focus. Anarchists contend some of those are systematically suppressed and exploited, or conversely, institutionally compelled. David Graeber claimed the proposition "that power corrupts and those who spend their entire lives seeking power are the very last people who should have it," is a key anarchist belief.²² He also went so far as to suggest that when people wait in line to get on a bus, for example, and they refrain from pushing others aside to get to the front, even when police are not present, they are embodying the anarchist principle of self-organization.²³ They are demonstrating an ability act in concert without having to be threatened.

In an interview from the late eighties, Chomsky made a similar point. "It's not the case," he said, if we "are, say, walking down the street, and we see a child eating a piece of candy and we see that nobody's around and we happen to be hungry, we don't steal it. If we did that, we'd be pathological."²⁴ Likewise, within families, "it's

22) Graeber, "Are You An Anarchist?"

23) Ibid.

24) Chomsky, "'Manufacturing Consent' (Part Two)."

not the case that in the family every person tries to maximize personal gain at the expense of others, or if they do, it's pathological."²⁵ Sadly, society-wide, "the desire to maximize personal gain at the expense of others" tends to predominate and displaces sociality, which is why Chomsky suggested we ought "to have a mode of social organization that reflects other values that, I think, are inherent in human nature that people recognize."²⁶

Marshall Sahlins, whose work influenced anarchist thinkers,²⁷ argued what we typically "consider human nature," in the main, "consists of the inclinations of (bourgeois) adult males, largely to the exclusion of women, children and old folks and to the comparative neglect of the one universal principle of human sociality, kinship. One would think that human nature begins at home; but then it would have to be understood differently than self-interest, since charity was always already there."²⁸ Alas, "our philosophies of human nature" tend to be derived not from communal or interpersonal relations, but "from the larger society, organized on radically different principles,"²⁹ like the pathological ones Huxley and Wallace were so keen to defend, for example. Sahlins recognized hegemonic conceptions of human nature that reflect and serve particular interests, but he also highlighted the human universal of sociality (and kinship).

Our sociality is inextricably bound up with our natural needs. After referencing evidence of prisoners subjected to solitary confinement for more than six months suffering brain damage, Graeber, who completed his doctoral dissertation under Sahlins, claimed humans "are not just social animals; they are so intrinsically social that if they are cut off from relations with other humans, they begin to physically decay."³⁰ Graeber also argued every form of human socioeconomic organization requires a "baseline" of sociality, a kind of "everyday communism" enabling life in common.³¹ That is why, for him, capitalism can be thought of as "a very bad way of

25) Ibid.

26) Ibid.

27) Martin and Rakopoulos, "Marshall Sahlins (1930–2021)."

28) Ibid.

29) Sahlins, *The Western Illusion of Human Nature*, 44.

30) Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*, 82.

31) Graeber, *Debt*, 96–100.

organizing communism.”³² Anarchy and communism (or anarchic communism), like anarchist-socialist praxis, are omnipresent yet pervasively stifled.

Still, it would be wrong to suggest that those who in theory (if not in practice) have rejected the reality of human nature, or that those who have dismissed the relevance of trying to better explicate it, have failed to make meaningful contributions to praxis. But in at least some cases, I think their philosophies could be enhanced with greater curiosity and care regarding questions of our nature.

On that note, L. Susan Brown claimed, “anarchist theorists, both past and present, buttress their anarchist politics by asserting that human individuals are naturally co-operative,” despite the notion of “fixed, co-operative human nature” being a problem, we are told, because “it contradicts anarchism’s commitment to free will and the existentially free individual.”³³ Viewing anarchism as “a political philosophy based on an existential individualism that emphasizes the freedom of the individual,” is preferable for Brown.

My disagreements notwithstanding, let us follow Brown for now. She understandably challenged static conceptions of what it is to be human, and she extolled a tradition she saw as rooted in a similar rejection. To wit, Brown claimed the following: “The political philosophy of existentialism, with its rejection of a fixed human nature and its affirmation of humanity as freedom itself, offers anarchism a fluid conceptualization of human nature more in keeping with its individualist imperative.”³⁴

Apropos her suggestion, the self-proclaimed “existentialist,” Jean-Paul Sartre, likened his philosophical position to a form of “humanism,” in what might be considered a somewhat odd application of the term, but one that perhaps made sense on his terms. For Sartre, “existence precedes essence,”³⁵ meaning first we humans are thrown into the world, and then we are free to define and re-define ourselves. If existence indeed precedes essence, “we can never explain our actions by reference to a given and immutable human nature.”³⁶ It is thus “impossible,” Sartre asserted, “to find in every

32) Quoted in Solnit, “David Graeber: Beholden.”

33) Brown, *The Politics of Individualism*, 153.

34) Ibid.

35) Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 22.

36) Ibid., 29.

man a universal essence that could be said to comprise human nature,” although he admitted that “there is nonetheless a universal human condition.”³⁷

Our sociality is, I think, akin to and a precondition for that condition. “Humans,” Graeber and David Wengrow claimed in their account of our species over the *longue durée*, “were only fully self-conscious when arguing with one another, trying to sway each other’s views, or working out a common problem.”³⁸ In their reading of the historical record, humans have also, from the jump, shown “a self-conscious aversion to being told what to do.”³⁹ The authors were sympathetic to the idea that “the very essence of our humanity consists of the fact that we are self-conscious political actors, and therefore capable of embracing a wide range of social arrangements,”⁴⁰ as humans did deliberately with a frequency we are no longer attuned to.

