

# HUMANISM AND ANTI-HUMANISM IN ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis identifies a family of humanist presuppositions which, I argue, pervade modern Western society and are partly responsible for our inability to escape from a spiral of environmental destruction. For example, humanist ethical theories frequently assume the existence of an objective / subjective divide, autonomous rational individuals and a neutral rationality. I argue that these assumptions, which are peculiar to our society, provide a wholly inappropriate basis for the expression of many environmental concerns.

Humanism imposes particular taxonomies and interpretations on social and environmental relations; these facilitate the treatment of nature as a resource rather than as a part of our (ethical) community. At the theoretical level, humanism develops explicit systems of “formal rationality” which purport to be neutral e.g. axiological systems like neoclassical economics and utilitarianism. However, these systems reduce environmental evaluation to the bureaucratic *application* of abstract methodologies and, far from being neutral, they impose a particular humanist ideology on decision making processes which marginalises those who speak in a different voice.

I develop an alternative perspective; a critical theory informed by the anti-humanism of Althusser, the later Wittgenstein and Bourdieu. This post-humanist theoretical problematic works in two ways. First, it explains how ideologies interpellate individuals into social structures and reproduce current social values. Second, it advocates an alternative “ecological paradigm”, embedded in anti-humanist and radical traditions which would give due regard to the constitutive role of ‘nature’ in the formation of our moral values.

## For my mother and father

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A Klee painting named "*Angelus Novalis*" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

Walter Benjamin "Theses on the Philosophy of History" <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin *Illuminations* pp. 259-260.

## INTRODUCTION

It should not be necessary to begin an essay in environmental ethics with the by now familiar litany of ecological disasters. I assume that we are all well aware of the earth's current predicament and its human causes.<sup>1</sup> Suffice it to say that the tempest of progress has now blown us “far from paradise”. Benjamin’s dystopian imagery finds increasingly frequent echoes in the writings of many environmentalists angered and sickened by the scale of our destructive activities.<sup>2</sup>

The current obscene scale of damage inflicted upon our natural environment is a product of *our* society, of *modern Western* social structures and ideologies. This thesis attempts to characterise, deconstruct and offer alternatives to the dominant ideology which legitimises this carnage, that which I refer to as “humanism”. Following Ehrenfeld and many other environmentalists, I hold that humanist assumptions and presuppositions (characterised in detail in chapter one) are deeply implicated in our destructive and shortsighted policies towards the non-human world.<sup>3</sup>

The argument of this thesis is that the survival of remaining wilderness areas, however small, is a matter for *moral* concern. Their preservation will not be

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<sup>1</sup> The Worldwatch Institute provides a concise summary of our current environment in their annual *State of the World Atlas*.

<sup>2</sup> *Far From Paradise* is the title of John Seymour’s and Herbert Girardet’s chronicle of environmental devastation. See also Kirkpatrick Sale’s timely counter-blast to the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the ‘discovery’ of the Americas, *The Conquest of Paradise*. The golden age is a recurrent theme amongst environmentalists which, although romantically appealing, does have its own dangers in idealising a past of which we know so little. (See chapter 8.)

<sup>3</sup> David Ehrenfeld *The Arrogance of Humanism*.

urged in the usual terms of human utility. For example, rainforests are often referred to as gene banks, potential resources for sustainable development, oxygen factories and so on. Though in some sense they may be all of these things, to justify their preservation by reference to these roles is to accept the language and rationale of their exploitation. These are expressions of human-centred attitudes towards nature and concrete examples of the imposition of managerial and financial constraints upon nature. Just as in our present bureaucratic/consumer society all has to be managerially approved and financially profitable, wilderness too, it is often argued, needs to justify its continued existence on the same grounds. Though the defence of wild places by such means may sometimes be successful as a short term expedient, to justify their preservation only, or even primarily, in these terms is tacitly to accept the status quo and the ultimate hegemony of human self-interest.

Systems of institutionalised rights are frequently touted as alternatives to an unrestricted instrumental rationality. They supposedly introduce ethical constraints into political and economic structures. However they fail to challenge humanistic presuppositions at their deepest levels. Often they simply reiterate anthropocentric assumptions and reinforce the bureaucratic institutions of modern society. Even where such rights are biocentrically disposed, e.g. towards animal or environmental rights, their a-contextual abstraction makes them ill suited to deal with the immense complexities of human / environmental interactions. What is more, I shall argue that these systems of explicit rules and regulations rely upon a very narrow conception of ethical values, they (erroneously) claim to *represent* real values but provide no insight into how ethical values might be produced and how such

values actually function in societies.

Whilst this essay argues that, *in our current situation*, it makes sense to speak of the ethical value of natural objects, as opposed to their instrumental value, it does not attempt to justify a specific normative stance on the moral value of the environment. Its refusal to produce a *philosophical justification* of particular values is not motivated by a wish to remain 'objective' or by any lack of concern over these issues. Quite the contrary. Rather, it represents an opposition to a form of *humanist* philosophical practice which, I shall argue, is too restrictive. Instead, this thesis attempts to understand how humanity might, in different times and places, have come to hold such a *bewildering* variety of values where relations with our encompassing environment are concerned.

It would therefore be a mistake to read this essay as supporting a radical and absolute dichotomy between two essentially different kinds of value; ethical and instrumental. Rather, I argue that *all* values are products of our social and environmental relations and that the particular historical development of our own Western society (*Gesellschaft*) has produced this humanist dichotomy; has divorced the instrumental from the ethical, increasingly privileging the former and fragmenting the latter. My re-privileging of the ethical is a manoeuvre intended to show the inadequacies of instrumentalism and the society which produced and relies so heavily upon it. The ultimate aim of the essay is to give a theoretical account of the production of environmental values which avoids, *so far as is possible*, reliance upon those humanist dichotomies and presuppositions which are entwined with society's headlong ecocidal dash toward oblivion. The

hegemony of humanism makes this task extraordinarily difficult but nonetheless necessary.

If humanism is at the heart of our environmental crisis, then this has serious implications for those ethical theories which attempt to define solutions to this crisis *within* philosophical frameworks which are themselves humanist. Thus we need to examine the very foundations of our ethical theories. As Alasdair MacIntyre has noted;

“[t]he ability to respond adequately to this kind of cultural need depends of course on whether those summoned possess intellectual and moral resources that transcend the immediate crisis, which enable them to say to the culture what culture cannot say to itself. For if the crisis is so pervasive that it has invaded every aspect of our intellectual and moral lives, then what we take to be resources for the treatment of our condition may turn out themselves to be infected areas.”<sup>4</sup>

For example, humanism in ethical theory recognises only those philosophical solutions which either reduce all values to the purely *subjective* (e.g. emotivism) or posit the existence of timeless universal *objective* values in nature (including human nature). That is, values are either matters of personal choice or alternatively concrete laws of nature to be unearthed by philosophy and expressed in rational arguments. Both of these conceptions blindly accept reason as a neutral tool, the former for ordinating individual values in the production of social policy, the latter as a tool for investigating ‘reality’. These are referred to by Horkheimer as

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<sup>4</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre ‘A Crisis in Moral Philosophy: Why is the Search for the Foundations of Ethics So Frustrating?’ pp. 3-4.

“subjective” and “objective” rationality respectively.<sup>5</sup> Horkheimer sees the development of Western society from the Enlightenment onwards as characterised by a progressive undercutting of objective rationality by its own internal logic. This allegedly leaves subjective rationality as the principal logic of modernity.

“The philosophers of the Enlightenment attacked religion in the name of reason; in the end what they killed was not the church but metaphysics and the objective concept of reason itself, the source of power of their own efforts... Reason has liquidated itself as an agency of ethical, moral, and religious insight.”<sup>6</sup>

An examination of the current literature in environmental ethics belies Horkheimer’s premature dismissal of objective rationality. As we shall see (in chapter one) many theories do try to provide objective rationales, often incorporating a blatantly metaphysical objectivism, in support of particular environmental values. The existence of these theories, unsatisfactory as they are, can be regarded as testimony to the inadequacies of subjective rationality, its inability to capture the impersonal (or communal) depth of ethical values.

Today, subjective, or instrumental rationality and its attendant conception of the morally autonomous individual reign supreme. But, I claim, the solution to the environmental crisis does not lie in a return to earlier conceptions of

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<sup>5</sup> Max Horkheimer *Eclipse of Reason*. Horkheimer utilises a distinction between types of rationality initially developed by Weber to account for the appearance of “subjective rationality” (which is approximately equivalent to Weber’s “formal rationality”) as a pervasive feature of modern Western society. (See chapter 1.)

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* pp.17-18.

objective values. Thus I will not refer to aspects of the environment as possessing “intrinsic values” or being of “inherent worth” because these terms might be taken to imply a particular ontological stance on the nature of values and a particular epistemological stance on the nature of reason. For example, Janna Thompson argues that “At a minimum....those who find intrinsic value in nature are claiming...that things and states are of value for what they are in themselves *and not because of their relations to us...*”<sup>7</sup> If this is an accurate portrayal of intrinsic value then it is not a position that I adhere to. Not only would such a reversion to older conceptions of independent objective values carry little weight in a society generally skeptical of metaphysical entities, but it remains part of the humanist problematic in accepting a radical objective / subjective divide.

The humanist categories “objective” and “subjective” are creations of the social structure and forms of life prevailing in Western society. They are not transcendental categories applicable to all times and places but expressions of a particular cultural *milieu*. Society’s inability to think beyond apparently exclusive categories such as these represents a limit on the theoretical options open to us, and forces us to recapitulate in only slightly differing forms a stale dialogue without hope of reconciliation. Environmental ethics in its humanist forms, whether utilitarian, deontological etc., simply replays with novel environmental exemplars an old debate about the subjectivity or objectivity of values. The current acceptance of this dichotomy reflects the existence of a whole range of inter-linked humanist presuppositions which ramify throughout our society.

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<sup>7</sup> Janna Thompson ‘A Refutation of Environmental Ethics’ p. 148. [My emphasis.]

My opposition to humanism extends to all those attempts to crudely quantify moral values and develop abstract methods of comparison which ignore the actual context and complexity of moral judgments. The creation of monolithic philosophical systems justifying or ordering values (i.e. axiologies) is, I shall argue, a profoundly mistaken enterprise: an enterprise which is a feature specific to the cultural, historical and environmental background of the modern Western social formation. Western society, including Western philosophy, has spread its influence world wide through commerce, colonialism and war but remains riddled with a set of destructive humanist ideological assumptions. Contemporary humanism, especially in its subjective form, attempts to impose a global moral and political consensus based largely upon an explicit brand of methodological individualism and Hobbesian self-interest originally peculiar to European culture. This is particularly true of the prevailing neoclassical economic conception of human nature. (See chapter 2.) However, the instrumental subjective rationality entailed by such a conception of society is itself a historical phenomenon which must be understood in its cultural context before it can be effectively opposed.

Given these criticisms, what is required of Western environmental philosophy is nothing less than the deconstruction of its own traditions and history, a critique of most, if not all, of its humanist presuppositions. To engage in this deconstruction philosophy needs to be conjoined with components of anti-humanist histories, sociologies and geographies of modern society. It needs to excavate alternatives to humanism from those traditions which have sought to oppose it. The *anti-humanisms* of social theory can be seen as one such critical attempt to recontextualise Western conceptions of the

individual and provide alternatives to the attendant conceptions of objective and subjective rationalities.<sup>8</sup> However, I shall not simply advocate a form of philosophical anti-humanism as an easy solution to environmental problems. Lest I should be misunderstood, I hope that it is obvious from what follows that I am by no means blind to humanism's many merits. For example, this thesis does not underestimate the importance of the individual subject, but rejects certain claims about its absolute nature and foundational importance. It rejects technological fixes and science's claims to provide 'factual' knowledge but it is not anti-science. It rejects a 'neutral' rationality but it does not condone irrationality. Although anti-humanism is a necessary corrective I believe that environmentalism will best be served by those philosophies which attempt to go beyond naive conceptions of the humanism / anti-humanism debate and all such rigid dichotomies. We need to produce a post-humanism. (See chapter 9.)

This thesis is not intended as a comprehensive account of either anti-humanist perspectives or of theories of environmental ethics. Thus important anti-humanists like Derrida, Heidegger and Deleuze appear infrequently and even Foucault gets less mention than he might.<sup>9</sup> Many environmental ethicists are mentioned only in order to place them in the tentative taxonomy of environmental ethics developed in chapter 2. This thesis attempts to deconstruct and reorientate the whole field of applied ethics as it is currently practised. Environmental philosophy has to be more than the application of moral metrics to our concerns about 'nature'. It has to be more than the simple extension into another realm of age old and tedious debates about

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<sup>8</sup> "Anti-humanism" is used here as a technical term and is not meant to have misanthropic overtones. (See chapter 3.)

<sup>9</sup> For example, see Martin Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism' pp. 189-243.

the relative merits of utilitarianism and deontological theories, of objectivism and subjectivism etc. Instead, it must try to understand the production and reproduction of moral values. It must look below the surface of moral argumentation and question the nature of the relations between *moral theory* and *social practices*. It has to ask how and why moral values change and how they come to be inscribed at the heart of the concrete individuals who compose societies.

If humanism, generally speaking, employs an objective / subjective divide and a neutral concept of rationality, it becomes imperative that any anti-humanism must both investigate and provide alternatives to the humanist conceptions of the "subject" and humanist epistemology. This thesis endeavours to fulfil these aims by adapting an Althusserian account of ideology: ideology as the genetic structures within which reason is embedded (the structures which delimit what counts as rational), and ideology as the structures within which the individual subject comes to take on her particular forms and to recognise herself. "Ideology" as a concept might therefore be seen as the theoretical seed from which other aspects of this essay germinate. For this reason a great deal of space is given over to an account of the implications of various interpretations of ideology and to its relations to other aspects of the anti-humanist theoretical problematic presented here.

The critique of the production and reproduction of ethical values developed here has no pretensions about possessing absolute or timeless status but only claims to provide a timely and reflexive alternative to work within the humanist tradition. It criticises the ideological underpinnings of humanism

and develops alternative conceptions of “values” and “reason”; an ethics and an epistemology intended to inform and strengthen a radical politics in opposition to the destructive status quo. The emphasis placed upon epistemology in a thesis primarily concerned with values might be found surprising. However, the distinction between epistemology and ethics is, to some extent, itself a feature of a humanistic distinction between facts and values. Focusing upon “social practices” as the fields within which and through which we construct our lives enables one to speak of the production and reproduction of knowledge and values in the same breath.<sup>10</sup>

This thesis originates in the dialectic between traditions within modernity - in particular between *humanism* and *anti-humanism*. Solutions to our predicament have to come, to a large degree, from our current social and environmental world views via reflexive critique and practical experience. Thus, although in one sense I argue that we need a radical *paradigmatic shift*, away from an ecologically destructive humanist framework bereft of solutions, we are not at liberty to simply reject our intellectual inheritance out of hand.<sup>11</sup> We need an “epistemological break” with the past, but this break can never be clean.<sup>12</sup> As Herbert Marcuse puts it, “...the position of theory cannot be one of mere speculation. It must be a historical position in the

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<sup>10</sup>“Epistemology”, the “theory of knowledge”, is a very recent invention indeed. The term was only coined by Eduard Zeller in 1862 in his ‘On the Significance and Problem of the Theory of Knowledge’. See Ernst Cassirer *The Problem of Knowledge* p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> The need for such a theoretical shift has been recognised by Riley E. Dunlap in his paper ‘Paradigmatic change in Social Science: From Human Exemptions to an Ecological Paradigm’. For a more guarded appraisal of this change see Frederick H. Buttel ‘Environmental Sociology: A New Paradigm?’ One recent attempt to incorporate environmental matters into the heart of a theoretical paradigm can be found in Niklas Luhmann’s ‘Ecological Communities’.

<sup>12</sup> See chapters 3 and 4 for the meaning of the term “epistemological break”.

sense that it must be grounded on the capabilities of the given society.”<sup>13</sup> Although we should not underestimate the potential benefits from a constructive discourse with other traditions (for example, the traditions of primary peoples, or Eastern religions), there are a number of reasons for our being tied to our past.

First, we simply have no choice in the matter. The threads of the humanist dialectic are part and parcel of our world-views: they are, because of the cultural history of our society, an intimate and ineradicable component of the very way we think. They are part of the ideological background of our society and delimit to a large extent the horizons even of critical thought. Humanism, to a large extent, defines our conceptual and perceptual *home*. Any attempt to break its shackles on our thoughts also destroys ties to our past, a past which has intimately shaped our very being. Thus any break from humanism will entail both “a shudder at being uprooted and a sigh of relief at escaping.”<sup>14</sup>

Second, these limitations have corresponding political implications for those wanting to bring about social change. To be successful, such change needs to appeal to a broad spectrum of people and can only do so by utilising, at least to a degree, the frameworks of thought within which they are accustomed to think.

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<sup>13</sup> Herbert Marcuse *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* p. xlvii.

<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Habermas *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* p.108. This thesis can, on one level, be interpreted as a continuation of the traditions of “critical theorists” like Benjamin, Horkheimer, Adorno and Habermas, although it makes no claims to be a ‘Marxism’.

Third, uncritical attempts to regress to pre-humanist states, e.g. by simply rejecting rationality or science *en masse* as indelibly tainted by Western society's cultural and environmental carnage, might easily encourage eco-fascism, a return to the "blood and soil" rhetoric of Nazi Germany. As Horkheimer states;

"...we are the heirs, for better or for worse, of the Enlightenment and technological progress. To oppose these by regressing to more primitive stages does not alleviate the permanent crisis they have brought about. On the contrary, such experiments lead from historically reasonable to utterly barbaric forms of social domination. The sole way of assisting nature is to unshackle its seeming opposite, independent thought."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Horkheimer *op.cit.*, n. 5 above, p. 127. The role played by ideology of nature in Nazi thought is exposed in Robert A. Pois *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature* .

“Today we have the capacity to turn the world into hell, and we are well on the way to doing so.”<sup>1</sup>

## CHAPTER ONE: HUMANISM

David Ehrenfeld has described humanism as “the dominant religion of our time”,<sup>2</sup> by which he means that we have, both consciously and unconsciously, replaced faith in one omnipotent deity with faith in our own species, its abilities, and its destiny. Ehrenfeld argues cogently that this religion of humanism is responsible for our despoiling nature, for the mass extinction of species and the destruction of the ecosystems upon which we ultimately depend. Given our current environmental problems certain sorts of solution present themselves as ‘obvious’ answers to humanists. These might, for example, include the use of genetic techniques or fertilisers to increase food production. But Ehrenfeld claims these obvious answers do not so much provide solutions to our current environmental predicament as constitute a part of the problem itself. Expensive genetic techniques have become necessary because we have planted huge monocultures lacking the natural diversity which might provide immunity to pest epidemics. Agribusiness requires fertilisers due to the artificial economic structures imposed on farming practices, and these fertilisers produce side effects which pollute rivers and water supplies, causing the eutrophication of lakes and encouraging poisonous algal blooms. Despite these setbacks, within

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert Marcuse *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics and Utopia* p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> David Ehrenfeld *The Arrogance of Humanism* p. 3.

the humanist paradigm the obvious answer is always to search for yet another technical fix rather than address the root cause of the problem.

We seem incapable of learning from experience that our theoretical understanding of complex natural systems lags far behind our technical capabilities for intervening in these systems. In our search for continual material progress we attempt to manage nature for our own ends, using woefully inadequate conceptual schemes. These schemes inevitably have unforeseen consequences which we then try to solve by further recourse to technology or management, thus entering an unremitting and destructive spiral. Ehrenfeld's analysis highlights three major aspects of humanism, its separation of humanity from nature, its reliance upon, and optimism in, scientific and managerial solutions to the problems that confront us, and its linear and teleological conceptions of historical and societal 'progress'. We can, however, expand this description of humanism into a more detailed, but still schematic, list of features some of which are only implicit (or even absent) in Ehrenfeld's own characterisation.

- 1). The separation of the human from the natural which usually implies:
  - a. Anthropocentrism - the privileging of the human over the natural.
  - b. The treatment of nature as an 'object', an externality.
  - c. The recognition of an absolute divide between the objective world and the subjective self.
  - d. A belief in an essential human nature distinguishing us from other species.
- 2). A "representational" epistemology, i.e. thought as the "mirror of nature".<sup>3</sup>  
This arises from the positing of two separate realms, that of the material

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<sup>3</sup> A phrase used by Richard Rorty *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

world and that of consciousness, (mind / body).

- 3). This is often associated (as in Descartes) with a thesis about the transparency of thoughts to the thinker, i.e. thoughts (language and theory) operate only at the level of their *consciously* apprehended semantics.<sup>4</sup>
- 4). An atomistic conception of the human individual as transcendent 'subject' i.e. essentially the same in all periods and societies.
- 5). A linear and frequently teleological conception of historical and epistemological 'progress'.
- 6). Scientistic and managerial optimism; e.g. a reliance upon technological fixes; faith in the scientific method.
- 7). The privileging of rationality as a *neutral* instrument
- 8). The separation of reason / emotion, fact / value.
- 9). The development of "formal rationality", i.e. the increasing dominance of explicit abstract systems of rules, laws and calculation within the social sphere.
- 10). The production of "Grand Theories" which do not respect context (in the case of ethics, axiological theories of normative values).
- 11). This frequently leads to reductive theoretical systems, e.g. "economism".
- 12). Ethnocentrism (European centred).
- 13). Androcentrism (Male centred).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This apparent transparency is believed to give theory its power to overcome the mystification engendered by a-theoretical superstition.

<sup>5</sup> This list of features overlaps with other characterisations of our dominant worldview both by environmental philosophers and social theorists. (See chapter 2 of this essay.) For examples of the former see Bill Deval and George Sessions 'The Dominant Worldview and its Critics', chapter 3 of *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* and Murray Bookchin *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism*, especially chapter 2. For an example of the latter see Kate Soper *Humanism and Anti-Humanism passim*.

I shall not analyse each of these features in depth here as some of their interrelations in various problematics form the structure of the following thesis. To chart their complex interrelations would, in any case, require a detailed historical genealogy of specific fields of society, for their relationship defies easy summary. However, I claim that these features run very deeply and often subliminally through the theory and practice of Western societies. They are examples of humanist taxonomies, ways of dividing up the world which both facilitate and constrain the possibilities of thought and understanding. They are unquestionably accepted as the given basis from which debate is to begin and are present in the form and use of our language. In some cases they are explicit, in others only implicit, but none the less influential.

No doubt other aspects could be added to this characterisation of humanism and some of those characteristics listed may be regarded as more central than others. However, I do not claim that any given viewpoint can be defined as humanist simply because it exhibits one or more of these features, or that to be humanist one needs to exhibit all of these features. The features are not *essential qualities* which humanist ideologies necessarily possess. Rather “humanism”, as I shall use the term, comprises the normative background which dominates modern society. It is within this background that the majority of everyday practices are conducted and theories formulated. In different spheres of society and at different times humanism has taken a number of forms, but these forms are related to each other by structures of similarities and differences forming, in Wittgenstein’s terminology, a “family” of inter-linked concepts and emphases. That is, “...these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the

same word for all, - but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all by the same term”, in this case humanist.<sup>6</sup> One cannot simply draw lines which will classify, for example, the works of a particular writer or the practices of a particular social group, as humanist or anti-humanist, without specifying the particular context(s) in respect of which one makes that claim.

Nor do I claim that there is any necessary *entailment* between certain humanist traits and the destruction of nature. For example, taken by itself, belief in a universal human nature does not necessitate that we *must* see other species as unimportant. However, many of the worst forms of environmental damage are justified, or simply taken as obviously right because of the theoretical currency and ideological effects of these taxonomic structures. Just how these structures are formed and operate in relation to modernity is the major concern of this thesis. We must recognise that such features have developed in, and been inextricably linked to, the dominant and consuming practices of Western society. They are then, not the *original causes* of environmental destruction, but are nevertheless part and parcel of that destruction.

Roughly speaking, those theoretical stances which exhibit and positively privilege certain of the aspects listed above can, *in that context*, be termed humanist and those which criticise such positions can be termed anti-humanist. Having said this, many of these traits do cohere, reoccurring together in only subtly altered forms in different disciplines. It is also

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<sup>6</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* §67 1985

possible to trace these themes and their evolution through the history of Western society.

This thesis will focus on the tripartite relationship between *theory, ideology* and the *environmentally and socially situated individual*. As such it emphasises certain of these humanist traits at the expense of others. Most importantly it will question the way that humanist philosophers envisage environmental ethics and philosophy generally. Environmental philosophy cannot remain a side-show, the freak of the philosophical circus, whilst logic and epistemology hog the big top. If properly practised, it will do more than simply apply current philosophical principles, it will alter the very structure of philosophy undermining its very foundations and rearranging the hierarchy and divisions within philosophy. It will also bring into question the divisions between philosophy and other disciplines now separated by institutionalised barriers.

I want to try to *unthink* the obviousness of humanist dichotomies and traits above. This work of paradigmatic change cannot be approached by introducing a simple 'logical' argument which will lead us by the nose to inescapable conclusions. Instead it requires us to change the structure of our thought. It needs to provide an alternative "problematic", (a theoretically informed world-view or research programme) within which we can come to think and act. As Wittgenstein said, "When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)"<sup>7</sup> Paradigmatic change involves thinking the current limits of our thought: seeing how the

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<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein *On Certainty* §141.

categories and structure of thought, our theoretical problematic, constrains as well as facilitates our actions and values. We need a paradigm that can accept and speak of the environmental (and human) values which are currently too easily excluded, which are, in many cases, literally *unthinkable*.

To engage with these three inter-linking themes (theory, ideology and the situated individual subject), it is necessary to go into the theoretical relations which have been thought to pertain between them in some depth. Chapter 3 sets out Althusser's anti-humanist theory which places these three components together. The chapters which follow expand upon and redraw this problematic to provide a more sophisticated, but still preliminary, account. The remainder of this chapter and the whole of the next will try and provide an adequate setting for the debate between humanists and anti-humanists.

### Humanism and the Environment

The links between humanism and our relations to the natural environment are well expressed by Kate Soper, who states:-

“... a profound confidence in our powers to come to know and thereby to control our environment and destiny lies at the heart of every humanism. In this sense, we must acknowledge a continuity of theme, however warped it may have become with the passage of time, between the Renaissance celebration of the freedom of humanity from any transcendental hierarchy or cosmic order, the Enlightenment faith

in reason and its powers, and the social engineering advocated by contemporary scientific humanists.”<sup>8</sup>

The continuity and coherence of humanism as an ideology is partly explained by the long and common history which this family of humanist traits has shared. As John Passmore has pointed out, the roots of certain humanist distinctions go deep into the Graeco-Christian heritage of European society.

“... the Stoic-Christian tradition has insisted on the absolute uniqueness of man, [sic] a uniqueness particularly manifest, according to Christianity, in the fact that he alone, in Karl Barth's words has been addressed by God ... but also... apparent in his capacity for rational communication.”<sup>9</sup>

This history is reflected in the use of the term “humanism” to refer to the revival of classical Roman and Greek Scholarship which preceded and developed with the Renaissance. It is no accident that the rise of humanism is associated with the recovery of ancient classics; that these products of past *city* states were able to inform the inhabitants of late mediaeval *cities*. Humanistic assumptions were common amongst the works of the rediscovered ancients with their emphasis on humanity's special nature and dignity, on humanity as the measure and measurer of all things. In both cases the humanistic assumption of a qualitative distinction between the human and the natural sphere came easily to those whose contact with nature was limited to the confines of the city and who saw in their own creations something apart from the inhuman otherness of nature.

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<sup>8</sup> Soper *op. cit.*, n. 5 above, p. 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> John Passmore 'Attitudes to Nature'.

Ehrenfeld places too many restrictions on his use of the term “humanism” in order to give credence to his religious analogy. By stating that humanism, as he uses the term, makes no reference to the study of the humanities nor to the study of the classic texts of the ancient world he inadvertently confines the scope of his analysis. These alternative associations are part and parcel of the humanist paradigm. The insights of the classical scholars acted as an intellectual catalyst for Italian scholars, and consequently our own present world views. In Charles Singer’s slightly overstated terms “[w]ith that [humanist] reconstruction Greece lived again, the modern world was ushered in, and modern science, arts, literature and philosophy were born.”<sup>10</sup> By excluding examination of the genetic links between these uses he obscures from view the specifically European historical and cultural context in which this now global humanist ideology originated.

The Humanist thinkers of the Renaissance included such figures as Alberto Mussato, Geri d’ Arrezzo and Petrarch. Most of the scholars associated with humanism were not atheistic, as one current use of the term “humanism” might suggest, but frequently married an intense religiosity with more anthropocentric intellectual concerns.<sup>11</sup> However, they all placed humanity in a pivotal position. As the historian A. G. Dickens writes, “..the thinkers of the humanist mainstream saw man [sic] as a comprehensible being standing midway between God and the lower orders of nature.”<sup>12</sup> Humanism

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Singer *A Short History of Scientific Ideas to 1900* p. 192.

<sup>11</sup> Thus A. G. Dickens states that “By any standards Petrarch must be called a Christian.” *The Age of Humanism and Reformation* p. 11. H. J. Blackham equates humanism with the denial of supernatural authority *Humanism*.

<sup>12</sup> Dickens *ibid.*, p. 5.

developed as a philosophical and literary ethos in late fourteenth and early fifteenth century Italy. Over the following decades and centuries the ideas of the Italian humanists spread outwards to form the basis of a genuinely European culture:<sup>13</sup> a culture which, though adapting and developing in response to particular locales and traditions on its journey, began to express that family of interlinked assumptions and presuppositions which still dominate our Western outlook today.

Humanist ideology now permeates our culture - it exerts a hegemonic influence in all spheres of life. Those of us concerned for the non-human world, and for those humans (primarily the poor) who suffer most from environmental degradation, may wish to extirpate, or at least alleviate, its baleful influences. But it is necessary to avoid naive generalisations about humanism. First, we must avoid any tendency to reify 'humanism' as an essential object of study. Whilst retaining the term as a useful shorthand, we must always relate those aspects which we have identified as humanist to their social, historical and theoretical context.

Second, it must be obvious that not all of humanism's presuppositions have had uniformly evil results. For example, systems of ethics based upon humanist presuppositions, like utilitarianism, originally promoted the expansion of civil liberties. The rise of the natural sciences, which forms such an important facet of humanism's ascendancy, has produced many benefits in terms of life expectancy, health etc. Of course these benefits have also entailed costs in other areas, but my aim in criticising humanism as an ideology is not to decry its achievements *en masse*. My argument is rather

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed account of the spread of Italian humanism into Britain see R. Weiss *Humanism in England During the Fifteenth Century*.

that the tenets of humanism are part and parcel of an anthropocentric ethos which is largely unsuitable for tackling our current *environmental* crisis.

Third, humanism is not, as I use the term, equivalent to “modernity”.

Although humanism provides the dominant ideological framework for modern Western society it has been constantly opposed by a number of equally modern traditions of thought and political action. Here one might note the very selective way in which ancient Greek texts were used to bolster the new humanist faith in progress. The tension which Walter Benjamin identified between technological / managerial ‘progress’ and moral decline also existed in the writings of the ancients.

“...the view that technological advance had been accompanied by moral failure or moral regress was at least as widely held in antiquity as it is at present... Some went further and posited a direct causal relation between the two: for them technological advance had actually induced moral decay, and was thus not a blessing but a curse - a line of thought which issued logically in an extreme form of primitivism.”<sup>14</sup>

These tensions between humanist and anti-humanist features have been an integral part of the outlook of European thought and occur over and over again in different forms; in the Romantics’ rebellion against the Enlightenment conception of reason, in the pessimism of Western Marxism faced with a triumphant capitalism, and in the current rejection of economic rationality by radical greens. In this sense the dialectic between humanist assumptions and anti-humanism is a feature of “modernity”, its institutions and its world-views.

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<sup>14</sup> E. R. Dodds *The Ancient Concept of Progress and Other Essays in Greek Literature*  
p. 2.

## Environmental Anti-Humanism

Ehrenfeld is certainly not alone in seeing humanism, or at least some aspects of it, as implicated in environmental destruction, but other writers have chosen to emphasise different components of that complex family of interlinking presuppositions offered above. I shall outline a few examples which explicitly link the humanist assumptions listed above with the exploitation of 'nature', and then set out the accounts of this relationship provided by Max Weber and the Frankfurt School. As we shall see, the emphasis placed upon these various humanist presuppositions differs from analysis to analysis and few would include all of the features I have listed. For example, whereas Ehrenfeld has little to say about the individual subject this is the focus of Gary Snyder's critique.

"American society (like any other) has its own set of unquestioned assumptions. It still maintains a largely artificial faith in the notion of continually unfolding progress. It cleaves to the idea that there can be unblemished scientific objectivity. And most fundamentally it operates under the delusion that we are a kind of "solitary knower" - that we exist as rootless intelligences without layers of localised contexts. Just a 'self' and the 'world'." <sup>15</sup>

Snyder argues that the development of the now commonplace egocentric conception of the human subject, the subject as unitary and wholly autonomous producer of thoughts and values, is far from being a universal norm. This subject is the product of a specific history and society which

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<sup>15</sup> Gary Snyder *The Practice of the Wild* p. 60. This atomistic humanist subject is criticised in chapter 7.

originated in Europe and drew upon Greek and Christian roots. Snyder, like John Passmore and Lynn White Jnr. before him, sees this privileging of the subject over the metaphysically separated object, the external world, as profoundly influential in the devaluation of nature. The subject / object dichotomy, it is argued, goes hand in hand with the culture / nature division and in both cases it is the former aspect which assumes the privileged mantle as the locus of all values.<sup>16</sup>

Whilst humanism may have had its origins in antiquity and been reborn in the Renaissance, its philosophical apotheosis occurred in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, in the work of Descartes and the later Enlightenment thinkers. Descartes explicitly states that the aim of his philosophy is to enable us to "...make ourselves masters and possessors of nature."<sup>17</sup> In Cartesian dualism a rigid subject / object dichotomy goes hand in hand with a culture / nature division which privileges the human at the cost of making nature both separable and exploitable. Indeed David Pepper goes so far as to say that the blame for the separation of humanity from nature lies squarely upon Descartes' shoulders.

"Cartesian dualism involved mind and matter, subject and object, and it had a profound implication for the man-nature relationship because nature became composed of objects metaphysically separated from man... It was this dualism, rather than any specifically Christian doctrine, which paved the way for a man-nature separation in which

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<sup>16</sup> Lynn White Jnr. 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis' pp.1203-1207. John Passmore *Man's Responsibility for Nature passim*.

<sup>17</sup> Rene Descartes *Discourse on Method* quoted in James Collins *Descartes' Philosophy of Nature* p. 31.

the former was conceived of as superior to the latter.”<sup>18</sup>

The “solitary knower” is also regarded as a central feature of modern destructive society by those influenced by post-modern philosophy, although here Descartes is seen as representative of a broader ‘modernist’ epistemology rather than of humanism. Thus Jim Cheney speaks scathingly of “[t]he modernist period in philosophy with its creation of absolute subjectivity...”<sup>19</sup>

For Enlightenment thinkers working against the background of Cartesian philosophy, whether they be Kant, Locke, Rousseau, or Hobbes, reason was a feature common to all human minds, a distinguishing faculty of the human species which, when exercised properly, could command universal agreement on substantive matters.

“..the emphasis on reason declares that man’s acts are those of a *thinking* subject guided by conceptual knowledge. With concepts as his instruments, the thinking subject can penetrate the contingencies and recondite devices of the world and reach universal and necessary laws that govern and order..”<sup>20</sup>

Given certain conditions, reason would ensure that we all came to the same,

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<sup>18</sup> David Pepper *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism* p. 51-52.

<sup>19</sup> Jim Cheney ‘Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as Bioregional Narrative’. Cheney, contra Pepper, argues that Cartesian philosophy was ‘a long time in the making’ and is as much a symptom as a cause of modernism. Insofar as Cheney’s target is ‘modernism’ rather than humanism his focus is too broad and misses some of the complexities and contradictions present between modern ideologies. (See chapter 8.)

<sup>20</sup> Herbert Marcuse *Reason and Revolution* p. 254.

true, conclusions.<sup>21</sup> The faith placed in reason by Enlightenment thinkers was explicitly linked to other aspects of the humanist paradigm. For example Kant could say:-

“As the single being upon earth that possesses understanding, and, consequently, a capacity for setting before himself ends of his deliberate choice he [man] is certainly titular lord of nature, and, supposing we regard nature as a teleological system, he is born to be its ultimate end.”<sup>22</sup>

Here Kant explicitly supports a division of humanity from nature and, whilst privileging the former, expresses a teleological and anthropocentric conception of history and endows the human subject with a faculty of reason which enables him to make autonomous choices.

Robin Attfield chooses to emphasise yet another of the features listed above, namely, the belief in linear progress found in many Enlightenment thinkers and its subsequent permutations in later systems of thought.

“...the attitude in large measure responsible for environmental degradation in East and West has been the belief in perennial material progress inherited from the Enlightenment and the German metaphysicians, as modified in the West by the classical economists and sociologists, by liberal individualism and by Social Darwinism and in Eastern Europe by the unquestioned deference accounted to

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<sup>21</sup> These conditions might require, for example, that the people making such judgments were not rationally impaired. A weaker concept of neutral reason might allow that two parties might *rationally* disagree because of their possession of differing background beliefs but still claim that certain arguments followed a universal underlying logic whilst others did not.

<sup>22</sup> Immanuel Kant *Critique of Judgment* p. 94.

Marx and Engels.”<sup>23</sup>

Whichever aspect of the Enlightenment tradition one chooses to identify as the primary source of our current predicament, the accounts above identify two aspects which seem to me to be both particularly important and closely interlinked. The first is the meteoric rise in the importance of “reason” which, as this Enlightenment conception gained ground and hurried the demise of religion and other sources of objective values, came to play a major foundational role in Western thought. The second is the concept of the human subject as a free and autonomous being who was also the locus of the rational faculty. This conception of the individual which is, for example, that of Hobbes and Locke, originated in a social critique of feudalism from the standpoint of an emergent capitalist society.<sup>24</sup> Its sources within this social formation are actually very diverse and complicated but, broadly outlined, this atomistic subject retains a central role in most humanist problematics.<sup>25</sup> (See especially chapters 2 and 7 of this essay.)

Ecofeminists like Carolyn Merchant have pointed out the close relationship between subject / object and nature / culture dichotomies and the

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<sup>23</sup> Robin Attfield *The Ethic of Environmental Concern* p. 83. Strangely, having charted the pervasive nature of this doctrine, Attfield seems to believe that one can simply reject these influences in favour of a unitary ethic based upon a reinterpretation of Judeo-Christian traditions.

<sup>24</sup> In Marxist analysis the dualisms of bourgeois thought are traced back to the fundamental contradiction between “use value” and “exchange value” which characterises the commodification of social production in capitalist societies. See Georg Lukács ‘The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought’ in *History and Class Consciousness* pp. 110-148.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Taylor has produced a detailed account of the genesis of our modern conceptions of the individual self in his *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. See also C. B. MacPherson *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism Hobbes to Locke*.

homologous privileging of the male / female couple. For example, the devaluation of women can occur through an identical form of economism to that applied to nature “..the domination of women and nature is inherent in the market economy’s use of both as resources.”<sup>26</sup> She makes further connections between “gender”, “reason”, “science” and the destruction of nature and rejects the idea that “The Earth is to be dominated by male-centered and male-controlled technology, science and industry.”<sup>27</sup>

Feminists have also begun to point out the connections between the neutral conception of reason utilised in the humanist framework and androcentrism. They argue that rationality, as currently defined, is far from being an essential and transcendental feature of human nature. Instead, as Genevieve Lloyd argues, it is an aspect peculiar to our own European male dominated cultural *milieu*.

“Reason has figured in Western culture not only in the assessment of beliefs, but also in the assessment of character. It is incorporated not just into our criteria of truth, but also into our understanding of what it is to be a person at all, of the requirements which must be met to be a good person, and of the proper relations between our status as knowers and the rest of our lives.”<sup>28</sup>

The ‘good person’ is in fact, Lloyd claims, defined almost entirely in masculine terms. Lloyd’s position does not lead to a rejection of reason *per se* but rather to a reflexive awareness of the values inherent in our current

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<sup>26</sup> Carolyn Merchant ‘Ecofeminism and Feminist Theory’ p. 100. *Ecofeminisme* was a term apparently first used by Franscoise d’Eaubonne in 1974.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101. See also Merchant’s *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* and Andrée Collard & Joyce Contrucci *Rape of the Wild: Men’s Violence Against Animals and Earth*.

<sup>28</sup> Genevieve Lloyd *The Man of Reason: Male and Female in Western Philosophy* p. xi.

conception of reason and the restrictions imposed by such reason on those who use it. These often astute comments by environmentalists and ecofeminists do not, however, attest to a universal awareness and rejection of humanist paradigms in environmental ethics. Far from it. Humanist assumptions still form the unquestioned starting points for the vast majority of works on environmental values.

Many 'environmental' philosophers continue to work entirely within utilitarian or deontological frameworks soaked in such humanist assumptions. They continue to hold fast to the idea that nature is a set of external objects perceived and valued by a self-conscious human subject separated from nature by essential differences. They refuse to see reason as anything other than a neutral investigative tool with which we can formulate culturally and historically transcendent systems of ethical values. Utilitarians try to expand the applicability of a hedonistic calculus to non-human groups. Deontologists similarly attempt to determine those essential features which are to carry moral rights. As the next chapter shows, there are serious flaws in both these approaches. Encouragingly, there does now seem to be something of a consensus amongst radical environmentalists about the intimate links between the features listed above, although there is also much debate about the relative import of particular humanist dichotomies. Thus, where Pepper sees the subject / object divide as the initial and critical dichotomy leading to the devaluation of nature, Attfield claims that the concept of progress is all important and ecofeminists argue that it is the male / female division which takes priority. Although these debates are not without import, I believe that they are the philosophical equivalents of "chicken or the egg" questions.

It seems likely that all these divisions, mind / world, male / female, culture / nature etc., have developed together in the context of European history and Europe's encounters with the wider world. Together they form a closely interlinked family of humanist presuppositions and have become, in many respects, inseparable from each other. They reinforce each other, for the most part, but are not completely at ease in each other's company. Those who occupy places which bring home the force of one or other of these dichotomies, e.g. women oppressed in a male dominated society, come to experience this particular aspect of humanism as the primary axis of oppression. However, feminists frequently recognise links with other aspects of humanism and this recognition provides the basis upon which to build alliances with other oppressed groups and an oppressed and devalued 'nature'.

These characterisations of humanism and its relation to the devaluation of the natural environment also seem to beg another kind of question. We need to be clear here about why such analyses of the writings of a few philosophers and their arguments might be important. For example, Langdon Winner finds Passmore's and White's theses on the intellectual roots of the domination of nature unsatisfactory because they give no account of how explicit ideas, found in the writings of philosophers from the stoics onwards, actually came to influence a wider society. Indeed he sees this as a problem "...endemic to writings on the domination of nature" generally.<sup>29</sup> A related point has been made by Andrew Brennan, who argues that we must look for a much wider variety of influences than simply philosophical and theological outlooks.

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<sup>29</sup> Langdon Winner *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought* p. 115.

“...[A]ny thorough analysis of attitudes to nature... will look at the impact of theology, the life sciences, the physical science, artists, poets, moralists, philosophers, farming practice and agricultural technology, patterns of trade, the relative role of different social classes, and a whole host of other data.”<sup>30</sup>

It is not simply a case of providing a plausible link between philosophers' ideas and society's attitudes. The problem is not one of finding causal links between the *idea* of a subordinate nature and its implementation in destructive *practices*. Nor is it simply a question of providing more detailed descriptions of those links, although these may both be important. We need to ask how the explanations and reasoned arguments theoreticians provide actually relate to our practical life within the world. It is a question of the role of theoretical concepts and their place in the social and environmental fabric, in other words a question of epistemology and *ideology*. (See especially chapters 3 and 4). It is also, at the same time, a question of how values and taxonomies are internalised by human individuals and then re-externalised; of the creation of particular individual subjects in social and environmental structures and the production of these structures by social and individual actions. (See especially chapters 3, 7, 8 and 9.) Here again *ideology* plays a pivotal role.

The philosophical theses of humanism should not be taken simply as the causes of our attitudes and values - although they may well be one aspect in the formation of such dispositions. Theory cannot be seen in isolation from other aspects of society. That a society comes to denigrate or respect nature is due to the particular system of social relations operating within that society

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<sup>30</sup> Andrew Brennan *Thinking About Nature: An Investigation of Nature, Value, and Ecology* p. 135.

and between that society and the environment. There is a constant dialectic between theory and other aspects of society. The argument of this thesis is that these issues can best be resolved through an approach which understands language, and hence theory, as parts of social practices. On this point I agree with Charles Taylor that the central features of the modern subject

“... arose because changes in the self-understandings connected with a wide range of practices - religious, political, economic, familial, intellectual, artistic - converged and reinforced each other to produce it.”<sup>31</sup>

Once begun, this process can produce a positive feedback from practice to theory and back again. It is this type of dialectic, widened to involve the natural environment as an active participant influencing social practices, which will be the subject of the work which follows. However, it is first necessary to investigate further the interrelation between the production of the self and the forms of rationality found in Western society.

### Rationality and Humanism

The social theory of Max Weber focused upon the need to explain “...the ‘specific and peculiar rationalisation’ that distinguishes modern Western civilisation from every other.”<sup>32</sup> In this sense Weber is *the* sociologist of

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<sup>31</sup> Taylor *op. cit.*, n. 25 above, p. 206.

<sup>32</sup> Rogers Brubaker *The Limits of Rationality: An Essay on the Social and Moral Thought of Max Weber* p. 1.

modernity *par excellence*, as a number of recent texts have testified.<sup>33</sup>

The complexities and nuances of Weber's multi-faceted conception of rationalisation are well documented by Kahlberg.<sup>34</sup> But, for our present purposes it suffices to say that rationalisation is associated with the decline of religion and the secularisation of the world, which in Western society at least (for the process varies in different societies), goes hand in glove with the rise of science and the extension of scientific methodologies and world-views. Rationalisation spreads into all sections of society, including economics, law, politics, ethics and even music, and as it does so it produces the disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) of the world.<sup>35</sup> Those things which had previously been value-laden and mysterious come to lose their inherent value and be seen only as means to particular ends. Human activity in all its forms becomes regulated and formalised in explicit rules and laws, and becomes subject to criteria of calculability. This process has implications at the level both of the individual and of society. At the individual level, people come, via self-reflection, to act on the basis of instrumentality, treating things as means to their own particular ends whatever they might be; this Weber terms "subjective rationality". At the level of society, rules and systems of calculation are developed to facilitate social exchange in an increasingly depersonalised sphere. Weber is the first social theorist to give a detailed

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<sup>33</sup> See for example Dirk Käsler *Max Weber: An Introduction to his Life and Work* Oxford: Polity Press 1988 and the essays collected in Sam Whimster and Scott Lash eds., *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity*. (Though Gunther Roth gives a more guarded appraisal of Weber in his essay in this volume.)

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Kalberg *Max Weber's Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analysis of Rationalisation Processes in History*.

<sup>35</sup> Kalberg claims that *Entzauberung* has a very specific context in Weber's discussions of religion, but almost all other commentators express the wider application of the term outlined here. *ibid.*

account of the relation between the development of a subjective rationality, that is the conscious reflection on one's individual aims, with a social and formal rationality, the supra-individual processes by which particular types of explicit rational structures ramify throughout the social arena. In this way he links together two of the central features of modern humanism, its conception of the subject as autonomous and self-interested, and the increasing role played by instrumental reason in the public sphere. Weber refers to the production of these twin components of modern Western society as particular instances of the process of rationalisation.

“By emphasising the historical connection between new forms of institutionalised control over men and a new ethos of self-control, between institutionalised discipline and self-discipline, Weber supplements institutional with psychological analysis in an effort to clarify the relation between social structure and personality.”<sup>36</sup>

It may initially appear somewhat paradoxical that the rationalisation of values, via formal rationality, occurs at the same time as the recognition of a radical break between reason and value. This is not so puzzling when one realises that the fragmentation of social practices, which accompanies the increasing complexity of modern societies, reduces the possibility for shared values within society as a whole. Values formed by the individual's immersion in innumerable separate practices become increasingly incommensurable. The only shared assumptions left for rationality to work upon are those of (in my terminology) humanism, i.e. the alienated experience of individualism which this fragmentation of society gives rise to. Ironically “reason” and “individuality” become the only extensive grounds of

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<sup>36</sup> Brubaker *op. cit.*, n. 32 above, p. 35.

communality upon which society-wide values can be founded.

Weber refers to society's recourse to calculus and formal rules as "formal rationality" and distinguishes this from "substantive rationality" which always includes particular value commitments. An example of the latter might be reflecting upon the best (most rational) method to further animal rights or freedom of speech. Modern Western society is, according to Weber, peculiar in the fact that it has become dominated by formal rationality, by a rationality that has no communal substantive content but comes to regulate the life of its citizens with its own internal logic of enhancing efficiency and calculability.