In the interest of retuning ourselves, we might solicit Bookchin’s help recuperating what the “social” really means. Bookchin advanced a social ecology which understands “the social is, potentially at least, a fulfillment of the *latent* dimension of freedom in nature.”⁴¹ He took dialectics to be a mode of thought that distinguishes phases of the evolutionary continuum from which second nature emerges, from which culture and society emerge, while first nature is preserved. His dialectical naturalism held that maturity is never so complete that there ceases to be potential for further developmental change. While human nature is enduring, it is thus never entirely fixed.

As for our sociability, Karl Marx also took that to be the essence of the species. In his “Theses on Feuerbach,” he wrote that “the essence of man,” “is the ensemble of the social relations.”⁴² And he affirmed his understanding of human nature elsewhere: “As *human* nature is the *true common life* [*Gemeinwesen*] of man, men through the activation of their *nature* create and produce a *human common life*, a social essence which is no abstractly universal power opposed to the single individual, but is the essence or nature of every single individual, his own activity, his own life, his own

37) Ibid., 42.

38) Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 94.

39) Ibid., 133.

40) Ibid., 86.

41) Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 87.

42) Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” 570.

spirit, his own wealth.”⁴³ As Sahlins put it, “for Marx, the ‘human essence’ exists in and as social relationships, not in some poor bugger squatting outside the universe.”⁴⁴ Individuals do not exist in isolation. Sahlins asserted that there is “no such thing as a human being existing before or apart from society. Humans are constituted, for better or for worse, within society, and variously so in different societies.”⁴⁵

Capitalist society produces not only commodities, but also people and social relations, Graeber observed.⁴⁶ Those social relations are rife with injustice, exploitation, and domination, yet those relations still rely on a baseline of ineradicable mutual aid. Domination depends upon and distorts sociality. Domination gets conflated with and perpetuated by desires for freedom too. Bookchin believed the “dialectical legacy of freedom” has hitherto been inextricably bound to a “legacy of domination” – the two have mutually conditioned each other throughout history, in his understanding.⁴⁷

Riffing on Graeber and Bookchin, then, it makes sense to evaluate a social order in part based on the kinds of people and relationships it produces. What sorts of human interactions does the given society sanction and incentivize – and for what alleged reasons and with what effects? Addressing that might help parse out how the dominant order exploits webs of mutual aid and cloaks repression in appeals to liberty or in a humanism that dehumanizes. That assessment, conducted in common, could be coupled with the Chomsky-inspired interrogation into what, if any, justification is given for the institutions enforcing exploitative interactions. That then can inform the determination as to if they are or are not temporarily tolerable.

It must be stated too that individuals are not merely reducible to or totally determined by the relations within which they are ensconced. While, following Marx, the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci claimed the notion of “human nature” really just refers to “the totality of historically determined social relations,”⁴⁸ in short, we cannot

43) Cited in West, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*, 46.

44) Sahlins, *The Western Illusion of Human Nature*, 109.

45) Ibid.

46) Graeber, “Turning Modes of Production Inside Out,” 61–85.

47) Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 169.

48) Gramsci, “Machiavelli and Marx,” 133. See also, Wilkin, *Noam Chomsky*, 55.

overlook how humans exhibit the ability to imagine and project beyond the present. As Marx acknowledged, our actions can bring about those imagined possibilities, rendering the ideal real.⁴⁹ We can recreate.

I am reluctant to accept that we can or should think we can do that without limits, however. And a notion of human nature without limits has cropped up in the anarchist tradition. As Sophie Scott-Brown documented, the British anarchist Colin Ward embraced an anarchism that, for him, transcended excessively deterministic ideas about our nature,⁵⁰ but I think that embrace partially eclipsed our creativity-enabling limits. “What I think anarchism says,” Ward explained, is that “human nature is neither good nor bad, it is capable of anything,” which he concluded on the basis of personal observation and what came out of the social sciences.⁵¹

To unpack that, let us first note there is a not-trivial difference between people’s actions, which can be judged as good or bad, and the human organism capable of both types of those actions – a human with an embedded, socially developed moral compass who can judge actions taken and decide to course correct as needed to better align being with what is good. I think it behooves us to believe that the potential for good resides within our nature, suppressed as the expression of it too often is. I fear failure to draw that tentative conclusion means we risk heading down a path toward nihilism.

More troubling for me, though, is the suggestion that human nature “is capable of anything,” even as I acknowledge the assertion speaks to the radiant horizon of what is humanly possible. Apropos the latter, Scott-Brown foregrounded anarchism as a politics of possibility in a February 2025 talk.⁵² Indeed, whenever we are peacefully waiting in line for the bus, whenever we are walking down the street without taking sweet candy from kids even when we could without repercussions, and when we are respecting those near and dear to us, we get glimpses of what could be. Demonstrating an aspect of that recurring tendency to reject power as self-justifying, Scott-Brown also spoke fondly of anarchism that involves disentangling knowl-

49) Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 284.

50) Scott-Brown, “Inventing Ordinary *Anarchy*,” 1255.

51) Quoted in Scott-Brown, “Inventing Ordinary *Anarchy* in Cold War Britain,” 1259. See also, Ward, “Anarchism and the Open Society,” 2.