Formal rationality has important implications for Western society as it becomes increasingly dominated by bureaucratic and economic structures. Substantive rationality always implies that values and background beliefs are important and integral parts of rational choice. This perspectival view entails that groups with different backgrounds will occupy different value spheres and often see each others actions as irrational. "Underlying Weber's emphasis on the limits of rationality is the idea that irreconcilable value conflict is inevitable in the modern social world."<sup>37</sup> This value conflict can be resolved only by society's recourse to formal rationality.

Formal rationality claims to be a value-free field of abstract reasoning which embodies no substantive claims, i.e. a neutral rationality able to overcome perspectival differences. A fragmented society thus finds its public sphere ever more reliant upon formal rationality in all its forms.<sup>38</sup> Yet this formal rationality, by its application of abstract calculation and its promulgation of

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> See also chapter 9.

fixed laws, comes to seriously distort the values held by individuals and communities within that society. For, from a substantive perspective, the application of formal rationality is simply irrational, i.e. it cannot recognise the values which are an inherent part of the substantive rational process. There is thus always a tension between formal and substantive rationality. For example, within the terms of financial efficiency recognised by formal economic reasoning the production of ozone destroying chemicals should continue despite the fact that it will inevitably cause the death of thousands from skin cancer, destroy plants etc.

Weber identifies a variety of features as responsible for the development and hegemony of formal rationality. Foremost amongst these are the development of capitalism and its associated economic rationale and monetary calculus, and the burgeoning successes of mathematics and abstract theories in the natural sciences. The pressure to extend these methodologies and their accompanying ideologies to other spheres of society became overwhelming. These developments in technology and business and the consequent diversification of society, led to the alienation of individuals from their traditional cultures and values. All that was necessary to develop modernity in its present form was a re-orientation of the individuals composing society so as to accept the right of formal rationality to govern their lives. Weber saw the “this worldly” and self-reflexive aspects of the Protestantism which developed in Europe from the Sixteenth century onwards as the necessary catalyst for the internalisation of this process of rationalisation.

“Science, and modern rationality more generally, represents the Puritan obsession with calculation, impersonal rules and self-

discipline without the Puritan belief in their divine origin. It is Puritan epistemology without Puritan ontology.”<sup>39</sup>

Rationalisation takes different forms in different spheres of life, e.g. juridically formalised laws in a legal system, or bureaucratic administration in government. However, such formal systems reduce human beings and the wider environment to mere objects, resources, or figures in calculations. (As we shall see, this has obvious relevance to the reductive economism of such people as Pearce and Beckerman and is also explicitly present in fields like “human resource management”.)

In one respect at least Weber was aligned with ethical humanism, i.e. he was convinced of the subjective origins of values (value-orientations) which were both generated in and internal properties of human subjects. Hence the need he felt for the appearance of Protestantism to account for the psychological acceptance of formal rationality at the individual level. However Weber also introduced the concept of ‘value-spheres’ which he associated with the production of particular sets of value norms, often irreconcilable with each other. These value spheres are levels of practical activity which are relatively self-contained, e.g. politics, art etc., and in

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<sup>39</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander ‘The Dialectic of Individuation and Domination: Weber’s Rationalisation Theory and Beyond’ p. 191. This connection between modern Western society and the emergence of our current conception of the autonomous humanist individual was made by Marx. “Only in the eighteenth century, in ‘civil society’, do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as an external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also that of the hitherto most developed social (from this standpoint, general) relations. The human being is in the most literal sense a *zoon politikon*, not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society. Production by an isolated individual outside society ....is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living *together* and talking to each other.” Karl Marx General *Grundrisse* p. 84.

allowing those engaged in these activities to develop certain specific outlooks he seems to have produced a precursor to later anti-humanist conceptions of value.<sup>40</sup> For Weber, these value-laden backgrounds, acquired through the individual's membership of particular social practices, are not open to judgment by reason but form the unquestioned bedrock of our values.

“These value constellations, even though for Weber they are themselves largely manifestations of “*irrational*” historical, economic, political, and even geographical forces... constitute rationally consistent world views to which individuals may orient their action in all spheres of life.”<sup>41</sup>

Weber's analysis of the increasing dependency of modern society upon formal rationality serves as a springboard for later critiques of modernity and humanism. Weber himself had an ambivalent attitude towards the process of rationalisation. He thought that it had brought undoubted benefits, not just in terms of scientific advancement or social organisation, but in terms of the greater freedoms enjoyed by the majority of those living in systems dominated by self-reflexive rather than hierarchical religious world views. On the other hand the growth of formal rationality now threatened the individual with new forms of domination and oppression by ordering her life according to rules of efficiency rather than according to her needs. The same rationality which made individuality, as we now recognise it, a possibility also, paradoxically, threatens its demise as substantive rationality becomes marginalised in the public sphere.

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<sup>40</sup> See chapter 2.

<sup>41</sup> Kahlberg *op. cit.*, n. 34 above, p.1170.

Weber's ambivalence towards the rationalisation process turns into a passionate repudiation of its totalitarian aspects by the Frankfurt School, a group of Marxist social theorists grouped around the Institute for Social Research.<sup>42</sup> These writers, including Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, recognise a trend in modern society towards that rationalised totalitarianism in which Weber referred to as the "iron cage" of capitalism. Convinced of the power of formal rationality in its unholy alliance with capitalism and the mass media they seemed to many unable to offer any practical alternatives or hope for the future. Their bleak prognosis led some critics, like Perry Anderson, to view their entire work as a depressing and unproductive chapter in Marxist history. "For, no matter how otherwise heteroclit, they share one fundamental emblem: a common and latent *pessimism*."<sup>43</sup> However pessimistic the Frankfurt School may have been (and in terms of environmental concerns there seem plenty of reasons for being so) even Anderson has to agree that they were before their time in opposing the destruction of the natural environment. "Adorno and Horkheimer called into question the very idea of man's ultimate mastery of nature."<sup>44</sup> Indeed this domination of nature is explained in terms very similar to those discussed above. As Martin Jay puts it.

"At the root of the Enlightenment's program of domination, Horkheimer and Adorno charged, was a secularised version of the religious belief

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<sup>42</sup> For an introductory account of the Frankfurt School see Tom Bottomore *The Frankfurt School*. For more detailed accounts see David Held *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* or Martin Jay *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950*. See also Zoltan Tar *The Frankfurt School: The Critical Theory of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno* and Susan J. Hekman's chapter on critical theory in her *Max Weber and Contemporary Social Theory*.

<sup>43</sup> Perry Anderson *Considerations on Western Marxism* p. 88.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, p. 89.

that God controlled the world. As a result, the human subject confronted the natural object as an inferior, external other. At least primitive animism, for all its lack of self-consciousness, had expressed an awareness of the interpenetration of the two spheres [the human and the natural]. This was totally lost in Enlightenment thought, where the world was seen as composed of lifeless, fungible atoms..."<sup>45</sup>

The Frankfurt School's debt to Weber is most obvious in the work of Max Horkheimer, in particular in his *Eclipse of Reason*.<sup>46</sup> Here Horkheimer writes of that same process of the formalisation of reason, which he terms "subjective reason", in modern society.<sup>47</sup> He counterpoises this to "objective reason" which although similar to Weber's substantive rationality, insofar as it also includes value orientations, differs in that Horkheimer seems committed to claiming that it is possible to produce a theoretical totality within which one might mediate between the values and goals of different spheres of society. From Horkheimer's perspective, the exclusion of communication between value spheres in Weber's analysis is too relativistic.<sup>48</sup>

According to Horkheimer, following the Enlightenment, objective rationality has turned inward upon itself in a critique of its own pretensions to objectivity and "liquefied itself" undercutting its own claims. Reason is no longer seen

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<sup>45</sup> Jay *op. cit.*, n. 42 above, p. 260.

<sup>46</sup> Max Horkheimer *Eclipse of Reason*.

<sup>47</sup> This should not be confused with Weber's more specific use of "subjective rationality". See page 34 above.

<sup>48</sup> Horkheimer states, "Max Weber ... adhered so definitely to the subjectivistic trend that he did not conceive of any rationality - not even a 'substantial' one by which man can discriminate one end from another". *op. cit.*, n. 46 above, p.6n. Here he seems to foreshadow Habermas' conception of communicative reason (action). See Jurgen Habermas' *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science and Politics* chapter 6. See also Habermas' criticisms of Adorno and Horkheimer in lecture 5 of *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.

as an objective principle but becomes a subjective faculty of the mind, a tool for one's own purposes, i.e. only subjective reason remains.

“Man has gradually become less dependent upon absolute standards of conduct, universally binding ideals. He is held to be so completely free that he needs no standards except his own. Paradoxically, however, this increase of independence has led to a parallel increase of passivity....Economic and social forces take on the character of blind natural powers that man, in order to preserve himself, must dominate by adjusting himself to them. As the end result of this process, we have on the one hand the self, the absolute ego emptied of all substance except its attempt to transform everything in heaven and earth into means for its preservation, and on the other hand an empty nature degraded to mere material, mere stuff to be dominated.”<sup>49</sup>

This passage nicely ties together some of the features of humanism, in particular the dominance of formal rationality and the particular humanist conception of the subject with the domination of nature. Formal rationality, epitomised by the supposedly value-free methodologies of economics, utilitarianism, etc., originally just a means of coordinating the complexities of modern society, comes to produce its own moral criteria, those of efficiency, growth etc. and to exclude any values outside of its remit. These issues were followed up further in the work of Herbert Marcuse, who again saw formal (or abstract) rationality as dangerous to both humanity and nature. “Abstract reason becomes concrete in the calculable and calculated

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<sup>49</sup>Horkheimer *ibid.*, p. 97.

domination of nature and man.”<sup>50</sup>

Marcuse's work makes explicit some further connections between the features of humanism outlined above. In particular he is interested in the role of science and technology and the forms of rationality which accompany them in producing a society with only “one dimension” - a society where it becomes impossible to think outside of the limits imposed by these rationales.<sup>51</sup>

“One-dimensionality” refers to the increasing ability of modern industrial

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<sup>50</sup> Herbert Marcuse *Negations*. The recognition and repudiation of the disenchantment due to formal rationality is common not only to writers on the left of the political spectrum but amongst conservative commentators too. Thus Michael Oakshott picks out almost identical points in characterising rationalisation. He claims that “...the Rationalist never doubts the power of his ‘reason’ (when properly applied) to determine the worth of a thing, the truth of an opinion, or the propriety of an action. Moreover he is fortified by a belief in a ‘reason’ common to all mankind, a common power of rational consideration... he is also something of an individualist... He has no sense of the culmination of experience, only of the readiness of experience when it has been converted to a formula...” *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* pp.1-2.

<sup>51</sup> Douglas Kellner states in his introduction to Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man :Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* p. xxvii.“Marcuse's theory presupposes the existence of a human subject with freedom, creativity, and self-determination which stands in opposition to an object-world, perceived as substance...” To this extent Marcuse must be deemed to be in the humanist camp. Marcuse sees critical theory as “...a theory which analyses society in the light of its used and unused or abused capacities for improving the human condition.” Marcuse *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* p. xlii. In these senses, as holding a rigid distinction between nature and humanity and in his emphasis on the individual subject, he is squarely within the mainstream humanist tradition. “Socialism is objectively ‘humanism’ by virtue of its specific place in the development of industrial society.” Herbert Marcuse ‘Socialist Humanism?’ in Erich Fromm ed., *Socialist Humanism* p. 100.

What so shocked his contemporaries was the extent to which he rejected technocentric perspectives and beliefs in the efficacy of scientific ‘progress’.

society to confine the thoughts of its citizens within the very narrow limits imposed by a self-perpetuating instrumental rationality. Science with its belief in itself as rationality personified, sole arbiter of truth about the world, embodies in its dominant positivist and empiricist philosophies both a patently representationalist epistemology and an all encompassing ideology with which it justifies itself. Epistemology is important here for as Anthony Giddens puts it,

“...in instrumental reason truth concerns correspondence not contradiction, and truth (or 'fact') is separated from values. Thus values cannot be rationally justified in relation to the objective world, but become matters of subjective assessment. Instrumental reason is supposedly wholly neutral in respect of values, but actually preserves as an overriding value the one-dimensional world of technical progress.”<sup>52</sup>

Technological change becomes an end in itself. In this quest for increased efficiency and material gain the scientific society feeds its ever more hungry furnaces with fuel composed of the surrounding natural environment. At the same time it excludes from its citizens the possibility of questioning its aims, methods or values. Marcuse claims that our thought is constrained by the ideological structure of society. We cannot think what we like, we can only think within the limits which our already given social and historical background allows. Formal rationality, as expressed in economic and scientific efficiency, maintains very strict limits on such thought. It entails “..the repression of all values, aspirations and ideas which cannot be defined in terms of the operations and attitudes of the prevailing forms of rationality.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Anthony Giddens *Profiles and Criticisms in Social Theory*. 149. This is not Giddens's own opinion but his explication of Marcuse's.

<sup>53</sup> Douglas Kellner, Introduction to Herbert Marcuse *One-Dimensional Man* p.xii.

However, this does not mean that we simply have to become reflections of that ideology, perfectly integrated with its destructive and unsustainable assumptions. We can also remold and alter those ideological presuppositions within certain practical limits. We can produce “critical theories” to inform our practical opposition to the status quo. (Always remembering that there would be little point inventing utopias which had no bearing on present society.) The critical element, the deconstruction of ideology (*negative dialectics*) has to be practically applicable. To reiterate, “...the position of theory cannot be one of mere speculation. It must be a historical position in the sense that it must be grounded on the capabilities of the given society.”<sup>54</sup>

This chapter has given an account of various aspects of that which I termed “humanism” and pointed out certain possible theoretical understandings of the connections between them. Many of these issues will be taken up in more depth after an account of Louis Althusser’s anti-humanism and its potential. First, however, we shall examine instrumental rationality as it is applied in the realm of environmental economics and in the axiologies of many humanist theories of environmental values.

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<sup>54</sup> Herbert Marcuse *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, p. xvii.

## CHAPTER 2: HUMANISM IN ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES

This chapter attempts to show how the various aspects of humanism identified in the last chapter are embodied in economic and ethical approaches to environmental values. Today, economics is the predominant branch of instrumental rationality and in its current theoretical form, “neoclassical economics” is inseparably connected with a view of the human individual as “free”, “equal” and “independent”. Such instrumental rationality also actively opposes ethical thought, at least insofar as ethical concerns lie outside of the gratification of *personal* desires. (See below chapter 7.) From the perspectives of Weber and Horkheimer the economisation of all values represents the culmination of the social processes which bring about the triumph of the subjective component of the subject / object dichotomy. Economics epitomises that “formal,” “subjective” and “instrumental” rationality which Weber recognised as “the specific and peculiar rationalism that distinguishes modern Western civilisation from every other.”<sup>1</sup>

### Environmental Economics

The growing discipline of environmental economics is perhaps the most blatant attempt to reduce the complexities of human / environmental relations to a uniform metric. The current tendency towards an overt economism of values is exemplified in such documents as David Pearce *et al* *Blueprint for a Green Economy*, originally a report for the Department of the Environment,

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<sup>1</sup> Rogers Brubaker *The Limits of Rationality: An Essay on the Social and Moral Thought of Max Weber* p. 1.

and Wilfred Beckerman *Pricing for Pollution*.<sup>2</sup> According to these economists money is the institutional form best able to express human interests. The report argues for the integration of environmental concerns into economic policy. Pearce *et al* regard economics as a theoretical methodology able to express the values underlying competing preferences, for example preferences for more roads or an unspoilt landscape. It is claimed that all 'rational' people would wish to maximise their satisfaction. In a finite world there are limits to preference satisfaction. To achieve maximum utility we must be able to measure people's preferences; money is presumed to provide this measure.

According to Pearce *et al* our past environmental problems have not been caused by economic rationality but rather by the lack of a market place for environmental services and concerns and by distorted accounting procedures. Once this structural problem has been rectified industrialists and developers will change their ways and we may leave environmental decisions largely to the free market. Accounting methods which previously regarded environmental damage as an "externality" simply need to be amended so that the economic value of habitats, species etc. can be entered into equations of costs and benefits. The environment's true economic value is to be determined by methods of contingent valuation. People will be presented with a hypothetical market and asked how much they are 'willing to pay' (W.T.P.) to protect any given environment or alternatively 'willing to accept' (W.T.A.) in recompense for the loss of environmental quality. These figures can then be entered into a cost benefit analysis alongside other more

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<sup>2</sup> David Pearce, Anil Markandya, Edward B. Barbier *Blueprint for a Green Economy*; Wilfred Beckerman *Pricing For Pollution*.

standard economic data. Thus, the economists say we have a 'rational' way of making decisions on environmental issues that takes all important factors into account.

However things are not so simple. Firstly, the figures that result from W.T.P. and W.T.A. surveys vary widely. People generally ask for much higher compensatory sums for losses than they are willing to pay for similar gains. Can both methods be appropriate if their results differ so much? Secondly, such monetarisation seems likely to reflect the depth of one's pocket rather than the depth of one's feeling. As one environmental economist critical of the over-extension of contingent valuation, Donald McAllister, has remarked, "cost and benefit are typically added without attempting to adjust for the likelihood that a dollar is valued differently by people at different income levels."<sup>3</sup>

More importantly, Pearce and his fellow economists ignore the fact that such studies in contingent valuation of environmental matters typically meet with a high proportion of protest bids and outright rejections of the hypothetical scenario. Sometimes up to 50% of those surveyed refused to take part in the survey or required huge sums of money as compensation.<sup>4</sup> These protest

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<sup>3</sup> Donald McAllister *Evaluation in Environmental Planning*.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Sagoff has played a prominent role in exposing abuses of cost benefit analysis. Mark Sagoff *The Economy of the Earth: Philosophy, Law, and the Environment*. However, Sagoff's analysis makes a distinction between subjective preferences amenable to economic comparison and objective concerns which "involve matters of knowledge, wisdom, morality, and taste that admit of better or worse, right and wrong, true and false..." *Ibid.*, p. 45. I do not believe that such a distinction can be rigidly upheld. Rather than seeing economic rationality, as Sagoff does, as a 'neutral' (though often callously indifferent) instrument, I hold that as a methodology it is already value laden and dependent upon a particular conception of human nature. It is never neutral.

bids are simply ignored by the analysts, who seem blithely unaware that many people do not share their conviction that environmental concerns can be expressed so easily in financial terms. As McAllister puts it,

“For years certain proponents of CBA [cost benefit analysis] have been selling it as a completely comprehensive evaluative method, capable of incorporating in its grand index all the factors important to public decisions .... But some of its serious limitations are inherent in its fallacious premise that all important human values can be adequately represented by money.”<sup>5</sup>

Pearce’s valuation techniques make a number of questionable humanist assumptions about what constitutes a ‘rational person’, about the nature of our values, and about our relations to our social and environmental surroundings. Beckerman and, to a lesser extent, Pearce *et al* represent an extreme, but unfortunately all too common, form taken by “humanist” anthropocentric attitudes. For example, many of the features detailed in the previous chapter can be recognised in the assumptions of environmental economics. Both Pearce and Beckerman think it unnecessary to question the use of nature as a human *resource*. We can also identify in Pearce and Beckerman that transcendental human subject which is everywhere and always presumed to be a selfish ego pursuing its own atomistic preferences. Neither economist shows any awareness of the ethnocentricity of this conception - that they are extrapolating a conception of human nature particular to elements of modern European society to produce a universal and unalterable idea of human nature. In this respect they are following an Enlightenment view of a fixed human nature as a solid and unalterable basis

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<sup>5</sup> McAllister *op. cit.*, n. 3 above, p. 143.

for values and rationality. Thus, Collingwood's rebuke of Hume applies equally to neoclassical economists.

"...Hume never shows the slightest suspicion that the human nature he is analysing in his philosophical work is the nature of a Western European in the early eighteenth century...He always assumes that *our* reasoning faculty, *our* tastes and sentiments, and so forth, are something perfectly uniform and invariable, underlying and conditioning all historical changes." <sup>6</sup>

Pearce and Beckerman's arguments explicitly assume a technical and instrumental account of 'reason' as a neutral instrument for reaching policy decisions. On their account economics is the *rational science* of social management. But, in their case, this technical rationality is compounded with a particular world-view which sees values as one-dimensional and reducible to a single metric. Their rationales are not neutral precisely because they exclude those perspectives and values which do not fit into their economic calculus. This form of rationality is supposed to be completely value free, but is rather valueless for it replaces the complexities of political, ethical and aesthetic values with a simple minded economism. This perspective sees emotion and reason as polarities of a universal dichotomy which echoes the fact / value distinction so beloved of post-enlightenment analytical philosophy. Thus Beckerman sees his own views as "cool" and "logical" as opposed to the "emotionally-charged reactions of the anti-growth school." <sup>7</sup> He is completely blind to his own humanist assumptions and values. In the economists' eyes we are simply calculating bundles of self-interested

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<sup>6</sup> R. G. Collingwood *The Idea of History* p. 83. Collingwood might however have added middle class, white, and male amongst the limitations affecting Hume's perspective.

<sup>7</sup> Beckerman *op. cit.*, n. 2 above, p. 22 & p. 29.

preferences; economic morons completely lacking in ethical or aesthetic sensibilities. This is simply not true. There are many areas of human life where we recognise that consumer preferences do not have a place. As Mark Sagoff remarks, few people would suggest that the outcome of murder trials should be decided upon a criterion of willingness to pay, and only the craziest of economists would argue for and against such issues as abortion and slavery on economic grounds.<sup>8</sup>

We can question this across the board application of economics, especially where ethical issues are concerned. For example, it is not possible for one to work out an economic value for someone one loves; to do so would be to treat them as a resource rather than a person. If asked the value of our grandmother we wouldn't institute a hypothetical market for aged relatives. We would quite rightly see the question as at least inappropriate if not downright evil. Nor are the values many of us place on the existence of rainforests and whales reducible to dollars and yen. Environmentalism requires the widening of our ethical and aesthetic concerns not just our preferences as consumers. The questions involved are not just about the allocation of resources but about morality and politics, about the very notion of treating 'nature' as a resource.

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<sup>8</sup> To be fair, the Pearce report itself does not envisage the *wholesale* application of market forces across the board. For example the suggestion that pollution permits should be bought and sold is only to apply to levels below that previously determined as safe. The problem lies in the report's tendency to over-extend the application of economics in decision making processes, particularly by the introduction of cost / benefit analyses. To this end perhaps the most revealing diagram in the report is figure 5.2 labelled "the costs and benefits of cost-benefit analysis." According to this figure there are *only* benefits and no costs to be derived from such a procedure. Who is fooling whom?

If we continue to treat these questions at the superficial level of instrumental reason the long term consequences will be disastrous. If the fundamental reasons given for preserving habitats are those of human utility, then, whenever and wherever the balance of utility favours habitat destruction this will occur. Once destroyed they can rarely be replaced. Bit by bit the wilderness is eroded until all that remains are a few curios, remnants of what once was, to be stared at and picked over. This is not idle speculation, but a description of our current situation.

This argument is unlikely to shift some economists from their myopic predilections. To even mention ethical considerations, or question economic assumptions, will be seen by some, like Wilfred Beckerman, as “an emotional over-reaction to some of the obvious disamenities [sic] of modern life.”<sup>9</sup> Beckerman holds that those who oppose such accounting methods “are no doubt motivated by other considerations. [and he claims] In the absence of any opportunity to subject them all to psychoanalysis it is not possible ... to speculate on their inner motivations.”<sup>10</sup> The implication being that those of us who object to being characterised as selfish bundles of personal preferences must be mad!

Of course not all economists are as shortsighted, or explicit in their humanism, as Beckerman.<sup>11</sup> However, any investigation of recent attempts to value the environment in economic terms reveals the same set of unquestioned assumptions about personal preferences - assumptions which

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<sup>9</sup> Beckerman *op. cit.*, n.2 above, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> For a more sophisticated defence of “economic man” [sic] see J. G. Merquior ‘Death to *Homo economicus?*’ pp. 353-378.

depend upon a humanist conception of the 'rationality' and 'autonomy' of individuals.<sup>12</sup>

### Axiological Extensionism. (The Expanding Circle)<sup>13</sup>

Humanist theories of ethics developed in an anthropocentric social setting have to be adapted to some degree when applied to non-human realms. For example, there are obvious difficulties with applying a moral system based on human utility to the natural world. Any calculus of moral utilitarianism would fare no better at expressing environmental values than homologous systems of economic utility. The moral utilitarian may have a different metric of utility, a hedonistic calculus instead of a monetary calculus, but her methodology would be subject to identical drawbacks in so far as giving a rationale for the preservation of wilderness is concerned.<sup>14</sup> Whenever the balance of utility, measured as maximised human happiness, favoured habitat destruction or species extinction it would be deemed morally right.

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<sup>12</sup>The idea that every person is motivated only by self-interest is the focus of a detailed critique by the economist Amartya Sen. 'Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioural Foundations of Economic Theory'. Sen argues that moral commitments frequently entail counter-preferential action by individual agents. He thus creates a distinction between moral values and personal preferences. He claims that economics is wrong to reduce the former to the latter. (See also chapter 7 of this thesis.) For a more expansive discussion the assumptions behind modern economics see Martin Hollis & Edward J. Nell *Rational Economic Man: A Philosophical Critique of Neoclassical Economics*. Andrew Brennan 'Environmental Ethics and Moral Rationality' has also criticised the use of economics as an over-arching framework supposedly able to represent all values and advocates a moral pluralism.

<sup>13</sup>Some parts of this next section first appeared in my 'Letting in the Jungle'.

<sup>14</sup>"Preference-utilitarianism" is the 'preferred' theory of rational choice theorists and most modern non-Marxist economists.

Humanists who wish to value at least some other species *ethically* but who work within traditional philosophical paradigms thus need to find some other way to expand the category of moral considerability.<sup>15</sup>

One such humanist conception of morality claims that if we look at the history of Western society there seems to have been a uni-directional expansion of the bounds of “moral considerability”, from the immediate social group to ever widening categories of moral objects.<sup>16</sup> Peter Singer has noted that a popular metaphor for describing this broadening of ethical horizons is that of the expanding circle. A typical example he quotes comes from Lecky’s “History of European Morals” first published in 1869.

“...benevolent affections embrace merely the family, soon the circle expanding includes first a class, then a nation, then a coalition of nations, then all humanity and finally its influence is felt in the dealings of man with the animal world.”<sup>17</sup>

This metaphor of the expanding circle encapsulates a humanistic concern

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<sup>15</sup> Some anthropocentric philosophers have argued that we should respect nature simply on the grounds that we have a duty to respect the well being of future generations of humans by not destroying potential future resources. There are a number of flaws in this approach. First, it is not at all clear that we should have any duties to future people at all. Second, as Derrick Parfit has pointed out in his *Reasons and Persons*, we do not know what these people will be like or want. Third, even if we assume that future people will be just like ourselves, the potential number of such people is almost infinite and so, for example, any calculus which took their wishes into account might deem that even very minor actions on our part might reduce the potential well being of millions of people yet to come and so be immoral.

<sup>16</sup> Works on moral considerability of particular relevance to environmental ethics are Christopher Stone *Should Trees Have Standing?*; Kenneth Goodpaster ‘On Being Morally Considerable’; Andrew Brennan ‘The Moral Standing of Natural Objects’.

<sup>17</sup> The Lecky quotation prefaces Peter Singer’s *The Expanding Circle, Ethics and Sociobiology*.

with the idea of a linear historical progression. Singer's own book *The Expanding Circle* both elucidates and epitomises this humanist approach. His thesis is that ethics originated in forms of biological behaviour such as kin selection and reciprocal altruism, whereby apparently altruistic acts of individuals are explained by their role in increasing the genetic contribution of that individual's genome to the gene pool of the next generation. A mother shares 50% of her genes on average with an offspring. Put in its crudest form, those mothers who die saving more than two offspring will be selected for. Thus altruism as a feature seems amenable to explanation in terms of so called "selfish genes."<sup>18</sup>

The altruistic faculty, according to Singer, comes to take on a new form for humans because of our endowment with language and rationality. Justifications of actions affecting the wider community come to be given in terms of reasons. For example, I may justify my claim to a greater than average share of the food on the basis that I do more work than most. This might be accepted but then someone points out that Freda does more work than I do, and so is entitled on this basis to more food still.

Once utilised, this form of rational argument suggests that we "cannot get away with different ethical judgments in apparently identical situations."<sup>19</sup> Certain rational considerations can call into question previously held prejudices about the limits of moral considerability. For example, if it is right to help person A in a given situation then why not person B?

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<sup>18</sup> See Richard Dawkins *The Selfish Gene*.

<sup>19</sup> Singer *op. cit.*, n. 17 above, p. 93.

Altruistic tendencies had in the first instance only extended to the immediate family, or our own group, but the "autonomy of reasoning" entails a logic whereby the boundaries of our own expand to the next largest community with which we identify.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps this community is a social class or a race but once such an extension of moral considerability has been justified then its boundary too is in turn open to questioning. Why for example should one skin colour be preferable to another? Viewed in this way, the history of morals comes to be seen as an increasingly enlightened view about those we conceive of as having affinities to ourselves. Like the layers of an onion the boundaries of moral considerability come to overlie each other as the rational justification for each is formulated and then challenged.

Eventually we reach a stage where claims to moral status are justified in terms of features of something called "human nature"; perhaps the possession of a rational faculty itself. This stage is equivalent to the roughly Kantian position, that if I am morally considerable because of my rationality then all rational beings must be so considered. This being so, individual members of different races, sexes and so forth apparently obtain equal moral status (unless of course we can find reasons for doubting that all sections of humanity are equally rational). In connection with the issue of moral extensionism, it is worth noting the importance that has been attached at different times to phrenology, I.Q. tests and other 'scientific' methods of

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 113. Singer is proposing that autonomous rational argument is the primary cause of the historical extension of moral considerability beyond kin and reciprocal altruism to wider society. But, we might note that the development of a language complex enough to produce and express such rational arguments might itself require a fairly stable and complex society, presumably including some moral norms. The historical and causal primacy of rational argument is therefore questionable.

discrimination.<sup>21</sup>

But why should the policy of extension stop at the level of species? In a famous quotation Bentham points out both the drawbacks in relying on rationality or language to delimit moral considerability and suggests instead that ability to feel pain or pleasure is the appropriate moral arbiter:

“It may one day be recognised, that the number of legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the *os sacrum*, are reasons equally insufficient [to skin colour] for abandoning a sensitive being... What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps, the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than is an infant of a day, or a week or even a month old... the question is not, can they reason? nor can they talk? but, can they suffer?”<sup>22</sup>

This is indeed the position that Singer takes, claiming that this is the outer layer of the onion. The difference between sentience and non-sentience is not, says Singer, a morally arbitrary boundary in the way that species differences are. Singer’s approach not only entails a linear conception of historical progress in ethical development but requires there to be certain essential features of humans, and *some* animals. His view of “the autonomy of reasoning” and his privileging of scientific information also means that he epitomises the humanist approach. One obvious drawback with Singer’s

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<sup>21</sup> For a lucid account of such scientific prejudices see, for example, Stephen Jay Gould *The Mismeasure of Man*.

<sup>22</sup> Jeremy Bentham *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* p. 311.

position, as far as environmentalists are concerned, is that a line drawn at sentience excludes most of the animal kingdom and certainly plants, waterfalls and whole ecosystems from moral considerability. However, humanist ingenuity can fill out this notion of rationally argued affinities in still other ways. Instead of using shared natural characteristics – genes, skin colour, sex, human nature or even life itself to dictate moral boundaries one could refer to shared interests. For example, our affinity with a particular class might be a common interest in overcoming the exploitation we suffer due to our social position. The less alike our social circumstances the less likely we may be to consider someone as part of our moral community.

Now, if interests are of critical importance, the outer layer of moral considerability will be bounded by an ability to possess interests. Singer believes that the capacity to possess interests is co-extensive with sentience, but others have a wider perspective. Why should plants not have interests in obtaining enough water and nutrients? Thus, for philosophers like Robin Attfield plants too find a place within the expanded circle. For him the interests of non-sentient beings lie in "their flourishing or their capacity for flourishing after the manner of their kind..."<sup>23</sup>

Paul Taylor proposes a 'biocentric' theory of environmental ethics where the outer layer of moral considerability is to be determined by a thing's ability to possess a "good-of-its-own". To have a good-of-its-own the object must be capable of being harmed or benefited as a teleological centre of life, having its own species-specific goals. The goals of an organism are realised when it has successfully maintained "the normal biological functions

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<sup>23</sup> Robin Attfield *The Ethics of Environmental Concern* p. 154.

of its species", thus developing to its full potential. A butterfly species, for example, has a life cycle from egg to caterpillar to chrysalis to imago. To stop any individual butterfly from playing each of these roles would constitute a harm to it. Having a good-of-one's-own is then a necessary condition of moral considerability (of having inherent worth in Taylor's terminology), but is not sufficient. This distinction between things which have and which lack a good of their own equates, according to Taylor, to that between the living and non-living and constitutes the justification principle which marks the outer boundary of moral standing.<sup>24</sup>

To summarise the argument so far: The humanist presents us with a succession of features or capacities that are supposed to determine the bounds of moral considerability. All previous boundaries as they become superseded are seen to have been mistaken, their core justifying principle being too limited in scope. They were based on the wrong objective essential characteristic: that characteristic, which has the role of carrying, or at least grounding, value. But now the humanist faces a serious dilemma. For, as the boundary principles become less and less specific to take account of the wider categories of ethical objects we wish to countenance, this form of rational argument brings with it a new and more expansive egalitarianism.

If, for example, possession of interests is the criterion used there seems to be no over-arching reason why the interests of one type of organism should have more importance than any other. All things capable of having their interests benefited or harmed are equally considerable whether aphids,

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Taylor *Respect for Nature*.

dandelions or humans. This extreme position would be held by very few. But, on the other hand, to relate everything to similarity of interests with humans seems unjustifiably prejudiced. Faced with the possibility of widespread natural egalitarianism most humanists backtrack and busy themselves constructing rational justifications for their prejudice in much the same way as others had previously tried to exclude various sections of humanity from equal consideration.<sup>25</sup>

Not all ethicists are equally culpable in these human centred prejudices. Taylor is specifically concerned to promote this natural egalitarianism as the heart of his 'biocentric' perspective. He states, "All animals however dissimilar to humans they may be are beings that have a good-of-their-own" and "...all plants are likewise beings that have a good-of-their-own."<sup>26</sup>

The first thing we do when we accept the biocentric outlook is to take the fact of our being members of a biological species to be a fundamental feature of our existence. We do not deny the differences between ourselves and other species, any more than we deny the differences among other species themselves. Rather, we put aside these differences and focus our attention upon our nature as biological creatures.

"... we keep in the forefront of our consciousness the characteristics we share with all forms of life on Earth. Not only is our common origin

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<sup>25</sup> For example, Robin Attfield *op. cit.*, n. 23 above, p. 154, having extended the boundary of moral considerability to those things capable of possessing interests, then constructs a rational justification which, in effect, severely limits the degree of consideration we can actually give things to their degree of similarity to humans.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor *op. cit.*, n. 24 above, p. 154.

in one evolutionary process fully acknowledged, but also the common environmental circumstances that surround us all. We view ourselves as one with them, not as set apart from them. We are then ready to affirm our fellowship with them as equal members of the whole Community of Life on Earth.”<sup>27</sup>

Such is his theoretical standpoint, but when it comes to the practical implications of this policy for human interaction with the environment he is less candid. All that this egalitarianism practically requires is that; “*certain* habitats used by wild–species populations are not destroyed, and *some* wildlife is given a chance to survive alongside the works of human culture.”<sup>28</sup> [my emphasis]

““Animals” [says Taylor] are not of *greater* worth [than humans] so there is no obligation to further their interests at the cost of basic interests to humans” [original emphasis].<sup>29</sup>

But surely there are cases where if equal moral status is to count for anything, the basic interests of animals and plants will outweigh those of humans. Indeed since Taylor’s theory gives inherent worth to microscopic individuals almost every act we do becomes of immense moral import, harming and destroying millions of our fellow citizens. In spraying a crop we destroy vast quantities of insects, fungi etc. all supposedly on an equal footing with ourselves. Taylor chooses to ignore the potentially restrictive

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>29</sup> For a full explanation of his principles “for the fair resolution of conflicting claims” between humans and non–humans and the source of these quotations see Taylor *ibid.*, chapter 6.

nature of his thesis and instead makes some extremely bland generalisations about living in harmony with nature.

Taylor fails to distance himself from the anthropocentric attitudes he originally claimed to be resisting. He is also engaged in the development of an a-historical, a-contextual and essentialist axiology which sees particular values as having *objective* standing. In these respects he is clearly still working within the humanist framework. Like the other approaches outlined above, whether utilitarian and deontological, he utilises humanist conceptions of reason. Either a reason which claims to be a neutral arbiter between all values or a reason which claims to determine the scope of application of all values. These are two sides of the same humanist dichotomy, the first sees reason as neutral with respect to *subjective* values, the second as neutral with respect to *objective* values.

The approaches I have called *humanist*, both economic reductionism / resource utilitarianism and axiological extensionism are, I suggest, ethically inappropriate, unworkable and vastly over-simplistic.<sup>30</sup> Similarities of faculty are reified into universal demarcation principles in an attempted emulation of the natural sciences. The only empirical evidence admitted is scientific evidence on the distribution of the chosen demarcating faculty in the natural world. Thus intelligence testing, biological taxonomy and sociobiology are all admissible as evidence for the possible moral considerability of a class of objects. What is not admissible, though, is evidence about whether people actually do so regard an object. What is positively dismissed is the massive

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<sup>30</sup> Bernard Williams refers to utilitarianism's "...great simple-mindedness ...having too few thoughts and feelings to match the world as it really is." in J. J. C. Smart & Bernard Williams *Utilitarianism For And Against* p. 49.

plurality of 'reasons' why people can and do value things morally. The humanist mania for objective theoretical criteria leads to a monolithic reductionism combined with an unwarranted mystification of one particular faculty as somehow bearing moral value.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the clearest way to see the problems this view creates is by looking at those things that are drawn out of moral bounds, things beyond the periphery of the expanded circle. In discussing his concept of the good of a being Taylor contrasts a child with a pile of sand. The sand, he writes, has "...no good of its own. It is not the sort of thing that can be included in the range of application of the concept entity-that-has-a-good-of-its-own."<sup>32</sup> This being so, it is excluded from moral considerability.

Yet we certainly can, and do, extend moral considerability even to piles of sand in certain contexts (the context is all important). The barchans, great crescent shaped dunes found in the sand deserts of Arabia's "empty quarter"

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<sup>31</sup> Singer provides a clear example of the problems associated with humanist arguments when he refers to genetic arguments about racial differences: "[e]quality is a moral idea, not simply an assertion of fact. There is no logically compelling reason for assuming a factual difference in ability between two people justifies any difference in the amount of consideration we give to satisfying their needs and interests." Peter Singer 'All Animals Are Equal' p. 152.

Singer must be arguing that since the boundaries of moral consideration based on racial differences are mistaken, using as they do, the wrong criterion of moral demarcation, we need no longer be interested in differences between individuals on these grounds. If moral status depends not upon intelligence but upon sentience the degree of intelligence someone possesses is superfluous. Singer just cannot mean what he says when he states that *factual* differences are immaterial to moral considerability. If sentience is the boundary delimiting moral standing then factual differences in ability to feel pleasure or pain will be crucial in moral deliberation. (All the racist need now do is focus attention on sensitivity rather than intelligence.) Like it or not, 'factual' differences are central to Singer's and other humanists' arguments on the expanding circle.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Taylor *op. cit.*, n. 24 above, p. 61.

have inspired the imagination of many travellers and moulded the lives of people like the Bedouin who have lived amongst them. The sandstone of regions like Exmoor or, more impressively, the Pakaraima mountains on the border of Guyana and Venezuela, containing some of the world's highest waterfalls, is directly responsible for their particular ambience. The feelings and forms of life these "piles of sand" have generated can and have led to their being valued for their own sake in ways that can best be described as ethical. To take a different example, when oil spills from tankers onto sandy beaches we think such avoidable occurrences morally reprehensible, not just because they are unaesthetic but because it makes sense to talk of desecration of the beaches.

I am claiming that we do not need, and cannot discover, objective values in nature. But it is simply an empirical truth that people do value natural objects for themselves in a manner precisely analogous to our moral valuation of people. Environmental ethics, for the anti-humanist, is not a matter of discovering abstract criteria by which one can judge such valuation right or wrong in any absolute sense. Such criteria exist *only* for the humanist who believes in neutral reason. Ethical values need to be explained in terms of their context and origins, their production and their reproduction in particular social and environmental circumstances.

### Paradigm Transformation: Biocentrism and Deep Ecology.

So far several different attempts to allocate values to the non-human world have been examined. First, a simplistic economic reductionism and a

homologous resource utilitarianism which suffer from identical anthropocentric defects; second, a series of progressively more extensive normative axiological theories. These approaches both account for values in a humanistic fashion, although the anthropocentrism is less immediately obvious in the latter case. However, there still remain a bundle of more radical environmental philosophies, some of which fall under the title of “deep ecology”, but all of which attempt to break with the hegemony of current humanist philosophical paradigms.

This description of three separable forms of value theories in environmental ethics, i.) economic reductionism / resource utilitarianism; ii.) axiological extensionism; and iii.) paradigm transformation, is not the only possible taxonomy. For example, John Rodman has identified four forms of “ecological consciousness”.<sup>33</sup>

The first, which Rodman terms “resource conservation” is motivated by identical anthropocentric considerations to my own category of resource utilitarianism i.e. it argues for the preservation of nature only insofar as it is useful for the long term survival of the human species, the well being of human individuals and the continuance of civilisation. Rodman traces this position to such influential figures as the American forester Gifford Pinchot who claimed in true utilitarian fashion that forests should be used for the greatest good of the greatest number (of people).

Rodman’s second category is entitled “wilderness preservation” and associates wilderness with the production of intrinsically valuable aesthetic

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<sup>33</sup> John Rodman ‘Four forms of Ecological Consciousness’.

and spiritual experiences. Nature has what might be termed a “therapeutic” or perhaps “romantic” value. Here again, the value of nature appears to reside in its production of particular human experiences and, given the well known vagaries of human tastes, Rodman assumes that this perspective is unable, by itself, to furnish an ‘objective’ justification for preserving nature. Rodman’s rejection of this aspect of the conservation ethos is, I believe, overhasty. Aesthetics may well be an inadequate basis for a *universal ethic* but this very search for universal and objective rationalisations of particular normative values is, as I have argued, profoundly mistaken from an anti-humanist perspective. Aesthetic and spiritual judgments remain important factors in many people’s evaluations and, on this note, it should also be pointed out that none of the approaches outlined here need provide an account of ethical valuation *by itself*. One might hold that natural ‘objects’ could be instrumentally, aesthetically and ethically valuable all at the same time or in different contexts. None need necessarily be exclusive of the others. There remains plenty of space for those interested in varieties of moral pluralism to operate.<sup>34</sup>

Rodman's third position is that of “moral extentionism” which includes those systems of philosophy like Singer’s which I refer to above as normative axiologies. However, Rodman includes in this category only those systems which retain an explicit hierarchy placing humanity at the top. Thus, whilst theories that give intrinsic value to explicitly human characteristics like sentience or intelligence, are, according to Rodman, examples of moral extentionism, his third category does not include theories like Taylor’s which

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<sup>34</sup> Indeed, some philosophers have argued specifically for a moral pluralism. See Christopher Stone *Earth and Other Ethics: The Case For Moral Pluralism* and Andrew Brennan *Thinking About Nature*.

rely on an identical rational methodology but refer to more abstract and less explicitly human features, such as a generalised teleology, and advocate biospheric egalitarianism. These theories form part of his fourth category which he refers to as “ecological sensibility.”

I have argued above that there is no significant methodological difference between attempts to extend moral theories relying on intelligence or sentience, like Singer’s, and those which posit either interests or a *telos*, like Taylor’s, for other species. They both utilise exactly the same humanistic rationales, both try to justify particular normative values and both are equally problematic in terms of their prescriptions for moral action.

The motivation for Rodman’s distinction between moral extentionism and ecological sensibility can be found in his acceptance of the predominant and humanist paradigm infecting current environmental ethics. This paradigm makes a distinction between anthropocentric and biocentric theories of value which mirrors the subject / object and culture / nature divides. Those theories which distribute values in terms of human characteristics are seen as anthropocentric and culture bound, those which distribute values in terms of *species-specific* interests or teleologies are claimed to be biocentric; they are, it is claimed, objective rather than subjective properties. But the very act of positing such an objective / subjective divide ties one in to an implicitly humanist framework, one that *in no way* transcends the problematic at the heart of axiological extentionism.

What Rodman’s and many other taxonomies of environmental ethics have in common is that they clump together a variety of very different theoretical

approaches, both humanist and anti-humanist, under the single title of “biocentrism” or “deep ecology”. But axiological biocentrism, as just outlined, is theoretically antithetical to those deep ecological approaches which start from assumptions which (try to) transcend, the humanist, subjective / objective divide. It is these theories advocating paradigm transformations that I wish to refer to under the title “deep ecology”. This does have the effect of excluding certain philosophers, like Paul Taylor and Lawrence Johnson,<sup>35</sup> who think of themselves as deep ecologists, but, on the other hand, it has numerous advantages. In particular, it comes closer to articulating the distinct methodological differences between those who simply apply ‘pure philosophical’ problematics to environmental issues and those who, in dealing with such issues, actively *challenge philosophy* as it is now constituted.

This definition of deep ecology also seems to have some support from a number of radical environmentalists and ecofeminists. For example, Marti Kheel has noted that the destruction of the world seems to go hand in hand with the production of theories of environmental values; theories which whilst giving a patina of respectability to a politically engaged philosophy actually produce nothing but pale reflections of current common-sense intuitions, always lagging behind the changes they claim to have caused.<sup>36</sup> She sees ecofeminism and deep ecology as united in their common rejection of axiological theories and attempts to rationally appraise the values of ‘objects’. Ecofeminism and deep ecology are also both allies in their demands for a reappraisal of the role and nature of the self - the subject as

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<sup>35</sup> Lawrence Johnson *A Morally Deep World*. For further criticism of Johnson’s approach see my review of his book.

<sup>36</sup> Marti Kheel ‘Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology’.

masculinised ego. As Michael Zimmerman has pointed out, there are genuine similarities in the programmes of deep ecology and ecofeminism although these are sometimes masked in debates about priorities.

“... ecofeminism and deep ecology share many points in common.

Both are critical of atomism, dualism, hierarchialism, rigid autonomy and abstract rationality.”<sup>37</sup>

The purpose of my taxonomic realignment of ethical theories is not simply to distinguish humanist from anti-humanist theses and to privilege the latter. Although I reject both axiological extentionalism and resource utilitarianism as irredeemably humanist in a manner that makes them both useless for long term environmental purposes, I do not wish to decry all elements of humanism. I do not believe, as many seem to, that humanist dichotomies necessarily always devalue nature. Indeed I believe that in many respects we are indebted to humanist modes of thought for many aspects of current Western societies which I value very deeply. Nor do I hold that something called anti-humanism will provide a panacea for our environmental ills. What I do argue is that the time for a naive humanism is past, neither we ourselves nor the wider environment can afford to continue down the line which we currently follow. We need a society that is not tied to our current humanist paradigms because they are, for the most part, unsustainable in ecological terms. Thus there is little point in appealing to humanist forms of argument if they are constrained by those boundaries upon our actions and thoughts imposed by “humanism in general” i.e. humanist ideology. We need to *transcend* these boundaries and humanism itself if the things which

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Zimmerman 'Deep Ecology and Ecofeminism: The Emerging Dialogue' p.142.

environmentalists value are to survive.<sup>38</sup> But, and this is an important but, one cannot simply invent a transcendent philosophy anew. It can only come from the contradictions posed by the implementation and conceptualisation of the old, and thus it is from the debate between humanism and anti-humanism that any new paradigm which can mesh with our Western traditions and forms of life must emerge. There is thus a continuity constraint here, something of the old must survive in the new.<sup>39</sup>

Deep ecology, ecofeminism and a number of allied movements are components of this process of evolution, both for environmental philosophy and in a much wider sense for the society as a whole. They are not clean breaks with the past but evolutionary developments from it, but for all that they nonetheless represent a radical change.<sup>40</sup> Deep ecologists do not succeed in breaking with all features characteristic of the humanist paradigm. However, at a minimum, they show an awareness of the object /

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<sup>38</sup> "The target of the deep ecologists' critique is not humans *per se* ( i.e., a general class of social actors) but rather human-*centredness* (i.e., a legitimising ideology)" Warwick Fox 'The Deep Ecology-Ecofeminism Debate and its Parallels' p. 19. Perhaps Fox should have made his ideological target a little wider in certain contexts extending it to other aspects of humanism. Fox also makes a distinction between biocentric, i.e. life centred, and ecocentric. Although some deep ecologists like Naess might find this division unnecessary, given their very broad interpretation of living things, one that includes rocks and streams, this taxonomy would effectively separate out people like Lawrence Johnson who claim to be deep ecologists but do not give intrinsic value to non-living organisms.

<sup>39</sup> This amounts to a claim that paradigms are never entirely incommensurable. There need be no essential shared features between old and new but some form of translation is usually possible. (see the material on the idea of an epistemological break in chapters 3 and 4.) For a discussion of incommensurability see chapter 7 of W. H. Newton-Smith *The Rationality of Science* and chapter 17 of Paul Feyerabend *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchist Theory of Knowledge*.