52) Sophie Scott-Brown spoke at Housmans bookstore in London on February 12, 2025. The talk was streamed virtually via Zoom. I was in the Zoom webinar and listened attentively while taking notes.

edge from authority, which I see as an invaluable exercise if we are to realize what is both possible and desirable. To the point, I think it makes sense for us to interrogate further the conclusions of the social scientists who shared and espoused the sort of “spacious, malleable definition Ward afforded to human nature,” to borrow Scott-Brown’s phrasing.⁵³

Authoritative social science has, at times, operated under the presupposition human nature is mostly malleable, with disturbing consequences. Chomsky’s critique of psychologist B.F. Skinner circa the early 1970s brings that into focus. Skinner argued at the time that science would come to explain why human “behavior is indeed related to the antecedent events of which it can be shown to be a function.”⁵⁴ Reducing human behavior to mere environmental reaction, as in Skinner’s stimulus-response behaviorism model, or interpreting the framework so as to assume humans are born as blank slates capable of being molded any which way, risks rationalizing authoritarian control and erasing the uniqueness of our generative faculties. “If people have no intrinsic nature,” Chomsky explained about the ideological serviceability for managerial classes of blank slate behaviorism, “then there is no moral barrier to control or manipulation of them – in their own interest, of course.”⁵⁵

Skinner’s ideas have been applied with some success in that regard. A technique akin to Skinner-style “operant conditioning” became part of the procedure to engender “learned helplessness” among prisoners inside the penal facility in Marion, Illinois, according to the work of Eddie Griffin,⁵⁶ an incarcerated sleuth who, along with fellow prisoners, investigated a behavior modification program inside the penitentiary. By subjecting an incarcerated person to abuse along with extreme isolation, and forcing him to carry out a series of movements based on orders blasted from a loudspeaker, punctuated by clanging cell doors, a prisoner is thereby “taught to accept, without question, the overseer’s power to control him.” But, Griffin added, that “notion rebels against human consciousness,” and there are prisoners who “seek some means of resistance” while others attempt “to circumnavigate the omnipotent force

53) Scott-Brown, “Inventing Ordinary *Anarchy* in Cold War Britain,” 1259.

54) Cited in Chomsky, “The Case Against B.F. Skinner.”

55) Cited in Wennerberg and Chomsky, “Liberty for Property,” 18.

56) Griffin, “Breaking Men’s Minds,” 6–7.

via escape.”⁵⁷ Moreover, steps involved in classical “operant conditioning” of the kind Skinner described, along with the provision of gratifying rewards on a “variable-ratio schedule,” are behaviorist techniques so-called “social” media companies have more recently deployed, deliberately, to get young people hooked on their platforms, with a slew of adverse consequences.⁵⁸

As I explain in greater detail below, Chomsky argues our organismic structure affords us a range of judgments that go far beyond obedient mechanical reaction. Inasmuch as that is true, we can reject asinine rationales for treating people in ways that fail to respect them as human beings, and we can envision other humanizing possibilities. Chomsky once wrote “the essence of human nature is human freedom and the consciousness of this freedom.”⁵⁹ By this I think he might have meant that our capacity for creativity operative individually and in relation to each other confers freedom, which entails awareness of how our personal and collective decisions impede or abet the co-shaping of our lives.

Discretion is still advised, however. Far-reaching claims about and appeals to humanity have functioned as hegemonic commonsense, normalizing values and arrangements that have proved far from universally propitious, to put it mildly. In a recent talk calling into question Western assumptions about universal human values, Tommy Curry posed pertinent rhetorical questions: “What if we don’t have a shared notion of humanity? What if the human itself is a cultural construction that certain groups of people rationalize and utilize as if they’re the basis of everyone else?”⁶⁰ We fail to address those questions at our own peril. As Curry explained, humanist rhetoric has functioned conveniently for groups who have benefited from propagating presuppositions that insinuate their own values are shared writ large. No doubt, particular ways of conceptualizing humanity have been wielded to ideologically exclude groups of people from the constructed human frame,⁶¹ providing a veneer of legitimacy to the violent and torturous – and I would say *dehumanizing* – treatment of the excluded.

57) Ibid., 5.

58) Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, 114–16.

59) Cited in Wilkin, *Noam Chomsky*, 72.

60) Curry, “Critique of Western ‘Universal’ Values.”

61) See also, Curry, *The Man-Not*.

Some have reserved the human descriptor for themselves, accruing social advantages in the process while denying any inherent dignity residing in those treated as “unpeople,” to use a term Chomsky, for purposes of critique, borrowed from George Orwell.⁶²

As Curry explained in his talk, universalists are wont “to articulate a view of human nature that’s fundamentally good, optimistic and rational,” “the basis of Kant’s autonomous and free individual.”⁶³ Biosocial thinkers have interjected more critical perspectives, he added. Drawing on Pierre Van Den Berghe, Curry noted that within the history of Western society, “coercion becomes the basis of inter-ethnic and interracial relationships.”⁶⁴ Paraphrasing Van Den Berghe, Curry explained that “we observe this antagonism that people have to people who are outside their group,” which gets bowdlerized by an “appeal to liberty, equality, egalitarianism and fraternity.”⁶⁵ To reiterate what was suggested above, universal human values have served as pretense, providing superficially magnanimous cover that helps some duplicitously justify “the antagonism they have to people who are outside of their group.” Given that recurrent historical theme, Curry goes on to argue for a rejection of universal values. To his point, we should not take such values or their presumed universality for granted. From an anarchist perspective, we can resist taking for granted suspect justifications for arrangements based on nuance-lacking notions of our nature.