<sup>40</sup> This is not to imply some overt teleological progress but rather evolution in its proper non-teleological Darwinian sense.

subject divide and its anthropocentric implications. They attempt to transcend this dichotomy in a wide variety of ways, for example, with Marxist conceptions of the dialectic, with structuralist accounts of the self, in the phenomenology of philosophers like Neil Evernden, by the mythic and poetic approach of Gary Snyder or the holistic philosophy of J. Baird Callicott.<sup>41</sup>

The single most important figure in the development of deep ecology is that of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. In a series of papers and books Naess has set out and defended his own deep ecological “ecosophy”, which he characterises by a number of features.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps the most philosophically relevant of these are:

- a.) The “relational, total field image” which holds that what things are is partly due to their relations with other things, we are thus all intimately connected to our surroundings.
- b.) A biospheric egalitarianism which holds that all species have an “equal right to live and blossom”.
- c.) That diversity is an intrinsic good.
- d.) Self-realisation as the ultimate end.

Taken out of context these aims are easily misunderstood. Many, like Taylor, have taken biospheric egalitarianism as the central plank of deep ecology. If

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<sup>41</sup> Neil Evernden *The Natural Alien*; Gary Snyder *The Practice of Wild*; J. Baird Callicott 'The Metaphysical Implications of Ecology'.

<sup>42</sup> This characterisation can be found in 'The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary.' Other works include; 'Self-Realisation in Mixed Communities of Humans, Bears, Sheep, and Wolves'; 'Identification as a Source of Deep Ecological Attitudes'; 'A Defence of the Deep Ecology Movement', and *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*.

one concentrates as biocentric axiologists do on “egalitarianism” it is easy to overlook the radicalness of some of these proposals. Axiologists like Taylor have taken Naess’s slogan in too literal and essentialist a fashion, awarding equal ‘rights’ to individuals of all species. This is understandable given Naess’s early formulations.<sup>43</sup> Naess’s early positions are often ambiguous. Thus he makes statements to the effect that his philosophy will deal with “both norms, rules, postulates, value priority announcements *and* hypotheses concerning the state of affairs in our universe”.<sup>44</sup> Or again he states that one should see “Self-realisation as a top norm and long term for an ultimate goal”.<sup>45</sup> But his later work shies away from such grand statements of intent. His problematic relies deeply upon the philosophy of Spinoza, a philosophy which as chapter three will show has provided the inspiration for the development of an explicit anti-humanism in much the same way as Descartes comes to represent humanist assumptions.

As Naess makes clear in his later writings what he has in mind is not the rigid allocation of rights with all the contradictions this necessarily introduces but a *modus vivendi* where human wants do not always override the needs of other parts of the environment. He states:

“It is fairly unimportant whether the term ‘rights’ (of animals) is or is not used in the fight for human peaceful coexistence with a rich fauna.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Arne Naess ‘The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary’.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>45</sup> Arne Naess *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* p. 84.

<sup>46</sup> Naess ‘Self-Realisation in Mixed Communities of Humans, Bears, Sheep, and Wolves’ p. 231.

Naess is aware of the importance of cultural traditions in informing our values and responses to nature. He does not argue for a universally applicable axiological system able to decree that certain species or natural features are morally considerable and others not. The fact that he refers to his philosophy as Ecosophy 'T' is specifically motivated by a wish to show that there are, and must be other perspectives requiring their own ecosophies (whether 'A', 'B' or 'Z').

Thus the self-realisation which Naess refers to should not be read as the self-realisation of the Cartesian subject. Rather, its purpose is to directly challenge the boundaries of that subject, claiming that, when fully realised, the self recognises that it is one node in a web of life, one component of a larger whole. Having said this, there is no doubt that Naess does see his notion of a wider self as representing the *true* situation, a self awareness that we should *all* try to attain. In this sense his doctrines claim a spurious universality. As soon as one tries to fill out what this true self actually is and what its attainment means for our ethical relations with nature one is in danger of falling back into notions of an essential human nature which we should all follow, of deriving universal normative ethical implications in a manner that differs hardly at all from mainstream humanism. Naess does indeed attempt to fill out this notion of the 'true self' though usually in a way which makes plain that he does this only for his own traditions and culture. Other philosophers are not so coy about claiming universal status for norms derived from a wider self. One such philosopher is J. Baird Callicott.

Callicott must in some ways be judged a border line case between Deep Ecology and axiological extensionism. He does make a distinction between,

on the one hand, the application of moral theories to environmental issues and, on the other hand, the exploration of moral valuations and criticism of moral theories from an environmental perspective.<sup>47</sup> But he also sees Deep Ecology as both providing a non-anthropocentric axiology *and* creating a new paradigm in moral philosophy.

In a distinctly humanist frame he defines a number of tasks which any value theory of the kind he wishes to develop must perform.

“An adequate value theory for non-anthropocentric environmental ethics must provide for the intrinsic value of both individual organisms and a hierarchy of superorganismic entities - populations, species, biocoenoses, biomes, and the biosphere. It should provide differential intrinsic value for wild and domestic organisms and species. It must be conceptually concordant with modern evolutionary and ecological biology. And it must provide for the intrinsic value of our *present ecosystem*, its component parts and complement of species, not equal value for any ecosystem.”<sup>48</sup>

It is obvious from this passage that in several senses Callicott's philosophy could be labelled 'humanist'. Whereas the rationale for axiologically extending moral consideration depended upon the sharing of certain features or capacities judged to be of moral import, Callicott's method might depend not on sharing anything with nature, but upon sharing in nature itself. He takes a radical reductionist stance based on his interpretation of quantum

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<sup>47</sup> J. Baird Callicott 'Non-Anthropocentric Value Theory and Environmental Ethics' p. 299.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 299-309.

physics, which might itself seem to represent a scientific humanism.<sup>49</sup> But, according to Callicott, our apparent individuality and isolation from nature is mistaken, for, at the level of quanta we are actually continuous with the world: Callicott endorses Alan Watt's sentiment that "the world is your body" <sup>50</sup> .

If this is the case then Callicott thinks we can dismiss arguments about the intrinsic value of different faculties, we need only posit that the self is valuable: "nature is intrinsically valuable to the extent that the self is intrinsically valuable." Environmental degradation is thus to be seen as an attack on my extended person: "the injury *to me* of environmental destruction is primarily and directly to my extended self, to the larger body and soul with which I am continuous." <sup>51</sup>

But humans do not operate ethically at the level of quanta. The fact, if it is a fact, that we are one with nature at this level gives us no ethical guidance at all, for so too are murderers, logging companies and industrialists. As Zimmerman puts it: "[i]t is important to remember that relationships can only obtain between *individuals* that have some measure of importance and reality of their own." <sup>52</sup> This is not to say that the perception that we form a part of a greater whole will always be morally insignificant. Such a view may for example lead to the valuing of nature as a whole system. The acknowledgement of holism may be central to particular ethical ideals in

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<sup>49</sup> Callicott's philosophy is actually inspired by a reading of quantum physics through the spectacles of Eastern religious traditions. See his 'The Metaphysical Implications of Ecology'.

<sup>50</sup> J. Baird Callicott 'Intrinsic Value, Quantum Theory, and Environmental Ethics' p. 274.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>52</sup> Zimmerman *op. cit.*, n.37 above, Though why Zimmerman thinks that ethical relationships have to be between *individuals* is unclear.

other ways, as it was for the stoics and Spinoza.<sup>53</sup> However, by itself, Callicott's holism cannot give us any ethical guidance. To live in the world we need to act differentially to parts of it. We have to relate on a human scale with whales, mountains and other humans. Environmental ethics must be about comprehending conflicting possibilities in our relations with our environment. The existence of physical links does not necessitate that conflict with our environment will cease or that, upon realising these links, people will automatically come to respect 'nature'. As Freya Mathews has pointed out, if we hold that we are one with nature,

“...if we identify deeply enough with such an indestructible nature, seeing our Earth as a single manifestation of an infinite, inexhaustible principle, a cosmic principle of life, then this alleviates our angst and despair at the prospect of eco-catastrophe, because it means that eco-catastrophe does not spell the “death of nature” in its widest sense.”<sup>54</sup>

Further, in terms of quantum physics it is very difficult to talk about environmental destruction at all. The destruction entailed when a beefburger is produced via a circuitous route from forest, to grassland, to cattle, cannot be expressed in terms of quanta. It can only be expressed in terms of the forest itself. Fundamental ethical dilemmas are left entirely unaltered by this egocentric holism. Callicott's version of egoism is not itself unproblematic. An egocentric holism could just as easily support a complete disrespect for the surrounding world on the grounds that as the world is a part of *my* body it is mine to do with as I wish.

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<sup>53</sup> A. A. Long *Hellenistic Philosophy* chapter 4, especially section 5.

<sup>54</sup> Freya Mathews 'Conservation and Self-Realisation: A Deep Ecology Perspective' pp.347-348.

Callicott's holism is only partly based on quantum physics. It also rests upon what might be termed eco-holism. Here the science appealed to is ecology rather than physics. Ecology, it is claimed, reveals our place in nature as a locus in an interdependent network of organisms.<sup>55</sup> This interdependency should lead us to re-evaluate the worth of other natural things and see ourselves as just one amongst many. Again, this may be true and have important metaphorical and practical implications, but it seems far from clear that it has any *necessary* ethical implications. One could clearly grasp an ecological understanding of our place in nature and yet still treat other organisms as mere means to human ends.

The eco-holist view reaches its scientific apex in the Gaia hypothesis of Lovelock which sees the earth as one giant self-regulating organism.<sup>56</sup> Importantly, however, Lovelock differs radically from Callicott in resisting the temptation to exaggerate the importance of humanity. In Lovelock's system it is "Gaia" - the Earth itself - which will carry on whether or not humanity survives. Lovelock is concerned to stress the scientific nature of his theory and in his later work at least regards his theory as having no *necessary* ethical implications. He states that "there is no prescription for living with Gaia only consequences."<sup>57</sup> As Lovelock remarks, with only mild approbation, some of his 'followers' have however taken his theory on a different level as a mystical concept entailing specific modes of treating the world. Lovelock's tacit approval for the mystical interpretation of his work seems to stem from a pragmatic approach towards influencing others to care

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<sup>55</sup> For more advanced formulations of eco-holism see Arne Naess 1984 'A Defence of the Deep Ecology Movement' and Andrew Brennan *Thinking About Nature*.

<sup>56</sup> J. E. Lovelock *Gaia, A New Look At The Earth*.

<sup>57</sup> J. E. Lovelock *The Ages Of Gaia* p. 225.

for their environment. For example, Christians might be persuaded to see the Virgin Mary as embodied in Gaia and thus come to change environmentally destructive practices. Whilst the mystical interpretation of GAIA will no doubt appeal to some as a possible ecosophy, those of a less pantheistic bent will remain unimpressed. In any event, this once again raises Freya Mathews point about the dangers in assuming that a metaphysics need deliver a *specific* set of normative morals.

Perhaps it is necessary here to return to points made earlier about humanist dichotomies. Much intellectual energy has been expended on producing arguments that purport to prove our close affinity, or unity with nature. This is motivated by the thought that such affinities will lead to our valuing nature. But, in some circumstances exactly the opposite is the case. Cravings for affinities with nature are frequently another way of shoring up beliefs in the centrality of the human species as the key figure in a web of nature. This comforting myth finds reflections of humanity throughout nature's creations, an anthropomorphism as well as anthropocentrism.

For example, the mystical interpretation of Lovelock's hypothesis is closely akin to the pantheistic holism of Romantics like William Wordsworth. In an essay entitled "Wordsworth in the tropics" Aldous Huxley makes points relevant to this argument about humanism and anti-humanism. He writes:

"It is only very occasionally that he [Wordsworth] admits the existence in the world around him of those 'unknown modes of being' of which our immediate intuitions of things make us so disquietingly aware. Normally what he does is to pump the dangerous unknown out of

nature and refill the emptied forms of hills and woods, flowers and waters with something more reassuringly familiar – with humanity, with Anglicanism. He will not admit that a yellow primrose is simply a yellow primrose –beautiful but essentially strange, having its own alien life apart. He wants it to possess some sort of a soul, to exist humanly, not simply flowerily ... But the life of vegetation is radically unlike the life of man.

The jungle is marvellous, fantastic, beautiful, but it is also terrifying, it is also profoundly sinister. There is something in what, for want of a better word, we must call the character of great forests...which is foreign, appalling, fundamentally and utterly inimical to intruding man.”<sup>58</sup>

Later, he writes:

“A few months in the jungle would have convinced him [Wordsworth] that the diversity and utter strangeness of nature are at least as real and significant as its *intellectually discovered unity* “[my emphasis]”<sup>59</sup>

We can now reconsider the general humanist rationale I have outlined bearing Huxley's comments in mind. What we need to do, to borrow a phrase from Kipling, is to let the jungle into our considerations.<sup>60</sup> Jungle epitomises, or at least epitomised in Kipling's era, wildness, ferocity, the power of nature, the unexplained, the untamable, that part of nature over which humans lacked control. It is a particular historical representation of the

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<sup>58</sup> Aldous Huxley 'Wordsworth In The Tropics'. Stephen Clark *pers. comm.* has pointed out that the “unknown modes of being” Huxley quotes from the Prelude (ln. 393) is, in fact, followed by a reference to mountains as “...huge and mighty forms, that do not live like living men...”

<sup>59</sup> Aldous Huxley 'Wordsworth In The Tropics' p. 883.

<sup>60</sup> Rudyard Kipling *The Second Jungle Book*.

'otherness' of nature, the alien character described by Huxley. In our own case let it refer to the deserts, the oceans and all the remnants of wilderness left in the world, however small.

I want to suggest that the reasons for valuing the jungle or the primrose, the desert or Antarctica are manifold and often concerned more with our perception of their disparity from humanity than any affinities, whether these are natural or intellectually contrived.<sup>61</sup> However, one point of this thesis is to subvert the whole enterprise of providing necessary criteria, or grounds for moral considerability. The methods of humanist philosophy which depend upon shared common features, (even shared 'otherness') reach the end of the road where the jungle begins. They were never compelling in any case. They serve only to impose too rigid a structure upon our moral beliefs and values. If moral consideration is to be extended to non-humans this has to be done not on the contrived and spurious basis of shared properties but on due recognition of other natural phenomena for their differences as well as their similarities and the many and varied ways we can relate to them.

The thesis of the expanding circle provides a graphic representation of anthropocentrism. Humanity sits at the centre of a concentrically ordered

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<sup>61</sup> It would however be wrong to take the present argument as putting forward 'alien otherness' as itself a criterion for moral considerability. The perception of something as 'other' does, in certain contexts lead to its being ethically valued, (e.g. Iris Murdoch makes the point that, "More naturally, as well as more properly, we take a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals, birds, stones and trees." *The Sovereignty of Good* p. 85. ) but it is by no means necessary that it should do so. As Stephen Clark points out, 'Gaia and the Forms of Life' p. 187, our valuation of the environment as 'other' may be dented when we realise that it now survives only by human protection. How alien is an area enclosed in barbed wire or patrolled by uniformed rangers? This sort of question raises problems for anyone wishing to treat 'otherness' as a criterion of moral considerability.

nature, as the archetype of ethical value, both the measure and the measurer of all things. In its theoretical development the humanist rationale develops an abstract and unworkable egalitarianism. In practice, the greater the difference between 'us' and 'them' the less is the gravitational pull on our moral faculties. In reality the periphery of moral considerability is determined by whatever arbitrary feature or concept we are happiest with in any given historical and cultural circumstance. The continual discovery of new and 'better' demarcation principles is a fiction, a "Just So Story" to use another of Kipling's phrases. In its dependence upon an a-contextual rationality it ignores the vital place that context plays in our ascription of values.

This is no way to treat nature with respect. Nor will it provide any better a barrier to habitat destruction than human utility. It is a parody of our ethical valuation of nature on much the same level that Walt Disney's 'Jungle Book' is a parody of Kipling's book, a cartoon fulfilling our inclinations to anthropomorphize everything: the pyromaniac apes who want to be 'men' [sic], the bear that wears a grass skirt. These sanitised symbols show nature with a human face, obeying human rationales. The Walt Disney of humanist philosophy allows us both to subjugate the 'otherness' of nature and to simplify ethical complexities into categories of the morally considerable and those beyond the pale.

A striking feature of Kipling's jungle is its otherness. The wolves are wolves and have their own world-view, the law of the jungle. Perhaps the only long term chance for the survival of the jungle lies in us coming to see it as being of intrinsic value on its own terms. The jungle offers us a chance to escape a world where all we see reflects "humanity" back at us. The

appropriateness of using ethical language in discussions of environmental concerns lies not in the *similarity* of the moral objects to ourselves, but in morality's ability to express concerns about a wider community, a community not of equals but of inter-relationships. What we need to do is to let the jungle into our moral considerations. If we have a passion for wilderness it will not be stemmed by the humanist who calls us unreasonable. If it is unreasonable to value rivers, if mountains are not morally considerable and deserts not intrinsically valuable to humanists, that is because they have too narrow a vision. Their eyes are closed.

To quote Bagheera: "We of the jungle know that man is the wisest of all. If we trusted our ears we should know that of all things he is most foolish." <sup>62</sup>

There is thus a need to put philosophical ethics into context: to try and account for its apparent success and failures in capturing our ethical intuitions as they pertain to our relations with our environment. This contextualisation requires that philosophy becomes reflexive - throws over its grandiose claims to universal significance and accounts for its 'stories' in terms other than their being the logical working out of disinterested reason. It requires a theorisation of society itself, and of society's place in historical and natural environments.

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<sup>62</sup> Kipling *op. cit.*, n. 60 above.

## CHAPTER 3: ALTHUSSER AND ANTI-HUMANISM.

### Preliminaries

The previous chapters suggested that humanist theoretical frameworks are too restrictive and carry too many anthropocentric presuppositions to provide a paradigm within which our ethical concerns about the non-human environment can be successfully accommodated. For this reason I now turn to an examination of alternative paradigms which deconstruct and recontextualise the roles of rationality and the human subject especially in relation to the formation of values. The anti-humanism of Louis Althusser, described in this chapter, provides a starting point for this critique of humanism. Indeed this is how Althusser viewed his own work, claiming that he made the "... struggle against the world outlook [of]...Economism (today 'technology') and it's spiritual complement Ethical Idealism (today 'Humanism')" central to his philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

In Althusser's terms "Humanism is the characteristic feature of the ideological problematic from which Marx emerged and more generally, of most of modern society."<sup>2</sup> To use another of his phrases it is the "very element and

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Althusser *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Glossary *For Marx*. "This concert is dominated by a single score, occasionally disturbed by contradictions (those of the remnants of former ruling classes, those of the proletarians and their organisations): the score of the Ideology of the current ruling class which integrates into its music the great themes of the Humanism of the Great Forefathers, who produced the Greek Miracle even before Christianity, and afterwards the Glory of Rome, the Eternal City, and the themes of interest particular and general, etc., nationalism, moralism and economism." Althusser *op. cit.*, n.1 above, p. 146.

atmosphere indispensable”<sup>3</sup> to modern life. This humanist *ideology* lies hidden within the complex intellectual heritage of modern Western societies. For most people living in these societies humanist ideology operates to ensure that the elements of humanism listed in chapter 1, are simply accepted as common sense. They constitute the repertoire of unnoticed and unquestioned presuppositions underlying everyday life. These presuppositions, although frequently unrecognised, nonetheless direct and confine our activities and thoughts in certain specific ways. In unconsciously structuring our relations to society and the environment, they do not just provide a framework which facilitates the resolution of practical problems but also exclude, by their very nature, a variety of other ways of comprehending that problem.

As we shall see, one of the great merits of Althusser's account of ideology is its ability to explain both the production of individuals and the reproduction of society and its associated values. The importance of Althusser lies in his introduction of the components of an anti-humanist conceptual repertoire and the synthesis of these into a unitary explanatory framework.<sup>4</sup>

The (omni) presence of humanist ideology within the current structure of discourses and practices has important implications for anti-humanism. It brings into question the very nature of theory itself and thus the epistemological status of a theoretical anti-humanism. Can a theoretical perspective, like Althusser's, which recognises the pervasive nature of ideology, claim the luxury of an objective or external standpoint from which to

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<sup>3</sup> Louis Althusser *For Marx* p. 232.

<sup>4</sup> Although some might thus see Althusser as unwittingly engaged in a form of humanism himself in this attempt to produce a “grand theory”.

criticise humanist presuppositions? Discourses which attempt to identify and criticise elements of humanism seem themselves to be tied to a language and philosophical practice soaked in humanist presuppositions. Given the global dispersal of Western culture we might all, to some degree, be held to be influenced by humanism. Even anti-humanism seems, by its very opposition to humanist tenets to depend critically, *to a degree*, upon those tenets - it is constrained by the same dialogical structures. Althusser posits a radical and revolutionary "epistemological break" with past ideological discourses to overcome this problem. Chapter 4 will, to some extent, question the nature of this break arguing that anti-humanism is not radically new, it does not come from nowhere. Rather, it evolved out of the humanist problematic and in opposition to the humanist problematic. I claim that the evolution of theoretical paradigms takes place within the limits of our past thoughts and practices much as the biological evolution of species is constrained by its raw material, by previous bodily anatomies and behaviour patterns. This biological analogy can be stretched further. Just as the evolutionary adaptation of species takes place against a background of changing environments, the varieties of anti-humanism now current might be

seen as theoretical responses to our changing environment.<sup>5</sup>

The term “anti-humanism” is most frequently associated with French structuralist and post-structuralist philosophy. For example, David Hoy refers to Derrida’s philosophy as an “anti-humanism” which he then defines by a number of features.<sup>6</sup> Amongst these are Derrida’s rejection, following Heidegger, of any philosophy of universal essences, especially a *universal human essence*. Derrida deconstructs the human “subject” as the given basis for theoretical abstraction, both in terms of the concept of a transcendental human individual unchanged by historical or social circumstance and in terms of the primacy of the ego, the constituting *consciousness* of the subject. As Hoy points out, anti-humanists like Derrida are also frequently critical of the idea of epistemological and socio-historical progress. They reject a conception of *reason as a neutral instrument* to be utilised by disciplines like philosophy and the sciences to unravel the nature

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<sup>5</sup> The positions termed humanism and anti-humanism represent not so much two antithetical polarities but the present reformulation of debates constrained by their history, the playing out of previous ideological preconceptions through discourses marked by their insistent use of dichotomous categories. The current debate between modernism and postmodernism might be seen as just one more evolutionary (and non teleological) stage in this process. There are few writers who could be said to be anti-humanist in repudiating all the aspects of humanism characterised in chapter 1 and even the most optimistic humanist may sometimes express doubts about central tenets of their faith.

Contemporary anti-humanism is not a developmental stage in a linear progression from ancient Greece to mediaeval Italy to the Twentieth Century France of Derrida, Lévi-Strauss and Althusser. I shall argue that current dissatisfaction with the mainstream humanist tradition has its roots in complex interactions between its component parts influenced by, and in turn influencing, the societies and environments of which they form a part (and from which they are only analytically separable).

<sup>6</sup> David Hoy ‘Derrida’.

of the world and humanity.<sup>7</sup>

The anti-humanism of Althusser is particularly important in terms of i). his holistic and anti-reductionist social theory, ii). his decentering of the abstract humanist subject, iii). Althusser's concept of ideology as lived experience and its relation to the internalisation of ethical values, and iv). his epistemology. This chapter focuses on each of these aspects in turn, showing how they inter-relate and provide a distinctive critique of humanism. Althusser's own assumptions will be critically examined in the chapters that follow.

If, as chapter 1 suggested, humanism developed in the cities, was dependent upon Western civilisation and achieved its most explicit formulation at the height of the industrial revolution (I am particularly thinking of philosophers like Auguste Comte here<sup>8</sup>), it is unsurprising that problems with that industrial civilisation might lead to a questioning and re-formulation of its basic tenets. If, as others have suggested, theoretical humanism can be seen as providing an acceptable philosophy and polity for the new industrial age then, in some senses, anti-humanism might be seen as part of our dissatisfaction with that same industrial age and the dubious benefits which science and human egoism have produced. Anti-humanism as a deconstructive practice may be a philosophy for the strange situation we now find ourselves in where industry consumes the surrounding world in a vain attempt to outrun environmental changes.

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<sup>7</sup> These anti-humanist concerns can be seen in (oppositional) relation to the list of humanist features in chapter one.

<sup>8</sup> See Ronald Fletcher's remarks in his introduction to *The Crisis of Industrial Civilisation: The Early Essays of Auguste Comte*.

The Western Marxist tradition, in which Althusser developed, represents a body of thought which is at once antithetical to many aspects of humanism, e.g. the object / subject divide, and yet Marxism is internally riven by its attempts to both distance itself from and contain its own humanist assumptions. Western Marxism, though breaking with certain aspects of the humanist paradigm, is still intimately connected to it. Even Marxists who are aware of the destructive aspects of modern society remain humanists in other ways. Thus Marcuse can state that

“...socialism is humanism in as much as it organises the social division of labour, the ‘realm of necessity’ so as to enable men to satisfy their social and individual needs...”<sup>9</sup>

In other words, according to Marcuse, socialism sees society as to be organised with certain *progressive* aims in mind - aims to be reached by an organisational rather than a technological fix. Marcuse’s rejection of technical ‘progress’ does not mean that he rejects the concept of progress itself out of hand. In one sense this is inevitable for, insofar as the concept of progress implies the possibility of change for the better, it seems to be a necessary part of any opposition to current trends in society.

### Althusser, Spinoza and Environmental Ethics

Any theoretical discourse will consist of a framework of concepts in structural relations to each other - relations which dictate both the meaning of those concepts, and, the questions, interests and presuppositions appropriate to

<sup>9</sup> Herbert Marcuse ‘Socialist Humanism?’ p. 99.

the theory as a whole. These relational frameworks, or 'problematics', exclude certain possibilities from consideration, make some concepts central, others peripheral and so create a position, "a particular unity of a theoretical formation", which "binds" those who use it. The problematic is not just a theoretical tool to be applied to the world but the framework in which problems develop and within which proposed solutions are judged. A problematic both *creates* and *emphasises* particular theoretical *relations* to the world.<sup>10</sup>

This thesis appropriates certain concepts from the work of Louis Althusser and is thus, to an extent bound by his problematic. This problematic is a theoretical framework which brings to the foreground certain philosophical themes and conflicts, questions of "humanism" and "anti-humanism", the role of ideology, economism, metaphysical holism and the links between philosophy and political practice. Althusser takes an original approach to these issues which are central to contemporary debates within environmental ethics. However, he was committed to posing these questions from within what was, in some respects at least, an orthodox Marxism. He has little to say directly about ethics and his concerns are primarily with the internal relations of human societies rather than relations between humanity and nature. For this reason, when some of Althusser's concepts are *adopted* in later chapters they will also be *adapted*, stretched beyond their original 'places' in his problematic. The boundary between appropriation (devoting to special purposes) and expropriation (taking away) is easily

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<sup>10</sup> In this sense the term "problematic" has close affinities with what Imre Lakatos refers to as a research programme. See Imre Lakatos & A Musgrave eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* and W. H. Newton-Smith *The Rationality of Science* chapter 4.

crossed, for a change of *use* inevitably implies a change of *meaning*.<sup>11</sup> A different, (theoretical) context necessarily implies a displacement of concept, (a connection made in Derrida's term "différance")<sup>12</sup> The problematic outlined in later chapters is not identical with Althusser's and insofar as it covers different territory, its concepts come to form a different structure of inter-relations, and hence acquire different meanings and emphases.<sup>13</sup> Thus whilst this thesis is indebted to Althusser, and strives to avoid misrepresenting his ideas, there will be some necessary theoretical differences. Analogously, Althusser's terminology represents his own reading and development of his varied precursors, of whom Spinoza, Marx, Comte, Bachelard and Lacan were perhaps the most influential.

Considerations of Althusser almost invariably focus upon his union of Marxism and Structuralism. His philosophical merit is frequently judged from the standpoint of one or other of these theoretical systems, or by his 'success' at producing a palatable blend of the two. That these criteria should predominate is partly the fault of Althusser himself, for he was always concerned to remain within an orthodox Marxist framework, so much so that

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<sup>11</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations*.

<sup>12</sup> Différance (with an a) "is the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the *spacing* ... by which elements refer to each other." Jacques Derrida quoted in John Sturrock ed., *Structuralism and Since* p. 165.

<sup>13</sup> Althusser's textual comparison of Marxist and Hegelian concepts in his essay 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' (*op.cit.*, n. 3 above, pp. 87-128.) applies this notion of problematic. He rejects any idea of transferring the 'essential' meaning of a concept to a different theoretical framework merely by using the same word. In this particular case he denies that Marx's conception of the "dialectic" can be *simply* an inversion of Hegel's. The structural role of Hegel's dialectic, is different having an "*intimate and close relation*" *ibid.*, p. 104., with his world outlook. The concept, "dialectic" is not extracted pure and simple and inserted unchanged, or even *simply* inverted, into a new theoretical framework, rather it is the concept's relations to other parts of the whole framework which gives it the meaning it has.

he became one of the most effective Marxist critics of his own work.

Retrospectively his early work came to be seen as infected with

Structuralism. Friend and foe alike seem to agree that

“His “flirtation with structuralist terminology”, as he was later to admit did much to make him successful - there are fashions in philosophy as in everything else - but I fear it will do little for his survival.”<sup>14</sup>

Merquior notes, in a particularly vitriolic article, that “Althusser got rid of the humanist rhetoric only to plug Marxism into structuralist phobias.”<sup>15</sup> The division is made even clearer in Assiter. “I believe, in so far as Althusser is a Structuralist, he is not a follower of Marx and vice versa.”<sup>16</sup> But to judge Althusser in this limited fashion is to miss both his immense creative originality, and to underestimate the variety of influences upon his work. First amongst these, after Marx, is Baruch Spinoza whose affinities with structuralism, post-structuralism and critical theory are only just beginning to be fully appreciated.<sup>17</sup> Much of the revival of interest in Spinoza amongst contemporary French philosophers like Balibar and Macherey is directly due to Althusser’s influence. I will argue that structural and Spinozistic elements

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<sup>14</sup> André Comte-Sponville ‘A Shattered Master’s Truth’

<sup>15</sup> J. G. Merquior *Western Marxism* p. 147.

<sup>16</sup> Alison Assiter *Althusser and Feminism* p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> See for example Christopher Norris *Spinoza and the Origins of Modern Critical Theory*. Althusser explicitly records the importance of Spinoza for himself and Marx, especially in relation to epistemology, “If we want a historical predecessor to Marx in this respect we must appeal to Spinoza rather than Hegel”, *For Marx* op.cit., n.2 above, p. 78n. and, “I cannot hide the fact that in this matter [the question of knowledge] I depended heavily on Spinoza. *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* p. 224. See also Louis Althusser *Elements of Self Criticism* pp.132-141.

are central, not peripheral, to Althusser's theoretical concerns.<sup>18</sup> To believe that one can ignore these components is to demean his contribution to both Marxism and philosophy in general, it is to mistake a part of his theoretical problematic for the whole. Only with the inclusion of structural and Spinozistic perspectives can Althusser's anti-humanism and other central theoretical concerns make sense.

Althusser suffers four-fold from contemporary philosophy.

First, orthodox Marxists condemn his theoretical writings for their perceived misinterpretation of Marx's texts - especially his thesis of a radical break in the nature and epistemological status of Marx's works before and after 1845. Second, humanist Marxists see in his theoretical anti-humanism a return to a reactionary orthodoxy, a defence of Stalinism or Maoism.<sup>19</sup> It is notable that, despite the divisions between these "orthodox" and largely "humanist" schools of Marxist thought, they both agree that Althusser erred in his (supposed) separation of theory from "revolutionary practice".<sup>20</sup>

Third, he is completely ignored or marginalised by those in non-Marxist academic circles working within a Spinozistic framework. Environmental

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<sup>18</sup>In contrast John Mepham holds that "[i]n fact *almost* everything in For Marx survives a criticism of the structuralist general concept of practice" and that "Althusser's anti-humanism is not specifically dependent on his use of the concepts of his analogy" [between Marxist and structuralist concepts] 'Who Makes History: Althusser's Anti-humanism' p. 23.

<sup>19</sup>e.g. E. P. Thompson *The Poverty of Theory*.

<sup>20</sup>Thus Michael Young, a humanist Marxist can say "I think Althusser's work, at least in the way it has been taken over by English Marxist intellectuals, has been almost as much an obstacle for developing a theory that might inform revolutionary practice as the dogmas of Stalinistic orthodoxy that Althusser sought to oppose." 'Althusser's Marxism and British Social Science' p. 130. His other grounds for criticising Althusser are his academicism leading to a concentration upon theory rather than practice, his structuralist orientation and the theoretical opacity of his ideas and language i.e. his elitism. He also charges, (quite rightly) that Althusser's views may help develop a "highly sophisticated relativism". *ibid.*, p. 129.

ethics must be the example *par excellence* of this phenomenon.<sup>21</sup>

Fourth, there is a new generation of philosophers who, unacquainted with his work, merely consider him as an influence on Foucault and other 'post-structuralists', a superseded stage in their own 'progressive' development. There is also a fifth line of attack that does not deserve philosophical attention. This merely consists in personal abuse against both him and his followers. All invariably mention his murder of his wife H el ene in the tragic circumstances of a mental breakdown in 1980. This has no possible bearing upon his theoretical work of the previous decade.<sup>22</sup>

### Structure and the Social Formation

Althusser's social holism is analogous to, and in part derived from, Spinoza's metaphysical holism and closely aligned to Structuralism. Norris states that "Althusser goes so far as to claim that Spinoza was a veritable structuralist *avant la lettre*"<sup>23</sup> The temptation to read Spinoza in this light can be easily appreciated in passages such as:

"[t]he reason why a circle or a triangle exists, or why it does not exist,

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<sup>21</sup> For example, Arne Naess has made a great deal of use of Spinoza. 'Spinoza and Ecology' in S. Hessing ed. *Speculum Spinozarum 1677-1977*. See also Genevieve Lloyd 'Spinoza's Environmental Ethics'.

<sup>22</sup> Merquior says " For a time Althusser's structural Marxism passed for a powerful sophistication of Marxism in the form of a long overdue epistemology of social science. That such an impression could ever have been entertained says much about the degree of philosophical literacy [in 1960's France]. ... For in reality Althusser's science-mongering was no sophistication. Rather it was sophistry." *Western Marxism* op. cit., pp.152-153. He also states, "Althusser was for a while a patient of Lacan - which apparently did not prevent him from strangling Mme. Althusser." *Ibid.* p. 149.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Norris *Spinoza and the Origins of Modern Critical Theory* p. 35.

does not follow from the nature of these things, but from the *order* of the whole corporeal nature.”<sup>24</sup>

That it is the relations between the parts of a complex and dynamic whole which dictate the nature of those parts is a *sine qua non* of structuralist problematics. Objects do not have an unchangeable essence or preexisting form. In Spinoza’s case this “whole” is the monistic substance of God or Nature (the terms being interchangeable). In Althusser’s case the whole is the complex material fabric of a society at a given historical period. This synchronic view of society is referred to as a “social formation” (*formation sociale*). Brewster, with Althusser’s explicit approval, defines the social formation as

“The concrete, complex whole comprising economic practice, political practice and ideological practice at a certain place and stage of development.”<sup>25</sup>

Althusser adds, “A concept denoting ‘society’ so called.”<sup>26</sup> Although the social formation is to be understood as a synchronic cross section of society it incorporates that society’s past history. It is historicised just as for Spinoza the present condition of the world is historically determined by what has gone before. Spinoza, Althusser and structuralist theorists like Lévi Strauss all claim that parts of society (or the world) can only be understood in terms of their *relations* to each other and the whole. Nothing is complete in itself except the whole system. Correspondingly, the “whole” is not reified as an object itself, it is simply the totality of these relations and configurations.

There is also a parallel between Althusser’s and Spinoza’s metaphysical

<sup>24</sup> Baruch Spinoza *The Ethics and Selected Letters* Pt. 1, Prop. 11, D.2. [my emphasis]

<sup>25</sup> Ben Brewster ‘Glossary’ in Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 3 above.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 251.

holism and their holistic epistemologies. Just as the meaning and adequacy of a theoretical term is dictated by its “place” in relation to other terms in a problematic so objects are determined, to a degree, by their place in the structure of nature as a whole. If “... by substance they would understand that which is in itself and conceived through itself; that is that the knowledge of which does not require the knowledge of any other thing”,<sup>27</sup> then as Spinoza makes plain, this only applies to Nature as a whole. “There can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God.”<sup>28</sup>

Althusser’s view of social formations as a *complex whole* implies a radical anti-reductionism, a refusal to reduce any one sphere of activity completely to any other, a refusal to accept that any one sphere can be explained and understood completely in terms of any other. This is very different from a common interpretation of Marxism which argues a one-way and rigorous causal determination of the superstructure by the economic base (the base being the economic modes and relations of production, the superstructure being culture, theory, politics etc.). Such a simple reductionism is patently inadequate for understanding the complex and multifarious interactions of the superstructural components of societies. Althusser’s structural conception of social formations is a radical emendation of the inaccurate oversimplification inherent in the naive interpretation of the base / superstructure model. In contrast, he recognises that superstructural components have important and direct effects both upon each other and reciprocally upon the economic base. These components are also partly self-constituting, they have a *relative autonomy*. They are not reducible to

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<sup>27</sup> Spinoza *op. cit.*, n. 24 above, Pt.1, Prop. 7, Scol. 2.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, Pt. 1, Prop. 14.

one another, but nor can they be understood in isolation from each other. Like Spinoza's modes they do not act or exist solely from their own nature. The components of the whole are determined by the structure of the whole. Just as Spinoza's modes "are in something else and ... conceived through something else" <sup>29</sup> so Althusser's social components ("practices", "levels" or "instances") are in social formations and conceived through their respective roles in them.

Althusser recognises four principal and relatively autonomous "practices" in society, the economic, the political, the ideological and the theoretical. Each practice is a "process of *transformation* of a determinate raw material into a determinate product, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour using determinate means (of 'production')" <sup>30</sup> The transformations undergone at each level are theoretically analogous but the elements of the process change in each case. For example, political practice transforms its raw material, "social relations", to new social relations whereas, in ideology, the 'object' of transformation is human consciousness. These practices together form the complex unity of "social practice". (See fig. 1.)

Althusser introduces a relatively autonomous theoretical sphere in addition to the three "levels" recognised by Engels and Marx. These "levels" are not simple but are in turn composed of relatively autonomous aspects. Thus ideology includes practices such as ethics, religions etc. which can each, to

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, Pt. 1, Defn. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 3 above, p. 166. Althusser utilises Marx's concept of "labour" as the determinate mode of transformation to enable him to theorise a series of practices - each with their own form of labour operating alongside each other. Thus political, ideological and theoretical practices become modes of production in their own right relatively independent of the economic mode of production. (See fig. 1.)

a degree, be considered in their own right.

Althusser's "practices" do not develop evenly alongside one another or even have equal and opposite effects upon each other. They are not the mechanistic billiard balls of Newtonian physics but the relational 'modes' of Spinoza's *Ethics*. They are not *elements* but dynamic, changing and inter-related *components*. These components of social formations differ in their capacities to affect each other in different eras and societies. The relative balance between components thus varies from social formation to social formation. This apparently reduces the importance of the economic level to a historically transient dominance of society in capitalist societies, robbing Marxism of one of its characteristic features, its explanation of social features by reference to the economic base. An acceptance that "[t]here is only and always a complex articulation of determination and levels" appears to be a denial of economics' absolute *given* privilege in determining the forms taken by the other levels of society. Having gone so far Althusser has to engage in some verbal qualifications to retain his Marxist credentials. He reinstates economic privilege by emphasising, with Engels, that the economic is determining "in the last instance": that after all, the economic is somehow 'transcendentally' dominant in *all* social formations. Thus despite Althusser's recognition of the fragmentation of the modern social formation into disparate practices, he still tries to retain a social 'totality', a totality bound together, in the last instance, by the economy.

The tension, made explicit in the formula "in the last instance", between Marxist and Spinozist influences is never fully resolved in Althusser's work. This formula marks only the most obvious example of Althusser's many

conceptual elisions, his continual changes of emphasis to try and satisfy two conflicting strains of thought. To satisfy Marxist criteria the economic level of all social formations must be finally determining “in the last instance”, but to retain his structural conception of a complex whole Althusser states that “From the very first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes”.<sup>31</sup> The economic instance *only* exists in relation to the other levels of society, it cannot be taken out of society and examined in isolation. Althusser’s elision, both reducing and retaining the efficacy of an economic analysis, did not satisfy the more conservative upholders of dogmatic Marxism.

Orthodox Marxism had a deep influence upon Althusser, as his retention of membership of the French communist party (P. C. F.) in the late 1960’s (a time of disillusionment with all forms of centralised authority) attests. As the tide of criticism enveloped his earlier works he began to cover their radical and structuralist implications with a veneer of orthodoxy, starting with his preface to the Italian edition of *Reading Capital* and English editions of *For Marx* and culminating in a series of essays in self-criticism.<sup>32</sup> It is, however, my contention that despite first appearances these autocritiques are rarely more than changes of emphasis and do not alter the fundamental structure of the problematic outlined in the essays of *For Marx* and in *Reading Capital*. Althusser, like Lukács and so many other Marxists before him, makes a public recantation of the heretical tenets of his philosophy. A close reading of Althusser’s work reveals that Structuralism and Spinoza continue to be key components of even his last works. This creates a continual and

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>32</sup> Some collected later as Louis Althusser *Elements of Self-Criticism*.

unresolved tension between Marxist (orthodox positivist and humanist Hegelian) elements of his thought and Spinozist and structuralist elements which are, after all, what makes his reading of *Capital* at all different from previous interpretations of Marxism. His works become increasingly full of difficult conceptual balancing tricks, sleights of hand and necessary ambiguities in an attempt to allow his work to be read as *merely* that of an interpreter of Marx. Althusser's case is complicated by the conservative aspects of his own thought which form one element of the inquisition. This being said, the Spinozistic elements clearly win out against thoughtless conformity; Althusser is not afraid to defend his holism and epistemology against the orthodoxy of a John Lewis.<sup>33</sup> These defences, far from making large concessions, are frequently rewordings of previous positions with the addition of thinly veiled contempt for his opponents.

Social formations are then structured wholes, the parts of which have determinate but changing relations to each other. The social formation is a dynamic system and that dynamism is powered by the manner in which the parts are constructed and articulate with each other. Social formations are not merely conglomerations of a few *fixed* components found in different proportions and differently arranged in contrasting epochs. Changes in the structural relations between components mean that both their content and their articulation into the social whole are changed accordingly. The way each component is articulated into the social whole is referred to as a "contradiction". The structure of social formations is such that the components do not develop evenly. This is the universal "law of uneven

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<sup>33</sup>Louis Althusser *Essays on Ideology* pp. 61-139.

development".<sup>34</sup> Some components have more influence than others, and there will always be a dominant contradiction in all societies although the particular contradiction in dominance varies.<sup>35</sup> In capitalist societies it is the articulation of the economic "level" which is dominant. The particular forms in which the components articulate at a given time necessitate that one contradiction becomes structurally dominant. The social formation is a '*structure à dominante*'. "[T]he complex whole has the unity of a structure articulated in dominance".<sup>36</sup> Which contradiction dominates is the result of 'overdetermination' (*Überdeterminierung*, a term borrowed from the psychology of Freud). Put simply, a number of structural components stand in such a relation to each other that their contradictions combine to collectively cause a particular effect - which is the relative dominance of one contradiction over all the others.

Overdetermination also has a second connotation which conveys a sense of redundancy.<sup>37</sup> Not all components will be necessary to bring about a particular structure, contradictions need not work 'additively' to promote a structure in dominance, some may act synergistically or induce cascade effects, whilst others are of negligible importance. The effects of these contradictions ramify throughout the entire system in a determinate manner

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<sup>34</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n.3 above, p. 201.

<sup>35</sup> "[T]he dominant element is not fixed for all time, it varies according to the overdetermination of the contradictions and their uneven development." *ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, p. 203. It is never explained why only *one* contradiction can dominate rather than two or more being of equal importance.

<sup>37</sup> Sheelagh Strawbridge 'From 'Overdetermination' to 'Structural Causality': Some Unresolved Problems in Althusser's Treatment of Causality' cites the following quotation from Freud's "*On Aphasia*" as an example of this connotation. "The safeguards of our speech against breakdown appear overdetermined, and it can easily stand the loss of one or other elements." p. 11.

analogous to Spinoza's causal chains. Another psychological term used by Althusser to express the emergence of a structure in dominance is "condensation".<sup>38</sup> In its original context it identified the formation of a symbolic meaning determined by "instinctual" (i.e. material) effects. This connotation of determination between relatively autonomous 'levels' is important because it emphasises that overdetermination is a result of interactions between radically different aspects of society. Condensation and overdetermination are the necessary outcome of Althusser's social interconnected whole.

"the mode of organisation and articulation of the complexity is precisely what constitutes its unity."<sup>39</sup>

Althusser is at pains to emphasise this distinction between his own Marxist holism (which is a Spinozistic holism) and that of Hegel and other simplistic substance monisms.<sup>40</sup> It is the uneven development of the complex whole *qua* structure in dominance which is, for Althusser, *the* important feature of Marxist totalities.

"if the complex whole were taken as purely and simply the development of one *single* essence or original and simple substance, then at best we would slide back from Marx to Hegel, at worst, from Marx to Haeckel! But to do so would be precisely to sacrifice the special difference which distinguishes Marx from Hegel: the distance which radically separates the *Marxist type of unity* from the Hegelian

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<sup>38</sup> The use of this psychological terminology reflects the influence of Lacan upon Althusser's thought.

<sup>39</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 3 above, p. 202.

<sup>40</sup> Norris goes so far as to say "It is no exaggeration to say that the entire project of Althusserian Marxism comes down to this issue of Spinoza versus Hegel." *op. cit.*, n. 17 above, p. 35.

type of unity, or the Marxist totality from the Hegelian totality.”<sup>41</sup>

There are many philosophies containing a concept of “totality”, but these should not be confused with each other. The *place* of the concept “totality” in the theoretical frameworks of Sartre, Hegel and Althusser determines its meaning. All these “totalities have in common is (1) a word; (2) a certain unique conception of the unity of things; (3) some theoretical enemies.”<sup>42</sup>

The Hegelian totality is not structured in dominance, it does not develop unevenly and has no principal contradiction, only reciprocally negating contradictions. It is unified by the concept of a teleological *Geist* and as such, the principle of its organisation is an essentialist concept beyond investigation. Althusser’s structural and complex holism contrasts sharply with this idealist conception.

Althusser does not suggest that structure is something separate from social components but that it is immanent in the components’ arrangement and constitution. Again this is analogous to Spinoza for whom, “God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things.”<sup>43</sup> The immanent cause of Althusser’s social formations is the structural articulation of the parts of those social formations. We cannot look beneath the skin of society and expect to find the structure labelled as if it were a feature on an anatomical atlas. This structure is not like the “skeleton” or “musculature” of a body, but the constitution and arrangement of the parts of the social components with respect to each other and the whole. The structure *is* the synchronic arrangement determining both the boundaries of any particular part, and its relations to other parts in the whole body of society. The structure is not then

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<sup>41</sup>Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 3 above, pp. 202-203.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, p. 203. See also Martin Jay *Marxism and Totality*.

<sup>43</sup> Spinoza *op. cit.*, n. 24 above, Pt. 1, Prop 18.

a separable, preexisting cause, or (*causa transiens*), but an immanent expression of the articulation of social practices with each other. Social formations are not visible results of structural causes but rather the structure is the relations between the parts in the whole. Thus Althusser says, “the superstructure is not the pure phenomena of the structure, it is also the condition of its existence.”<sup>44</sup>

For Althusser as for Spinoza, “all things are determined....not only to exist but also to act in a definite way.”<sup>45</sup> The forms things take and indeed their very existence is determined by past relations within the complex whole. The world and its contents unfold as they must, not teleologically but because, “[t]hings could not have been produced by God in any other way or in any other order than is the case.”<sup>46</sup> What we think of as contingency is merely due to our insufficient grasp of the causal inter-connectedness of events. “Nothing in nature is contingent, but all things are from necessity of the divine nature determined to exist and to act in a definite way.”<sup>47</sup> A “thing is termed contingent for no other reason than the deficiency of our knowledge.”<sup>48</sup> These Spinozistic points are echoed in Althusser. The structure in dominance in any particular social formation can be investigated (using the

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<sup>44</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 3 above, p. 205.

<sup>45</sup> Spinoza *op. cit.*, n. 24 above, Pt.1, Proof 29.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, Pt. 1, Prop 33. Jonathan Bennett, in *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* discusses this at length. But see especially p. 120.

<sup>47</sup> Spinoza *op. cit.*, n. 24 above, Pt. 1, Prop. 29.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, Pt. 1, Prop. 33, Scol. 1. This deficiency of our knowledge is in turn a product of our necessarily limited perspective as parts of the whole of nature. No God like view is possible without actually being God i.e. the whole of nature. Any such view would have little connection with our own very limited human form of understanding. We should not push our anthropocentric perspectives to extremes and imagine that we have access to incontrovertible truth.

science of historical materialism) but if this structural dominance was merely aleatory then no such science would be possible.