During his talk Curry also invoked a colleague, Norman Ajari, who emphasized that it is “how the people who are oppressed, the people who are marginalized, embody or aspire for a new world” that makes “ideas of freedom or justice” resonate, not armchair theorizing.⁶⁶ I do not disagree. The anarchist emphasis on direct action⁶⁷ echoes a similar sentiment. People are beings of praxis; we find meaning through our embodied doing, which can become an object for our critical, careful reflection, informing what we do and indeed how we struggle going forward.

62) Chomsky, “Recognizing the ‘Unpeople.’”

63) Curry, “A Critique of Western ‘Universal’ Values,” starting ~6:14.

64) Ibid., starting ~7:37.

65) Ibid., starting ~7:50.

66) Ibid., starting ~5:38.

67) Graeber, “The New Anarchists,” 61–73.

Still, we can think through why ways of relating that challenge what many consider oppressive are regularly associated with notions of both freedom and justice – and why people struggle to enact, practice, and realize both. We can similarly wonder whether the very notion of “good,” be it applied in an assessment of our innate proclivities or otherwise, should be understood as emerging from the uniquely human. Particular contexts and struggles shape what people try to realize, as Curry and Ajari appropriately aver. But what might undergird and propel struggles against certain ways of interacting and for others? Are there naturally endowed, species-specific abilities to make those crucial distinctions, even as freedom and domination can get conflated?

Anarchists have grappled with relations of domination in ways that help elucidate what is at issue. In *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*, author Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin expressed critical optimism about humanity, offering another way to think about the libertarian thrust throughout history. “Anarchists trust the best instincts of the people,” Ervin wrote, “and human nature dictates that where there is repression there will be resistance; where there is slavery, there will a struggle against it.”⁶⁸ A dismissively critical appraisal of his claim might infer from his statement that anarchists put undue faith in the predilections of people. Like Pollyanna rocking rose-colored glasses, the caricatured, inane anarchist cannot be taken seriously, a cynic could similarly retort.

As highlighted above, Dupuis-Déri referenced the efforts of some anarchist thinkers to tackle unjustifiable optimism, but anarchists like Ervin are not naïve either. Rather, they recognize our capacity for shared trust and affirm a humanistic belief in what we are capable of co-realizing. We can take his claim – “Anarchists trust the best instincts of the people” – to mean that within anarchism can be found the life-affirming contention that certain ingrained instincts are better or more worthy of struggling to liberate than others. Anarchists like Ervin understand the value, via praxis, in making our best assessments about which inherent capacities should be encouraged.

Implicit in that take is not just an acknowledgement of the reality and, indeed, the importance of human nature. What also seems implicit is an understanding that we have a naturally given inclination to identify and evaluate what is better and what

68) Ervin, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*, 97.

is worse, what we should cultivate and what we should resist. Riffing on Ervin, I would suggest anarchism entreats us to consider what best does justice to our nature.

Claiming that anarchists trust the best human instincts can also suggest anarchism entails trusting ourselves and each other, not authority itself. In other words, it is recognition of our often enough demonstrated sociability. Ervin's claim seems to imply a decision to advance our inclination toward the social, toward mutual aid. Not for nothing did Ervin add that, "Anarchism is free or Libertarian Socialism" in his chapter on anarchist theory and practice. "Anarchists are opposed to government, the state and capitalism," he wrote. "Therefore, simply speaking, anarchism is a non-governmental form of socialism called libertarian socialism."⁶⁹ Anarchist praxis is thus anarchist-socialist praxis.

As regards Ervin's claim that "human nature dictates that where there is repression there will be resistance; where there is slavery, there will [be] a struggle against it," a flippant rejoinder might stress that human nature does not deterministically drive struggles against enslavement or preordain rebellion in response to repression. Yet, the reader would be hard pressed to find historical examples of systemic subjugation that have not been resisted,⁷⁰ be it directly, subtly and hidden from the view of would-be masters,⁷¹ or through attempts to escape, like Griffin alluded to in the prison context described above. And indeed, according to Graeber and Wengrow, "slavery was most likely abolished multiple times in history in multiple places," though, granted, "such abolitions are rarely definitive."⁷² Repeatedly, however, abolitionists have actualized the archetypes of freedom and justice residing within the species, giving them form and new meaning.

A Critical Primer on Human Universals

To further explore how human nature appears essential to ideas and experiences of freedom and justice, I will return first to Bookchin to explore our species distinc-

69) Ibid., 33.

70) For one pertinent example, see the chapter, "The Real Resistance to Slavery in North America," documenting multiple historically neglected efforts to resist chattel slavery, in the following: Shoatz, *Maroon the Implacable*, 131–56.

71) Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.

72) Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 523.

tiveness. On the first page of his influential civilizational narrative, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*, he claimed his “views could be summarized in a fairly crisp formulation: the very notion of the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human.”⁷³ Put differently, domination is a distinctly human relation. We might despoil the natural world, but for Bookchin we cannot dominate it because domination, like exploitation, implies a human relationship and ethical capacities of people who can name oppression and decry it as unjust. Whether desecrating non-human nature requires a label other than domination does not concern me as much as our uniqueness in being able to identify domination – a specifically human faculty and long observable facet of our being that, you will recall, Chomsky equates with anarchist sensibilities.