“For the domination of one contradiction over the others cannot, in Marxism, be the result of a contingent distribution of different contradictions.”<sup>49</sup>

Althusser, like Spinoza before him, is positing a material determinism, the patterns of which theory can express insofar as it theorises the complex whole. The link between uneven development, overdeterminancy and immanence of structure is made by Althusser as follows.

“In this complex whole ‘containing many contradictions’ we cannot ‘find’ one contradiction that dominates the others as we might ‘find’ the spectator a head taller than others in the grandstand at the stadium. Domination is not just an indifferent fact, it is a fact *essential* to the complexity itself. That is why complexity implies domination as one of its essentials: It is inscribed in its structure.”<sup>50</sup>

In summary the metaphysical similarities between the systems of Spinoza and Althusser are striking. Althusser’s totality is contrasted with other totalities like Hegel’s because of its complexity and unevenness and it is Spinoza not Hegel that Althusser reads as Marx’s closest ally. Both Spinoza and Althusser have conceptions of complex wholes which are deterministic, dynamic and non-teleological and contain within themselves the structural causes of their own formation. With this overview of Althusser’s anti-reductionist ‘metaphysics’ of society in mind we now turn to his anti-humanist account of the human subject, an account that centres on his theory of

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<sup>49</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 3 above, p. 207.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p. 201.

ideology.

### Ideology and the Interpellation of the Subject.

The role and presence of ideology is central to Althusser's analysis of social formations. The most extended formulation is to be found in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation)",<sup>51</sup> which is concerned with the maintenance of power relations within society over time, i.e. with the *reproduction* of particular modes and relations of *production*.

Althusser makes a distinction between the organs of the State itself, the police, army, government, administration etc. which he terms the "Repressive State Apparatuses" (RSA's), and what he terms "Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISA's). The latter are not usually under the direct control of the state, tending to be defined as part of the *private* rather than the *public* political domain. ISA's include institutions like the family, the media, trades unions, religious organisations and education. Whereas the State functions predominantly by repression, sometimes even violent repression, the ISA's function predominantly by the transmission of ideology which in a class society is always the ideology of the ruling classes. In modern capitalist

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<sup>51</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 33 above, pp. 1-60. This essay is occasionally taken to represent a change in Althusser's concept of ideology from the earlier formulation found in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*. (See for example Ted Benton *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism: Althusser and his influence* pp. 96-107). The later formulation is, however, in no way incompatible with these earlier works and is best seen as a politically orientated development of them.

states the I.S.A.'s maintain the hegemony of the ruling classes, making the present relations between the components of society seem natural and unalterable. If a challenge to the prevailing ideology is strong enough then the I.S.A.'s will be supplemented when necessary by State repression. In mediaeval society the foremost I.S.A. was the church coupled with the family, today, Althusser claims, it is the education-family couple.

Ideology functions, in all cases, as the 'cement' of society, binding it together in common mythical representations of individuals, relationship to reality.

“[W]hat is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of the individual to the real relations in which they live.”<sup>52</sup>

Humans necessarily live this imaginary relation. Ideology is not an illusory *bricolage* of 'ideas', it is a *level* of the structural complex whole, an immanent part of social relations. Ideology then is a structurally immanent and theoretically omnipresent feature of social formations. Ideology has a material existence.

“..an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice or practices. This existence is material.”<sup>53</sup>

The material existence of ideology cannot be identical in ontological terms with that of 'solid' objects like paving stones. Althusser sees ideology as existing in a different 'modality' from 'solid' objects, a modality which is however rooted “in the last instance in 'physical' matter.”<sup>54</sup> This distinction between modalities should not be read as positing different kinds of material - it does no such thing. There are two distinct aspects to the claim that

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<sup>52</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 33 above, p. 39.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p. 40.

ideology exists materially. First, it explains the causal links between the 'ideas' of experienced human consciousness and their inculcation via ideological practice.

*"ideas are his [sic] material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the idea of that subject."*<sup>55</sup>

This emphasis upon materiality is not merely an attempt to counter the philosophical idealism of Descartes or Hegel. It is not (just) an ontological claim about substance monism but serves to emphasise that ideology does not usually function to affect consciousness via the direct transfer of ideas. It involves largely unconscious acceptance of certain taxonomies, interpretations etc., but is brought about, primarily, by the person's material relations to ideological structures, rather than, say, economic or political structures. Ideology is not contained *within* individual subjects' minds. Althusser's position is not equivalent to a physicalist philosophy of mind, indeed it is not a philosophy of mind at all. Rather, ideology, as a structural component of social formations, serves to create our common-sense notions of the nature of individuality and minds.

The material referred to in "material practices" is not physical material *per se* but our apprehension of that material via our practical contact with it. Althusser's is a dialectical materialism, not a reductive materialism like Feuerbach's. This links this first aspect of modalities of practice to the second, namely, that all practices are reducible "in the last instance" to

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<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, p. 43.

material substance. These epistemological aspects will be taken up in the next section, but it is necessary here to emphasise that Althusser, like Marx, specifically criticised materialists for their separation of objects from their knowledge of them.

“The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the things, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of *the object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively.”<sup>56</sup>

In other words, Marxism, and Althusser, holds that we are all part of a material world and that our thoughts are a creation of that world, in opposition to idealists who hold that the world is primarily a psychological phenomenon. But Marxists hold that we do not know the material world, as it ‘really’ is, but only through the mediation of our active experiences of it - via “practices”. All knowledge is necessarily knowledge acquired through these practices, ideological practice, political practice etc. The material world’s existence, of which even these mediations are a part, can only be inferred.<sup>57</sup>

It is absolutely crucial to understand that Althusser’s conception of ideology is *not* one of false consciousness. Ideology is *neither false nor*, for the most part, *consciousness*. Ideology is an absolutely necessary part of any society, even socialist societies. The representation is mythical because it is not *theoretical* not because it is wrong, i.e. not because it entails mistaken ideas about the world.<sup>58</sup> Ideological relations to the world are inherently

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<sup>56</sup> Karl Marx ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ §1 in *Early Writings* p. 421.

<sup>57</sup> This is treated in more depth in the section on Spinoza and coherence theory below.

<sup>58</sup> The inadequate nature of ideology will become clearer in the discussions of Althusser’s epistemology below, especially in connection with Spinoza’s ‘knowledge of the first kind’ i.e. uncriticised belief into which systematic reasoning does not enter.

inadequate because of the nature of human relations to the world.

“[I]t is the *imaginary nature of this relation* which underlies all the imaginary distortion which we can observe (if we do not live in its truth) in all ideology.”<sup>59</sup>

Althusser's conception of ideology is, despite its occasional negative connotations, functionalist and dialectically materialist. “Ideology Interpellates Individuals as Subjects.”<sup>60</sup> In other words we come to take up a particular role in society and act and think within the frameworks that society imposes on us from our birth onwards. We are “*always - already* subjects.”<sup>61</sup> Ideology could be seen as equivalent, in ecological terminology, to the structural determinant of the individual's “niche” in society. Our niche space *qua* subject is determined by the immanent ideological structure of the social formation. Ideology, just like the niche, is not logically prior to subjects, it is not as if the structure of society was somehow ‘given’ and then individuals were slotted into it. Individuals as subjects are necessary constituents in the formation of ideology which could not exist without them, but there is a reciprocity in this constitution.

“*..the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology, insofar as, all ideology has the function (which defines it) of constituting concrete individuals as subjects.*”<sup>62</sup>

We are all subjects, and live in ideology. “Man [sic] is an ideological animal by nature.”<sup>63</sup> In social formations “..ideology hails or interpellates concrete

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<sup>59</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 33 above, p. 38.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, p. 45.

individuals as concrete subjects.”<sup>64</sup> This is clearly spelled out in *Reading Capital*.

“the structure of the relations of production determines the places and functions occupied and adopted by the agents of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of these places, insofar as they are the ‘supports’ (*Träger*) of these functions.”<sup>65</sup>

So far as Althusser is concerned, the true ‘objects’ of Marxist analysis are not humans *qua* individuals but subjects insofar as they are interpellated into roles or niches within the production processes of social formations.

Individuals who are wholly within ideology are subjected to structures beyond their control, yet still see themselves (wrongly in capitalist societies) as empowered beings with free-will.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>65</sup> Louis Althusser & Etienne Balibar *Reading Capital* p. 180. This theoretical anti-humanism is, Althusser claims, derived from the ‘scientific’ writings of the mature Marx e.g. the Marx of *Capital*. “Individuals are dealt with here only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, the bearers of particular class-relations and interests.” Marx quoted in Alex Callinicos *Making History*.

<sup>66</sup> This attack on the human subject is echoed in the works of other structuralists and post-structuralists. Thus the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss believes that the human sciences should not constitute but dissolve the human subject.

Lévi-Strauss does not regard individual consciousness as a possible basis for anthropological study. “We are not, therefore, claiming to show how men think the myths, but rather how the myths think themselves out in men and without men’s knowledge.” Quoted in Edmund Leach *Levi Strauss* p. 51. Leach interprets Lévi-Strauss as positing a “collective unconscious”, a kind of transcendental ‘mind’. This is, I believe, profoundly mistaken. It makes far more sense to interpret him as recognising that discourses which are closely tied to particular “forms of life”, not simply the creations of individuals but, in part, actually create them. Myths relate a kind of taxonomic structure which human thinkers find themselves embedded in rather than in control of. (See also chapters 7 and 8.)

There are two interpretations of this kind of claim which are difficult to prise apart. First, that from the perspective of the scientific study of social formations, individuals are only relevant insofar as they are *engaged* as “subjects” in productive practices. Since Althusser’s definition of productive practices is very broad, encompassing economic, political, ideological and theoretical production this *may* not seem to be too extravagant a claim. If, for example, Beethoven had composed only in his head keeping his musical talents to himself, then his effect on society at large would not have been that of a composer, his social import would have been negligible. (The question of “production” is taken up in chapter 6.)

The second connotation is that people’s places in the social formation are wholly determined by aspects of that social formation, and that people are fitted for their role in the present modes and relations of production by ideologies which are *completely* beyond their control. This interpretation of the *Träger* thesis as one of social determination is encouraged by the words “never more than” in the above quotation.

Now whilst it may be accepted that “ideology” necessitates that we have a mythical representation of our relations to the world, it does not follow and is not true that individuals have *no* part in the creation and alteration of ideology and the modes and relations of production. It does not follow that there is no individual effectivity in history, i.e. that anyone could have been Beethoven. If such a reading were correct then people in Althusserian science would be wholly reducible to their predetermined roles in society, they would be *functionally* essentialised and have no independent agency.

Althusser may never have held this extreme position and he certainly rejects a completely reductionist social determinacy in his later work, acknowledging criticism from humanist Marxists.<sup>67</sup> However, the first interpretation is insufficient by itself to explain how people are *subject to* as well as *subjects in* ideology, for it is almost true by definition that people only affect society insofar as they interact with it. The originality of Althusser's theoretical construction lies in his *emphasis* on social effectivity rather than in any comprehensive social determinism.<sup>68</sup> It is this emphasis which is an important strand of his anti-humanism. No longer is the individual at the root of all social change, an isolated figure who, at crucial moments, consciously enters the fray to change the course of history. Instead people are only part of an immensely complex causal network, much of it beyond their control, their own conscious and unconscious life being determined by their place in relation to the whole. Human individuals cannot be isolated from society and examined for the essence of their greatness or poverty, for they can only be understood fully in the appropriate social context. This emphasis upon the relations between parts of society, upon the importance of wider contexts, sets Spinoza, Structuralism, Althusser, and Marx apart from humanist, reductionist, and essentialist theories.

This structuralist conception of the human subject as simply the bearer of social roles is in direct opposition to the humanist vision of the autonomous rational agent. This difference marks the poles of the structure / agency debate in social theory. This debate concerns the forms of explanation that

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<sup>67</sup>Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 32 above.

<sup>68</sup> As Althusser later admitted, "I did consciously 'think in extremes' about some points which I considered important and bend the stick in the opposite direction." Louis Althusser *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists op. cit.*, n. above, p. 210.

social theory can / should give for social events, i.e. whether it can provide a 'scientific' language which removes any anthropocentric bias about social theory or whether the social sciences need to give an entirely different form of explanation from those prevalent in the natural sciences due to humanity's apparent possession of rational and reflexive capabilities.<sup>69</sup>

The interpellation of the individual in ideology should not be confused with a person coming to accept a particular political creed or a narrowly defined world-view. Ideology operates at an altogether different level from this - in structuring the configuration of a person's relations to the world. It is not as *given* ideas that ideology functions, but as structures delimiting the possible frameworks in which any thought at all takes place.

"in the majority of cases these representations have nothing to do with 'consciousness'; they are usually images and occasionally concepts, but it is above all as *structures* that they impose upon the vast majority of men. [sic]" <sup>70</sup>

It is not *simply* that ideology dictates a certain perspective from which the individual is constrained to see the world. Ideology operates on that subject such that these perspectives seem second nature and unquestionable. It does this in a very specific manner at the heart of the individual constructing both object and subject at the same time in a dialectical process. The subject internalises her external environment and reproduces it, objectifying it for others to internalise in their turn. In this way society both reproduces its values and produces a certain kind of individual. Ideology mediates the

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<sup>69</sup> For introductory but detailed accounts of the structure / agency debate see Anthony Giddens *Central Problems in Social Theory* and Alex Callinicos *Making History: Agency, Structure and Change in Social Theory*. The question of agency is again raised in chapter 7 in relation to personal preferences and ethical values.

<sup>70</sup> Althusser *For Marx op. cit.*, n. 3 above, p. 233.

construction of a particular and historically specific dialectical relationship between the 'subjective' consciousness and 'objective' world. Both are equally the creations of the engagement of the biological individual in ideological practices.

Althusser offers as an example the operations of the church in interpellating an individual as a subject. Interpellation has much wider implications than merely that individual coming to see a particular relation between herself and God, (*qua* a funny old man with a beard)

“they are always-already interpellated as subjects with a personal identity... it [religion] obtains from them the *recognition* that they really do occupy the place it designates for them in the world, a fixed residence.” <sup>71</sup>

In other words the person recognises what she takes to be herself in a particular relation to God which alters structurally her other relations to the world or social formation. The very acceptance of this ideological relation brings with it a host of other relations, religious and non-religious, which now seem 'natural' and inevitable to her. This *necessarily* ideological, mythical, relation between the world and human individual is always present in some form and as Althusser says, it was Spinoza who “explained this completely two centuries before Marx, who practised it but without explaining it in detail.” <sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 33 above, p. 52.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p. 49.

The Epistemological Break: Ideology, Marxist Science and Philosophy.

Althusser is famous, or infamous, for his thesis of an “epistemological break” in the work of Karl Marx. This break divides the early works under the influence first of the idealist works of Hegel and then the humanist works of Feuerbach from those post 1845. (Starting with the “Theses on Feuerbach”, and *The German Ideology*.) The later works, Althusser argues, provide a genuine scientific understanding of societies in their historical and material circumstances, rather than simply a reflection of current ideology at the theoretical level. Marx developed a science of society (historical materialism) based upon new concepts such as the forces and relations of production, the base / superstructure, ideology etc. This represented “a scientific discovery without historical precedence in its nature and effects.”<sup>73</sup> For Althusser science is rigidly distinguished from the ideological perspectives which preceded it and involves not just new concepts but a new epistemology rejecting the foundational role of the categories of “subject” and “object”. The epistemological break also involves the formation of a new philosophy, Marxist philosophy or “dialectical materialism”. This replaces all previously ideologically tarnished philosophies and provides a problematic within which “historical materialism”, the Marxist theory of society, can be situated. Science epitomises the level of theory and Marxist philosophy is, in Althusser’s earlier works at least, the Theory (capital T) of theoretical practice. In later works Althusser partially revises his view of the ‘revolutionary’ nature of this epistemological break insofar as he suggests that the change in philosophical outlook takes place over many years. The new dialectical materialism is still to a degree entangled with older concepts

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<sup>73</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 3 above, p. 13.

both idealist, such as the “negation of the negation” and humanist, e.g. “alienation”. The “break” may thus have lost some of its dramatic appeal but it is still irreversible. The lengthy formation of a Marxist philosophy in no way weakens Althusser’s respect for Marx’s *scientific* achievement or his belief in a strong ideology / science dichotomy.

The epistemological status of “ideology” with respect to “theory” is of central importance in Althusser’s work. At stake is the status of Marxism itself both as science (historical materialism) and as philosophy (dialectical materialism). The status of Althusser’s ‘science’ may be better understood by making reference to three frequently distinguished theories of truth, namely, “correspondence theories”, “coherence theories” and “conventionalism”. The similarities and differences between Althusser’s epistemology and these analytic archetypes may help illustrate and evaluate Althusser’s position.

The correspondence theory is epitomised by the empiricist approach to science i.e. a scientific theory *represents* the world in some fashion, scientific knowledge relates directly to a-theoretical empirical data, ‘facts’ and ‘observations’. (We have previously referred to this view as theory as the “mirror of nature”. See chapter 1, n. 4.) This approach typifies humanism, but to try to squeeze Althusser into this mould would be absolutely wrong, so wrong that it is difficult to see how anyone could approach Althusser’s work in such a way were it not for the prevalence of positivist readings of Marx’s own works and positivist traces still current in Althusser’s own writings. Althusser’s interpretation of Marx is the antithesis of the epistemologies generally associated with the subject / object divide of

humanism, and, whether or not his interpretation of Marx's philosophical positions is correct, he is explicit about his own anti-positivism and anti-empiricism.<sup>74</sup>

A second reading interprets science along the lines of a coherence theory of truth. This suggests that knowledge is the systematised ordering of concepts and that we gradually approach a single coherent and complete system of thought. Propositions, on this view, are not true or false depending upon their correspondence with 'facts' but, more or less true, depending upon the adequacy of their role in the system. The coherence of a theory is its own guarantee of truth. This has affinities with Spinoza's quest for knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis*, a knowledge encompassing the whole world in all its aspects in a transcendental theoretical system.

The third view may be termed conventionalism and, whilst sharing the approach to knowledge as systematisation, it is quite distinct from any coherence theory insofar as it recognises its own necessarily historicised position in a particular social formation. Conventionalism sees sciences as theoretical systems suitable only for particular historical and social

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<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12. At this point it is necessary to say a few words in clarification of Althusser's somewhat ambiguous relationship with positivism. This requires that we distinguish between two different traditions of positivism, the largely Anglo-American schools of (empiricist) "logical positivism" typified by such philosophers as A. J. Ayer and the largely French positivist tradition derived from Comte and influencing Althusser through the philosophy of science of Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem. (See chapter 4.) In so far as positivism is associated with empiricism and a correspondence theory of truth Althusser is implacably opposed to it. In so far as positivism privileges science and condemns metaphysics he is clearly aligned with it. The French school of positivism retains these latter aspects whilst developing broadly speaking, conventionalist and coherence theories of truth based in scientific *practice*, i.e. knowledge is *constructed* not found.

circumstances and subject to constant change. It denies the possibility of knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis*, claiming that all knowledge is *sub specie durationis*. It also suggests that there might always be more than one possible coherent theory.

Althusser is influenced in different ways by all three of these schools of thought but his own position is closest to the second. In this case however this affinity with Spinoza is not merely the result of a direct theoretical influence but also arises from competing pressures from empirico-positivist (humanist) and conventionalist critiques. The Spinozistic position on coherence allows him to maintain that Marxism is, in some sense a transcendently true theory as the only theory suitable for explaining complex wholes. To satisfy humanist political pressures, e.g. from the P. C. F., this 'truth' has to be ambiguous enough to be read as "corresponds to the way the world really is." Althusser also struggles with conventionalist arguments according to which Marxism has to see *itself* as a historically situated theory. I argue that Althusser's solution to this problem lies in stressing the hermeneutic aspects of Marx's thought and in an emphasis upon *practices* of knowledge acquisition. I shall therefore sometimes refer to his position as "constructivist".

### Correspondence Theory, Humanism and Althusser

Taken out of context, Althusser's science / ideology dichotomy is easily misconstrued. There is a natural tendency to read "science" as that practice which describes the 'objective' condition of the real world, and "ideology" as

an unenlightened and 'subjective' acceptance of distorted images of reality. But this view is seriously mistaken. It reads into Althusser the very humanist and empiricist conceptions of epistemology which he attacks. It is doubly wrong. First, because it returns to the old conception of ideology as "false consciousness" which is not Althusser's but that of Lukács. Ideology, as previously noted plays a largely functional and material role in Althusser's Structuralism, interpellating "subjects" and, in capitalism, promoting the interests of the ruling classes. Ideology is *pre*-scientific, but in Canguilhem's sense that it is insufficiently theorised and historically prior to science, not necessarily 'wrong'.<sup>75</sup> Second, to confuse Althusser's science with an "objectivism" where science is *the* privileged arbiter of *true* representations of the world is to completely misread his position. As we shall see, scientific truth for Althusser is something quite different, it is a function of the distance between *scientific practices* and other aspects of the *social formation*.

A correspondence theory of truth, in its simplest form, will hold that there is an external world which we can study by testing hypotheses against non-theoretical empirical data, observations that are 'pure' and not themselves sullied by theoretical implications. It founds its claim to true representation upon the existence of a fully independent reality. This has an obvious connection with materialism which claims that there are 'solid' objects in the world which exist independently of our thoughts of them *in the sense that* the world is not the creation of our ideas. Because of this perceived connection, there is a danger of Althusser's anti-empiricism being read as anti-materialism or idealism. Some see him as opposed to any empirical

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<sup>75</sup> On Canguilhem's influence, (specifically about the use of the term "epistemological break") Althusser says, "my debt to Canguilhem is incalculable, and it is my interpretation that tends in the direction of his, as it is a continuation of his" *ibid.*, p. 257.

investigation at all. Thus Merquior claims that Althusserian science floats free of empirical data altogether and accuses him of an

“appalling ignorance of most modern philosophy of science (not a word about Popper or Quine, Reichenbach, Nagel, Hempel, Lakatos or Putnam)”<sup>76</sup>

In fact this only shows up Merquior's own ignorance of Althusser's philosophical precursors in the philosophy of science.<sup>77</sup> Almost all philosophers of science now agree that there are no such things as pure and unadulterated empirical data, they are always “theory laden”. Althusser's attack on empiricism is an attack upon the philosophies associated with methods that do not fully take into account the nature of the relations between theory and experience, that experience which, he claims, without theory is *always* ideologically mediated and never simply raw data.

Because of the close analogy between materialism's and humanism's view of an ‘independent’ world, the correspondence theory of truth is carried over into naive readings of Marxism. From Descartes onwards, and to some extent even before this, common-sense notions of knowledge have echoed this mirroring relationship between mind (and its “glassy essence”) and body.<sup>78</sup> But, Althusser claims, this whole metaphysical view is ideological; it represents a humanist and inadequate understanding of human relations to

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<sup>76</sup> Merquior *op. cit.*, n. 15 above, p. 148. He also states that for “Althusser science spins concepts perfectly undisturbed by the world they are supposed to explain, and thought becomes a silkworm, drawing on itself alone.” *ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>77</sup> In particular French traditions, not a word about Duhem, Poincaré, and only a passing mention of Canguilhem and Bachelard! This is not to suggest that Merquior is ignorant of these philosophers but to emphasise that the philosophers referred to in any text has more to do with the traditions upon which the author calls than with his or her philosophical ability.

<sup>78</sup> See Richard Rorty *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

the world which Marxism is designed to overcome.

The pervasive nature of the ideology of correspondence theories of knowledge is such that it is extraordinarily difficult to eradicate, causing serious difficulties for an understanding of any Marxist epistemology. This problem arises in two ways. First, the humanist analysis of the world and our relation to it is unquestionably accepted by the majority of people living in Western societies. This leads to the interpretation of Marxism as positivist *science* - in the sense that it reaches and exposes the underlying laws of nature and society.

Second, those who advocate materialism oppose it to idealism as an alternative philosophical position. The error is then to advocate materialism because it *corresponds* to the world whereas idealism does not. This smuggles in the correspondence theory again, this time under the guise of *philosophy*. Both these tendencies have to be resisted, for in accepting any correspondence theory vulgar Marxism becomes, ironically, tied to a dualist conception of the world in which theory has no material being itself but is merely that which mirrors nature - the very dualist conception of object and subject which the dialectic is intended to overcome.