Moving to Chomsky, we can try to further unpack the issue of universality. While Curry appropriately took into account the critical perspective of biosocial thinkers in his talk, I will consider Chomsky’s take on “what has been called ‘the biolinguistic perspective,’ an approach to language that treats the capacity to acquire and use language as an aspect of human biology.”⁷⁴ It has been fashionable “to treat mental aspects of the human organism differently from so-called ‘physical,’ aspects,” but Chomsky referred to this as “a kind of methodological dualism,” one he deemed “more pernicious than Cartesian metaphysical dualism.”⁷⁵

Chomsky’s nuanced critique belies what authors George Lakoff and Mark Johnson claimed about his views in their *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*. They wrote that “Chomsky believes there is a single universal human nature, that the mind is separate from and independent of the body, and that what makes us distinctively human is our mental capacities, not our bodies.”⁷⁶ The first clause is accurate. The second? Not so much. And the third claim attributed to Chomsky is similarly spurious.

Defending his theory of “universal grammar,” or UG, Chomsky noted: “To deny the existence of UG – that is, of a biological endowment underlying the capacity

73) Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 1.

74) Chomsky, “What We Know.”

75) Chomsky, “Lecture II: What Can We Understand?,” 665.

76) Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 478.

for language – would be to hold that it is a miracle that humans have language but other organisms do not.⁷⁷ Rejecting every theory of an embodied faculty, if one asks Chomsky, reproduces the mind-body dualism that, ironically, Lakoff and Johnson accuse him of propounding.

The biological basis for human language acquisition, as Chomsky interprets it, is not wholly independent from the rest of the bodily organism or from the body's interaction with the rest of the world. Chomsky has emphasized both the “internally determined” and the environmentally influenced course of language and general human development.⁷⁸ Chomsky rejects the reductive empiricist position that might admit organs of the body are structured from birth but while also often adhering, at least theoretically, to a dualism, regarding the mind-brain as an empty or unstructured organ, more or less. That assumes knowledge acquisition forms freely irrespective of biological maturity and heedless of the ways nutrition, education, class position, and so forth, can all influence our ontogenetic development.⁷⁹

Human biology, and hence needs, distinguish us from plants and from many non-human life forms. We would be quite different beings with different needs if we used photosynthesis to fuel our activities, or if we flew through the sky like vultures. That we do not develop chlorophyll pigments to convert light energy from the sun into chemical energy for our body, nor grow wings, underscores our species-specific genetic limitations.

Chomsky is at pains to point out our nature is both constraining and enabling. It is enabling precisely because it is constraining. Without the limits that constitute human nature, Chomsky explains, our “cognitive capacities would also have no scope, just as if the genetic endowment imposed no constraints on growth and development of an organism it could become only a shapeless and amoeboid creature, reflecting accidents of an unanalyzed environment. The conditions that prevent a human embryo from becoming an insect play a critical role in determining that it can become a human.”⁸⁰ Our limits, interestingly enough, confer the capacity for language,

77) Chomsky, “Lecture I: What is Language?,” 659.

78) Quoted in Putnam, “An Interview with Chomsky,” 331–332.

79) Wilkin, *Noam Chomsky*, 68.

80) Chomsky, “Lecture II: What Can We Understand?,” 682.

which is “typically innovative without bounds, appropriate to circumstances but not caused by them – a crucial distinction,”⁸¹ Chomsky explained. Our innate creative capacities, enabling a near-infinite array of possible expressions, are made possible by finite means and organismic qualities that distinguish us from amoeboid-like blobs. Our unbounded creative use of language enabled by our bounded, embodied being represents a key aspect of a universal human capacity for freedom.

The misinterpretation of Chomsky advanced by Lakoff and Johnson led them to presuppose specious connections between the anarchist-socialist’s understanding of human nature and his politics:

Since what makes us human is our minds, not our bodies, and since the mind is separate from the body, what makes us essentially human is not material. Thus, it follows from this philosophical perspective that universal human nature does not include a need to acquire material possessions (beyond what is required to live). Capitalism is thus a perversion of universal human nature and nonstate socialism is in accord with universal human nature.⁸²

With this interpretation, “one arrives at the conclusion,” Lakoff and Johnson wrote, “that the ideal form of government is a type of anarchistic socialism, which,” they claim, “is why Chomsky favors anarcho-syndicalism.”⁸³ They are not totally wrong to suggest Chomsky’s anarchist-socialist philosophy might be derived “from the same source as his linguistic philosophy,”⁸⁴ given that both are partially based on how he understands human nature. They failed to grasp the finer points of Chomsky’s views, however.

81) Chomsky, “Lecture I: What is Language?,” 649.

82) Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 478.

83) Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 478–79. Anarcho-syndicalism in theory shares a lot in common with anarchist-socialism, though the former tradition tends to focus on economic relations and primarily refers to direct control of production and allocation through democratically organized, militant labor unions. For more on anarcho-syndicalism, see Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*. The social revolution in Spain that took place during the Spanish Civil War featured prominent anarcho-syndicalist organization, though it was not limited to that; see Chomsky, “Part II of ‘Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship,’” in *On Anarchism*, 45–102; Bookchin, *To Remember Spain*; Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain*.

84) Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 479.

First, they suggest Chomsky accepts the mind and body as separate, despite his understanding of mental powers as predicated upon human biology, as explained above. They also attributed to Chomsky some view of an immaterial human essence, but the attribution relies on an ambiguous notion of what is “material,” and it ignores Chomsky’s grasp of language capacity as enabled by the uniquely human material (biological) body. For now, we will put aside the question of whether within our nature lies “a need to acquire material possessions,” since it is not clear if the acquisition being referenced is also being conflated with commodity relations and consumerism. But Lakoff and Johnson also made a leap, eliding their taken-for-granted assumption-cum-insinuation that “nonstate socialism” does not allow for enjoyment of certain physical goods along with perhaps far preferable social arrangements.

What is more, while libertarian socialists tend to oppose the State while practicing mutual aid and championing non-coercive participatory communal planning, nevertheless, “anarchists dedicated to these goals often support state power to protect people, society, and the earth itself from the ravages of concentrated private capital,” without contradiction, according to Chomsky.⁸⁵ “People live and suffer and endure in the real world of existing society,” he continued, “and any decent person should favor employing what means are available to safeguard and benefit them, even if a long-term goal is to displace these devices and construct preferable alternatives.”⁸⁶

Riffing on the Brazilian rural workers movement, Chomsky went on to wax metaphorical. He noted popular struggles can widen the floor of the “cage of existing coercive institutions,” with the cage functioning to keep us painfully constricted while in the present also providing “protection from savage beasts roaming outside, the predatory state-supported capitalist institutions that are dedicated in principle to the vile maxim of the masters, to private gain, power, and domination, with the interest of the community and its members at most a footnote, perhaps revered in rhetoric but dismissed in practice as a matter of principle and even law.”⁸⁷ I would describe that as a far more nuanced politics than the framing of his praxis provided by Lakoff and Johnson.

85) Chomsky, “Lecture III: What is the Common Good?,” 690.

86) Ibid.

87) Ibid.

As regards universality of human rights – or, moral and ethical universals – Chomsky invoked Hume’s suggestion that, like our linguistic knowledge, our range of moral judgments are necessarily predicated upon principles inextricable from our nature.⁸⁸ He referenced emerging work in experimental cognitive science and in moral philosophy that points to “the operation of internal principles well beyond anything that could be explained by training and conditioning.”⁸⁹

He also offered a brief case study that seems suggestive. As recounted,⁹⁰ the chief economist of the World Bank wrote a memo in 1991 intimating that polluting industries should move to the poorest countries, since, per the reasoning in the memo, “measurement of the costs of health impairing pollution depends on the foregone earnings from increased morbidity and mortality,” and it thus makes (perverse) sense to let places with the highest mortality and lowest wages deal with the toxicity. That memo was leaked, eliciting widespread condemnation and, denials aside, the world witnessed “virtual unanimity of the moral judgment that the reasoning is insane, even if logical,” as Chomsky framed it. While we could observe “the virtually universal judgment” in response to the leak, that “word ‘virtually’ must not be overlooked,” Chomsky stressed. There were important exceptions, namely the people exercising preponderant international influence via the sort of institutions Dupuis-Déri claimed produce ethical calamities at odds with the development of the moral powers Bakunin once alluded to. Chomsky continued:

Western culture condemns some nations as “relativists,” who interpret the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UD)] selectively, rejecting components they do not like. There has been great indignation about “Asian relativists,” or the unspeakable communists, who descend to this degraded practice. Less noticed is that one of the leaders of the relativist camp is also the leader of the self-designated “enlightened states,” the

88) Chomsky, “What We Know.” Chomsky added that Hume took the nature-based “general principles” upon which moral evaluations must be founded to “lie beyond our ‘original instincts,’ which elsewhere he took to include the ‘species of natural instincts’ on which knowledge and belief are grounded.”

89) Ibid.

90) Ibid.

world's most powerful state. We see examples almost daily, though "see" is perhaps the wrong word, since we see them without noticing them.⁹¹

Chomsky added that universal rights are those "which the U.S. government explicitly rejects, and increasingly the entire West rejects," but only, he added, if we ignore the sentiments of large swaths of Western populations who, per political science scholarship, have next to no influence on policy.⁹²

A caveat is in order. David Graeber pointed out that while some "celebrate the West as the birthplace of freedom," and others "denounce it as a source of imperial violence," few have adequately questioned the coherence of "the Western tradition" itself.⁹³ Values that allegedly define and distinguish "the West" have been based on criteria that elide other values observed among those categorized as part of the tradition. Putatively Western values can historically be located outside of what is considered "Western civilization," a construction from "thoroughly entangled," interacting societies.⁹⁴ Graeber alluded to the parallel confusion that results when ancient Athens, taken as tantamount to the artificially constructed "West," is extolled as the birthplace of democracy, erasing the surfeit of examples of communities across time and place that "each had some kind of procedure for coming to decisions in matters of collective importance," often via assemblies "in which all members of the community, at least in theory, had equal say."⁹⁵ The ascendance of "the West" might be better understood as the rise of the "North Atlantic world-system," which featured "endless fusions of African, Native American, and European traditions,"⁹⁶ and, per Graeber, arose "through almost unimaginable catastrophe; the destruction of entire civilizations, mass enslavement, [and] the death of at least a hundred million human beings."⁹⁷ The erasure and suppression of anarchic association, never entirely successful, was perhaps coeval and continues apace.

91) Ibid.

92) Gilens and Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics."

93) Graeber, "There Never Was a West," 337.

94) Ibid., 340.

95) Ibid., 341.

96) Ibid., 340.

97) Ibid., 340.

Dualisms, Dialectics and Freedom in (Our) Nature

With the caveat in mind, I should add that Sahlins excoriated the Western metaphysical construction of humanity for artificially separating nature from culture. The ostensibly Western outlook popularized a “nature-culture dualism,” a “culture-nature antithesis,” as Sahlins would have it.⁹⁸ The dualistic thinking “underwrites” enduring ideas about the necessity of both sovereign rule and governmental authority to subdue our animalistic dispositions (or the supposed animalistic nature of others), conceived of course in opposition to dichotomized civilization, Sahlins suggested.⁹⁹ Acknowledging species distinctiveness, Sahlins wrote that, per “our own paleontological evidence, we too are animal creatures of culture, endowed with the biology of our symbology.”¹⁰⁰

Bookchin critiqued dualistic thinking with his philosophy (or praxis) of social ecology as well. He opposed hypostasizing nature and rejected the supposed dualism delinking human (second) nature from non-human (first) nature. He believed anti-humanist thinking “deprecates nature,” by taking our human attributes – like the ability to reason dialectically, to anticipate, and to “act insightfully to enhance our own natural development” – and separating those from the natural world, “as though they did not emerge out of evolutionary development and were not implicitly part of animal development.”¹⁰¹ Recovery of human nature became a key part of his project. “To recover human nature,” he wrote, “is not only to recover its continuity with the creative process of natural evolution but to recognize its distinctiveness.”¹⁰² Instead of subsuming society within nature or vice versa, “social ecology tries to recover the distinctive attributes of both in a continuum that gives rise to a substantive ethics, wedding the social to the ecological without denying the integrity of each.”¹⁰³

Bookchin saw dialectic(s) as an antidote to the ironically inorganic and surprisingly shallow anti-humanist currents of deep ecological thought. Misanthropic frames

98) Sahlins, *The Western Illusion of Human Nature*, 14.

99) Ibid.

100) Ibid., 94.

101) Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 83

102) Ibid., 85.

103) Ibid., 92.

might cast humanity as a curse, parasite, virus, or scourge, admittedly given some of the mayhem we have managed to wreak. Yet, anti-humanism is also insidiously anti-ecological because it obscures the connection between human second nature and non-human first nature, reproducing a dualism where dialectic is needed.

To be sure, humans *have* demonstrated both immensely destructive powers that seem to surpass those of all other life forms on this planet. Beetles have not dropped atomic bombs. Bonobos do not contribute to anthropogenic climate disruption as we do. Indeed, denying human nature could dangerously downplay our distinctive role in causing planetary harm. But blanket human hating is unhelpfully fatalistic. Disparaging our species helps hide the social and economic origins of ecological problems. The disparagement simultaneously conceals the problems afflicting us and furnishes a dubious explanation that functions as pseudo-rationalization for the established order reproducing a plethora of problems. As Bookchin noted, “how long one can continue to belabor ‘humanity’ for its affronts to the biosphere without distinguishing between rich and poor, men and women, whites and people of color, exploiters and exploited, is a nagging problem that many ecological philosophers have yet to resolve, or perhaps even recognize.”¹⁰⁴

His naturalist dialectic recollects ethical responsibilities associated with humanity. Bookchin observed that our ethical rationality diverges appreciably from what is found in non-human life forms. We do not hold those other organisms to the moral standards we hold each other, for good reasons. Per Bookchin, “rights” come “from the human social sphere,” meaning we share a responsibility with each other but not with non-human animals. “Leopards claim no ‘rights’ for themselves,” Bookchin asserted, “and certainly recognize no ‘right’ to life, much less to ‘self-realization,’ in the animals on which they prey.”¹⁰⁵ For Bookchin, ascribing rights to non-human animals, like say, leopards, is anthropocentric and unfair to them.

I might depart from Bookchin to a degree here and suggest we can and maybe should extend what we consider “rights” (or freedoms) to other organisms, with the understanding that their “rights” or freedoms will not be perceived or experienced the way we might perceive and experience ours. What leopards, bonobos, beetles,

104) Ibid., 116.

105) Ibid., 138.

and bloodhounds can conceptualize and hold themselves morally responsible for differs from what humans can, just as the freedoms that are or ought to be enjoyed by non-human animals differ from the freedoms inseparable from what it means to be a human being. We would not chastise a chimpanzee for killing another chimpanzee in the wild as we would be critical of humans for murdering people, for example. Bookchin's dialectical naturalism distinguishes human nature from the rest of nature in describing us as distinctive moral agents who can be held responsible by ourselves and by our fellow moral agents who are also capable of ethical decision-making.

Bookchin, rightfully in my view, also repudiated mystical appeals to any "oneness"¹⁰⁶ wherein humanity dissolves ideologically into everything else. The superficially spiritual conception vitiates our naturally endowed difference, which I believe any worthwhile spirituality would respect. If we are simply "one" with the world, inseparable from it and the disparate organisms that help constitute it, moral agency disappears.¹⁰⁷

If we assume our moral agency does not exist, if we reject it as a universal, "then human beings" can, as Bookchin explained, proceed "to use the biosphere exclusively to suit their own ends, a 'right' that cannot be denied any more than the leopard's 'right' to kill and feast on its prey."¹⁰⁸ In other words, failure to take our distinctiveness seriously and to think carefully about what distinguishes human being from non-human being opens the door to a wrecked world.

There is an objection the reader could raise. Our reckless, inconsiderate actions could ultimately boomerang, destroying the means for human life. But that sort of thinking reaffirms the sinister dualism between first and second nature at best, or it tacitly supports an instrumental rationality that conceives of the world as consisting of parts to be used for one's own gain at worst. Apropos the latter, Bookchin criticized the "crassly instrumental"¹⁰⁹ utilitarian belief that our concern for nature rests solely on our own narrowly conceived self-interest. Chomsky, in slight contrast, has criticized our degradation of nature on the basis that it undermines the possibility of species

106) Ibid., 101.

107) Ibid., 139.

108) Ibid., 139.

109) Ibid., 74.

survival under tolerable conditions.¹¹⁰ Yet, in making the criticism, he observed that our disregard for the environment threatens to wipe out the possibility of decent life for our grandchildren, and that concern for human posterity might not be so easily reducible to instrumental reason.

Recovering What it Means to Be Human

In a 1971 debate with Chomsky, Michel Foucault cited past state socialist experiments in which paradigms for liberated human nature still relied on the “bourgeois model,” and he flagged a risk in using the terms of existing society and culture to define human nature, which could lead to error.¹¹¹ Foucault also argued that in a revolutionary scenario the proletariat wages war against the ruling class not because it considers it just, but because “it wants to take power. And because it will overthrow the power of the ruling class, it considers such a war to be just.”¹¹² Foucault questioned whether “the idea of justice” functions merely as an “instrument” of political-economic power and as a weapon against it.¹¹³

In addition to what he identified as the pressing task of clearly understanding the nature of existing oppression, power, and terror, Chomsky also specified the imperative “to create, if you like, a humanistic social theory that is based, if possible, on some firm and humane concept of the human essence, or human nature,” so as to realize a just society.¹¹⁴ He argued neither our bodies nor our notions of justice can be reduced to ideological discourse, and he rejected the claim that aggrandizing power vis-à-vis others is a principal human motivation.¹¹⁵ He suggested “a ‘real’ notion of justice” resides “within fundamental human qualities,” and he referred to “fundamental human needs, including such needs as those for solidarity and sympathy,”

110) Quoted in Barsamian, “The World of Our Grandchildren.”

111) Chomsky and Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate on Human Nature* (New York: The New Press, 2006[1971]), 43–44.

112) *Ibid.*, 51.

113) *Ibid.*, 54–55.

114) *Ibid.*, 41–42.

115) *Ibid.*, 55.

among others.¹¹⁶ Following Chomsky, a concept of justice is meaningful insofar as it refers to relations that respect and nourish our limits and scopes, to ways of being that enable our creativity and to organizational forms that nurture our nature. Chomsky's bio-naturalism provides a normative, if never fixed or precisely definable, partial notion of human flourishing.

Back to Bookchin. When we are "rendered oblivious," to our own "species-distinctiveness,"¹¹⁷ he wrote, we risk conforming to the institutional demands of hierarchical and exploitative social systems. Denial of our own humanity fuels deleterious instrumental treatment of the natural world, human bodies included. But any dialectical naturalism attuned to our innate creative and caring capacities should also recognize our ontological incompleteness.¹¹⁸ Nature's human embodiment bestows upon us the ability for further self-realization through praxis.

Bookchin's philosophy in turn reminds us of our interdependence. We depend on each other and on the first nature from whence we came. The insight underscores the importance of solidarity and a commitment to realizing our related co-liberation in a desirably livable world. Bookchin believed evolution was not some predetermined unfolding of external factors in a static, unchanging biosphere that selects the fittest of life forms, privileging passive objects of evolutionary change so they might dominate, survive, and procreate.¹¹⁹ Rather, Bookchin affirmed a "nascent source of freedom within nature," describing ecology as "a medium for providing varying degrees of choice, self-directiveness, and participation by life-forms in their own development."¹²⁰ We are naturally endowed with the potential and desire for freedom, he believed. Being free means exercising both autonomy and collaborative agency in the cultivation of ourselves and our social ecology.

If the endpoint is not predestined, then we need not treat our current predicament as a *fait accompli*. We might recall that, up until more recently, humanity often demonstrated a knack for intentionally transforming the social order. Graeber and Wengrow

116) Ibid.

117) Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 84.

118) For more on the notion of humanity's ontological incompleteness, see Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 55–66.

119) Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 77.

120) Ibid.

claimed that “one could say Aristotle was right when he described human beings as ‘political animals’” insofar as politics involves reflecting on the directions society could take and deliberating why we should move in one direction or another.¹²¹ The authors lamented that certain questions – like, “Is human nature innocent or corrupt?” and, “Are we, as a species, inherently co-operative or competitive, kind or selfish, good or evil?” – might “blind us to what really makes us human in the first place, which is our capacity – as moral and social beings – to negotiate between such alternatives.”¹²² We can opt to actualize what is implicit in our previously and partially realized potential. And, as Bookchin would have it, we can uphold “what-should-be” against what is at present, relying on our self-conscious subjectivity. That can guide us in refashioning the relationships that influence what sort of humans we are. I believe Bookchin took that to be “the basis for a truly objective ethical socialism or anarchism.”¹²³

Additionally, I agree with Chomsky that “the idea of care for others and concern for other people’s needs and concern for a fragile environment that must sustain future generations,” well, “all of these things are part of human nature. These are elements of human nature that are suppressed in a social and cultural system which is designed to maximize personal gain.”¹²⁴ Like him, I “think we must try to overcome that suppression and that’s, in fact, what democracy could bring about,” or what anarchist-socialist praxis could make conscious and help bring into being. “It could lead to the expression of other human needs and values which tend to be suppressed under the institutional structure,” under “a system of private power and private profit,” as Chomsky put it. Those different “human values have to be expressed if future generations are going even to be able to survive,” he added, solemnly if also astutely. Expression of those values, via defense and development of our innate capacities, for me implies collaboration to recognize and recover what lies latent, to rescue what has weakened with neglect, and to liberate what hitherto remains arrested and repressed. That in turn, to me, implies creative praxis to nourish the soul and remind us what it means to be human.

121) Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 86.

122) *Ibid.*, 118.

123) Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 172.

124) Chomsky, “Noam Chomsky on ‘Manufacturing Consent’ (Part Two)”

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