Althusser's critique of humanism is also a critique of the inherent reductionism of over-simplified conceptions of materialism. In the naive, and orthodox, Marxist view materiality is centred upon the archetypal mode of the concrete physical object (like concrete paving stones!) and theory has to be reducible to *this* modality of material, it can be nothing more than an epiphenomenon of a material object, i.e. the brain. Althusser's modalities of

materiality correspond with his attempt to *de-center* this fixation with 'solid' material and allow a space for non-reducible levels of substance, constituted in practices. Theory now becomes not epiphenomenal 'ideas' but a structured and structuring aspect of social realities, with a relative autonomy. This conception has the advantage that theory is no longer immediately associated, by a knee-jerk reflex with ideas and "idealism". It does not specify the form that the material of social formations must take, as it is not a simple substance monism but a complex Spinozistic holism. Theory has its own structural efficacy which is not reducible to other levels of the social formation.

The humanist misreading of Althusser exactly parallels the naive materialist misreading of Marx, and for the same reason, namely that both understand dialectical materialism as Feuerbachian materialism, a simple reductive materialism opposed to idealism. But dialectical materialism rejects this idealism / materialism dichotomy, replacing it, as noted, with the notion of productive practices. This "practice" is not the psychological collapsing of the division between 'object' and 'subject' envisaged by Kant, but is explicated instead in terms of social practice rather than human consciousness.<sup>79</sup> In this way it avoids the subject / object dichotomy of humanism. (Marx's concept, unlike Kant's, is also historicised.) In other words it is in practical activities that we come to know the world.

As previously noted this does not mean that Althusser was uninfluenced by positivism. Ironically this influence comes about because of the nature of his

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<sup>79</sup> See David Rubinstein *Marx and Wittgenstein: Social Praxis and Social Explanation* p.167.

break with humanism and empirico-positivism, with the whole ideology that sees truth as correspondence with the world. In making this break his problematic becomes so different from common-sense approaches that few are able or willing to understand it. But the political purpose behind Althusser's work was to renew Marxist theory and provide an understanding of societies which could facilitate revolutionary practice, i.e. a practice involving the very people who labour under common-sense ideology. It was therefore necessary for these people to break from their own ideological positions in order to be able to understand them. The dilemma is how to bring about this understanding. Althusser cannot simply alter his theoretical stance to make it translatable into common-sense terms, for in this case its avocation of science would appear as positivism. Nor can he reject common-sense perspectives altogether, as incompatible with his problematic, as this runs the risk of being too theoretical. This dilemma is spelt out by Althusser in relation to past readings of *For Marx* in the later introduction in the English edition. His emphasis on the unity of the epistemological break (in respect to the simultaneous origins of historical and dialectical materialism) made him open to positivist readings, but when he emphasises the importance of theory in its autonomous aspects he is read as idealist, or at least too far removed from revolutionary practice.<sup>80</sup> Although Althusser does not repudiate the importance of theory (how could he?) he does accept this latter political reading of his work to some extent and attempts to 'correct' it.

Althusser's movement towards Marxist orthodoxy in his later works is, however, more apparent than real. Most essays are merely simplified

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<sup>80</sup> See Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 3 above, pp. 13-14.

expositions of his early positions. The “Reply to John Lewis” is a classic example. Ironically it was Ralph Milliband, no friend of Marxist structuralism, who saw the importance of Althusser’s theoretical works; ironically, as he opposed the perceived Althusserian tendencies of Marxist theoreticians like Poulantzas; discussing Althusser’s anti-empiricism (so misunderstood by Merquior), he states,

“This is... not a crude (and false) contraposition of empiricist versus non- or anti-empiricist approaches; it is a matter of emphasis- but emphasis is important.”<sup>81</sup>

The theoretician aspects of Althusser’s work, from which he later seemed to backtrack, were the focus of many attacks, which questioned the motives of a Marxist philosopher who derides common-sense. E.P. Thompson’s essay “The Poverty of Theory” is perhaps the best known example of such an approach.<sup>82</sup>

Althusser quite openly admits to these theoretician tendencies which, nonetheless are no more than a proper lack of emphasis upon the political import of his work. His later self-criticisms are an attempt to take into account

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<sup>81</sup> Ralph Milliband *Class Power and State Power* p. 30.

<sup>82</sup> See for example his witty attempt to show how far removed Althusser’s concepts of the interpellation of the subject and overdetermination would be from dissatisfied factory workers in Longbridge car plant. E. P. Thompson *op. cit.*, n. 19 above, p. 335. Thompson reminds theoreticians that there is a real need to keep in mind the political implications of the work they produce. For example, too much philosophy, including that in the field of environmental ethics, is too far removed from the practical problems of everyday ‘green’ issues. This being said the theoretical arena is a necessary part of the environmentalists’ struggle especially when faced with a pervasive ideology of economism. The theoretical sphere has a *relative* autonomy which environmentalists must use to further their ends.

Thompson actually completely misunderstands Althusser’s political motive which was to re-establish the credentials of science and make a case for it as a practice which should not be subordinated to the political sphere as Stalin had attempted to do.

that as Marx said,

“the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.”<sup>83</sup>

In only one important area does he significantly change the basis of his theories. This is in altering his definition of Marxist philosophy from that of the “Theory of theoretical practice” to that of “class struggle in the field of theory.”<sup>84</sup> This change, brought about by political pressures to give his theories an ‘obvious’ (and common-sense) relevance, pushed him towards an instrumentalism at odds with his Spinozistic inheritance. This redefinition risked reducing Marxism’s epistemological and theoretical import to that of political practice, it comes to be valued only for its effectivity in other spheres. This justification of knowledge has a ring of desperation about it. One of the Twentieth Century’s greatest philosophers when asked to justify Philosophy answers first with an original explanation in terms of its relatively autonomous role in the overdetermination of social formations. This answer, misunderstood because of its radical nature is simplified to a new formulation, one that then runs the risk of being interpreted as support for pragmatism, a reductionism of philosophy to politics in complete contrast to that philosophy’s inherent anti-reductionism. To echo Milliband “emphasis is important”. Althusser ironically recognised exactly the phenomenon of which he was later to become a willing victim in his earlier analysis of the death of good French philosophy.

“[The French Party] very rarely attracted men [sic] of sufficient *philosophical* formation to realise that Marxism should not be simply a

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<sup>83</sup> Marx *op. cit.*, n. 56 above, §3 p. 422.

<sup>84</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 33 above, p. 108.

political doctrine, a 'method' of analysis and action, but also, and over and above the rest the *theoretical domain of a fundamental investigation.*"<sup>85</sup>

### Spinoza, Althusser and Coherence Theories of Truth

For Althusser theory has two aspects, historical materialism (Marxist science), and dialectical materialism (Marxist philosophy). Science is not concerned to establish a correspondence between theory and (so called) 'facts', or 'empirical data': the existence of pure empirical data is a positivist myth. Althusser's is an attempt to construct a theoretical framework in which historical events and conceptual terms are given meaning, in the only way that anything can be meaningful. Althusser holds, as does the later Wittgenstein, that there can be no understanding except by grasping a concept's "place", its relation to other concepts and its use. This must not be taken to mean that concepts float free from the world, rather, the metaphysical aspects of the theory require concepts to have a certain practical and active relation to our perception of events to be acceptable. If a science cannot predict events which it is supposed *on its own claims* to do then it will be found wanting. Any coherence theory of knowledge makes a necessary distinction between the object and knowledge of that object, between in Althusser's case the *real-concrete* and the *concrete-in-thought*. A theory that was *only* a coherence theory, in the sense of a doxastic theory where concepts only relate to other concepts would be idealism. Spinoza and Marx avoid this problem in different ways. In Spinoza the problem is

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<sup>85</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 3 above, p. 26.

solved by the necessary connection between “*idea*” and “*ideatum*”, the parallelism of the two attributes of substance. Marxism rejects the idealism / materialism divide altogether and proposes knowledge as practice, inherently and always a mediation of object and subject.<sup>86</sup> In this sense the theoretical concepts employed by Althusser are only relatively autonomous, not, as in idealism and empiricism, completely autonomous. (In idealism theory constitutes the world according to its own categories, in empiricism empirical data is, to a degree at least, independent of theory.) For Althusser, practices determine (overdetermine or underdetermine) the success of any theory.

Althusser and Spinoza both believe that there is a convergence of all science and theory into a *single* whole and transcendental theoretical system. Increasing knowledge depends upon placing concepts within an increasingly inter-linked rational theoretical system.

“As we ascend the scale of levels of knowledge... to scientific knowledge, our ideas... become more and more ‘concatenated or logically coherent, and so we can be said to understand more and more fully...”<sup>87</sup>

In Spinoza’s case this increasing systematisation approaches the view of nature *sub specie aeternitatis*. A view which is all inclusive and hence neither historically or socially particular. In Althusser’s case this is Marxism, historical and dialectical materialism as *the* science and philosophy of social

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<sup>86</sup> The process that produces concrete knowledge takes place wholly in theoretical practice. It does concern the *real-concrete* but this real material world “survives in its independence after as before, outside thought.” Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 3 above, p. 186.

<sup>87</sup> Stuart Hampshire *Spinoza* p. 76.

formations. i.e. the Theory of Althusser's complex whole.<sup>88</sup>

If we experienced ideas merely as strings of thoughts haphazardly connected no adequate understanding would be possible. Adequate ideas only come about when we logically connect them together into a coherent whole. Truth, or adequacy, is for Spinoza and Althusser a matter of coherence, not of correspondence to external objects. As truth in coherence theories is a matter of the degree of concatenation of concepts, these concepts cannot be said to be *absolutely* false.

“There is no sense allowed in Spinoza in which any judgment or idea, *considered in isolation from other judgments or ideas*, could be said to be absolutely false; for, given the doctrine of the law of infinite Attributes, every idea or judgment must have its *ideatum* and therefore no question of an idea utterly failing to correspond to some independent reality can possibly arise.”<sup>89</sup>

As Hampshire puts it,

“Spinoza insists that error is always a privation of knowledge; to say that an idea or proposition is false is to say that it is relatively incomplete or fragmentary ... the falsity is corrected as soon as the idea is placed in connection with other ideas in a larger system of

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<sup>88</sup> The possibility of such an increasingly all encompassing theoretical problematic depends, in Spinoza's case, upon there being a unitary absolute substance, and this suggests that the analogous totality for Althusser would be the totality of the social formation. This in turn raises the question of what constitutes the grounds for Althusser's claim that the social formation can be regarded as a totality given the fragmentation of practices within the social formation. As we have seen he cannot, and does not, rely upon substance monism in any essentialist manner to construct this totality but upon the notion of the relative autonomy of practices.

<sup>89</sup> Hampshire *op. cit.*, n. 87 above, p. 74.

knowledge.”<sup>90</sup>

Of course, neither Althusser or Spinoza thinks that a state of perfect systematisation has been reached. The perfect metaphysics is something both strive to achieve. In Spinoza’s case our limited nature as modes of the whole substance makes such a perfect understanding impossible but the use of our rational faculties can overcome this at least to a degree.

“We as mind bodies have access to the infinite intellect of God when we impose upon our confusing perceptions ... those features of logical and mathematical coherence, and those solid principles of rational explanation, which are in reality everywhere valid.”<sup>91</sup>

For Althusser an acceptable account of the superstructure has yet to be formulated, but Marx laid the foundations in his theoretical break with previous ideological understandings of social formations.

“there is no pure theoretical practice, no perfectly transparent science which throughout its history as a science will always be preserved.... from the *ideologies* which besiege it.”<sup>92</sup>

In referring to Althusser’s and Spinoza’s theories as coherence theories I do not mean to imply that the truth or falsity of a statement is dependent solely upon its place in a *theoretical* problematic. Both systems also assume particular kinds of relation between the theoretical and non-theoretical, between theory and practice in Althusser’s case and between idea and *ideatum* in Spinoza’s. In this sense they both give hermeneutic justifications for their epistemological claims. Both Althusser and Spinoza have

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<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>92</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 3 above, p. 170.

conceptions of inadequate and adequate knowledge and both see knowledge proceeding by a critique of common-sense. Both operate with what might broadly be called coherence theories of truth and both have a faith in the power of theory. But, rather than drawing exact parallels as Christopher Norris has tried to do, e.g. between Spinoza's "knowledge of the first kind" and ideology, and between higher levels of 'adequate' knowledge, we need to recognise the differences in their problematics as well as their similarities.

Althusser's adherence to Marxist and structuralist problematics means that, although his levels of ideology and theory are material modalities, it is by their relatively autonomous structuring of social formations that they affect individuals rather than via a physical or biological modality as Spinoza seems to suggest. This is also indicative of a further important difference. Spinoza is continuing Descartes' quest for *individual* enlightenment and truth. Althusser places emphasis on the effectivity of theory at the societal level, his practices are *social* practices which affect individuals.

For all these reasons epistemological parallels must not be pushed too far. Adequate knowledge comes to represent both science and Marxist philosophy and, for Althusser, theoretical forms of knowledge e.g. bourgeois philosophy are more or less consigned to the level of ideology as inadequate although critical concepts. On Spinozistic terms there is no *a priori* reason for choosing to relegate any type of theoretical work to the level of "knowledge of the first kind". Althusser has to relegate all non-Marxist philosophy to ideology to maintain his ideology (qua prescience) / science distinction. It is not sufficient for him that ideas be actively systematised

rather than passively received to distinguish adequate from inadequate ideas. All prescientific theory and pre-Marxist philosophy (including Marx's own early works) is inadequate and ideological. In this respect Althusser's philosophy is partisan in the extreme.

There are however other interesting parallels that can be drawn.

Spinoza's "knowledge of the third kind", or intuitive knowledge, proceeds from knowledge of the second kind, adequate ideas of the properties of things, to an adequate idea of the essences of things. It achieves this qualitative leap via the adequate knowledge of God or Nature achieved in knowledge of the second kind, i.e. via a knowledge of the complex whole. This does have a parallel in Althusser's conception of Marxist philosophy, if one reads science as a possible equivalent to knowledge *sub specie durationis*. Dialectical materialism is able to discuss the status of scientific practice only via the proper understanding of the social formation as a complex whole achieved by historical materialism. Only after Marx had produced historical materialism, a science providing adequate knowledge of social formations (the complex whole), could one proceed to Marxist philosophy.

"the foundation of the science of history by Marx has induced the birth of a new, theoretically and practically revolutionary philosophy, Marxist

philosophy or dialectical materialism.”<sup>93</sup>

The very existence of ideological and theoretical levels only came to be seen after Marx’s theoretical formulations in the “Theses on Feuerbach” and “The German Ideology”. But any *justification* of such a holistic science must be dependent upon that science for its own explanatory power. The apparent, and real, circularity is a necessary result of maintaining a holistic coherence theory, which has no external standards for comparison and must therefore possess a self-reflexivity. Althusser recognised that only Spinoza had ever previously come close to such a discovery.

“The only theoretician who had the unprecedented daring to probe this problem and outline a first solution to it was Spinoza. But as we know, history had buried him in impenetrable darkness. Only through Marx, who however had little knowledge of him, do we even begin to guess at the features of that trampled face.”<sup>94</sup>

This raises the whole issue of the status of coherence theories and the respective rationales of Spinoza and Althusser for advocating such a view.

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<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, p.14. In Louis Althusser & Etienne Balibar *Reading Capital*, Althusser had discussed the epistemological break in Marx’s work as one that was at the same time both scientific and “philosophical”.

The radicalness of this rupture had the benefit that it seemed to occlude the question of how a Marxist Theory of social formations arose in a particular social formation in which philosophy was just a reflected form of ideology. i.e. How did Marx himself escape from the all-enveloping ideology without already having to hand a theory of Ideology-in-general? If the epistemological break was sudden and both philosophical and scientific then it can be passed over as a work of genius, a flash of inspiration or just in silence. But critics like John Lewis pointed out that the break in Marx is not at all sudden. Concepts like “alienation”, a humanist concept, and “negation of the negation”, a Hegelian concept, keep reappearing in Marx’s later works.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, p. 87.

In one respect, Althusser's and Spinoza's adherence to a coherence theory of truth is the result of holistic and deterministic aspects of their metaphysics which require that everything is, in the last instance, causally related to everything else, and therefore potentially fully understandable only within one single unifying system of thought. Althusser never questions that Marxism is *the* transcendental science and philosophy of society; that it is the only serious contender for the status of a Theory of complex wholes. Althusser's claim for the authority of Marxist theory above all others, is that it is the only theory which coheres with other scientific views of the world and the only theory which can properly explain its own origins.

Althusser sees science as a possible route of escape from the imposition of specific forms of ideology present in class societies. "[W]hile speaking in ideology, and from within ideology, we have to outline a discourse which tries to break with ideology."<sup>95</sup> Althusser was aware that claims to have made this break altogether have to be treated with scepticism

"those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology... As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself (unless one is a Spinozist or a Marxist, which, in this matter, is to be exactly the same thing)."<sup>96</sup>

By this Althusser means that both Spinoza and Marx are aware of their own positions as theorists within particular social and historical contexts, they both comprehend the difficulties inherent in proposing a theory which has to explain its own origins and status. To this extent at least they could both be seen as *hermeneutic* philosophers.

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<sup>95</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 33 above, p. 46.

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*, p. 49.

“That Marxism can and must itself be the object of the epistemological question, that this epistemological question can only be asked as a function of the Marxist theoretical problematic, that is necessity itself for a theory which defines itself dialectically, not merely as a science of history (historical materialism) but also and simultaneously as a philosophy, a philosophy that is capable of accounting for the nature of theoretical formations and their history and therefore *capable of accounting for itself*, by making itself as its own object. Marxism is the only philosophy that theoretically passes this test.”<sup>97</sup>

Spinoza, Marx and Althusser believe that theory allows one to escape from particular circumstances, at least to some degree, to generalities that are fundamentally a-historical. In other words they see their own theories as paradoxically escaping from ideology. To justify this they all posit an a-historical qualitative difference between different levels of knowledge in one form or another. Althusser’s own problems with this paradox crystallise around the theoretical role of the science / ideology dichotomy. He wishes to privilege the Marxist science of society (historical materialism) as breaking with old ideological conceptions of society, yet to do this he has to maintain that in effect the level of theory was, at least in relation to social and historical matters, before 1845 ineradicably “ideological” i.e. not theory at all. Marx, by himself, created a theory of society which led to the recognition of ideology and (after Althusser) of theoretical levels within society. Marx had to break with previous views of the relations of human thought to the world. He accomplished this with a general theory of “practices”. Marxism itself has to be situated in this general theory and according to Althusser represents a separate and potentially self-reflexive theoretical practice. It is the fact that

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<sup>97</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 3 above, pp. 38-39.

Marxism can achieve this hermeneutic or self-reflexive feat that justifies its own elevation to become the sole occupier of the theoretical level insofar as the social sciences are concerned. For any non-Marxist this must appear unforgivably arbitrary.

### Jorge Larrain and the 'Objects' of Theory.

If this thesis is correct in identifying and emphasising the Spinozistic influences on Althusser, this interpretation should clarify some of the difficulties theorists have raised in respect to his work. Larrain provides one of the more comprehensive critiques of Althusser's concept of ideology. Larrain perceives three changes of emphasis in Althusser's use of the concept "ideology".<sup>98</sup> (Schaff, according to Larrain, "finds at least ten different definitions, not all of them compatible with one another."<sup>99</sup>) First, a structural conception of ideology as the *cement* of society. Second, ideology as necessarily distorted and false. Third, a functional conception whereby ideology interpellates *concrete* individuals as subjects, and serves the interests of the dominant classes.

I have argued that Larrain's second emphasis is one that is read into Althusser because he panders too much to conservative (and positivist) Marxist conceptions of science. The first and third emphases are aspects of a single theoretical concept in no way incompatible with each other.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Larrain *The Concept of Ideology* p. 155.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, p. 239n.

<sup>100</sup> "In effect, in the article on the ISA, Althusser formalises a distinction foreshadowed in his first writings." *ibid.*, p. 158.

Larrain's claim is that Althusser has replaced an idealist conception of humanity (that of a shared human essence in all social formations) with an equally a-historical and hypostatized conception of ideology, which is Althusser's concept of "ideology in general". Ideology in general has no history. "If there is any truth in it [the general theory of ideology] the mechanism must be *abstract* with respect to every real ideological formation."<sup>101</sup> It is "endowed with a structure and functioning such as to make it a non-historical reality i.e. an *omni-historical* reality."<sup>102</sup> Although specific ideologies have particular histories, "the formal structure of all ideology is always the same."<sup>103</sup> Larrain states

"Althusser's distinction between the theory of ideology in general and the theory of particular ideologies is highly problematic for a Marxist approach. It entails the pretension of constituting ideology as an immutable object of study across the various modes of production."<sup>104</sup>

In other words having disposed of a concept of human nature Althusser allegedly reintroduces a conception of social nature which implies that ideology is always and everywhere a part of social formations. (Incidentally but perhaps more importantly for Althusser's anti-humanism, this would also reintroduce a concept of human nature, in which to be human is to be a being which find its place in social formations through ideology.) If one were to ignore the Spinozistic elements of Althusser's thought then this would indeed seem to be a logical reading, but this diminishes Althusser's own distinction between "ideology in general" and "ideology in particular".

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<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 159-160.

Without wishing to write an apology for all aspects of Althusser's epistemology this distinction is nonetheless crucial to his work.

Larrain's question raises two issues. First, what sort of an 'object' is ideology? Second, is this 'object' immutable or a-historical? Althusser might answer that "Ideology in general" is a structural *concept* at the level of *theory*. That is, it belongs to a discourse which is relatively autonomous, separated (to a degree) from particular instances of other parts of the social formation such as the economic and the ideological. "Ideology in general" is a concept used in understanding particular features of social formations, it plays a part in the scientific analysis of social formations, i.e. in historical materialism and in dialectical materialism. "Ideology in general", does not exist in any ontological fashion *except insofar* as all concepts are also a part of the complex social whole: i.e. it exists in the theoretical modality. On the other hand, ideology in particular is the actual experience of the world produced through given historically and socially specific ideological practices. It is ideological "knowledge" of the world not theoretical knowledge.

Larrain appears to underestimate the epistemological emphasis of Althusser's work. He compares Althusser's abstraction of ideology in general to Marxist generalities like "labour", "production", etc. and points out that for Marx these categories are all ultimately historicised and never proposed as causally effective 'objects' in their own right. This is to miss Althusser's point, for he is comparing ideology to other practices. e.g. economic practice. Ideology is an epistemological analogue of these, having exactly the same status. Just as economic activity *in particular* is

regarded in Marxist theory as having social effectivity, so does Althusser's ideology in particular. Ideology in particular is not the pure material, of something called ideology, it does not correspond to a material object, but is a theoretical term in a coherence theory, used to indicate the *presence*, of a particular *instance* of a theorised ideology in general. This presence is not a real-concrete object, but a part of ideological practice, of a certain form of experience, understood in a concatenation of theoretical terms. All of the concepts discussed here - whether Larrain's or Althusser's, are to be seen in this coherence view as theoretical. They are once removed from the elements of practice they discuss and yet are paradoxically still a part of the same physical materiality.<sup>105</sup> Althusser is working with an entirely different

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<sup>105</sup> This is where a reference to Spinoza may help clarify these difficult entanglements. In appendix 1 Althusser's levels of society are compared with Spinoza's modes, or "affectations of substance". Roughly speaking, modes are the forms in which finite parts of the infinite whole express themselves, the 'states' of things. Spinoza *op.cit.*, n. 24 above, Pt. 1, Defn.15. Similarly, for Althusser different levels are modalities of the complex whole which are nonetheless still parts of that whole, not distinct from it.

But in this regard it is interesting to compare the 'modalities' of material to that of the 'attributes' of substance. Whilst the status of Spinoza's attributes is matter of some contention (See for example R. N. Beck 'The Attribute of Thought' pp.1-12. and A. Donegan 'Essence and the Distinction of Attributes'), they operate as a compromise between Cartesian dualism and Spinoza's substance monism. Spinoza defines an attribute as "that which the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence." Spinoza *op. cit.*, Pt. 1, Defn. 4. Humans because of our limited natures, perceive only two attributes, those of extension and of thought, but, from the perspective of nature there are an infinite number of attributes. *ibid.*, Pt. 1, Prop. 11. Althusser's levels or practices are the perceived 'essences' of his social formation, those attributes that our current social relations allow us to distinguish. Thus Althusser's statement that "in the last instance" theoretical modalities are reducible to the physical material seems to be simply a statement of a monistic philosophy. Insofar as the analogy between social formations and Spinozistic substance holds then, the practices represent the necessary ways in which people come to experience the world and are to this extent akin to Spinoza's attributes. However whereas Spinoza's "attributes" are properly autonomous but Althusser's modalities are only relatively autonomous.

taxonomy of the world, i.e. his fourfold division of practices, rather than a humanist taxonomy which recognises two distinctions, that of theory and that of materiality (of language and world) one of which is then held to represent or correspond to the other.

Perhaps now we can make some sense of Larrain's views that Althusser "borders on idealism"<sup>106</sup> and decide whether or not ideology is immutable. He is quite simply wrong on both counts, for "ideology in general" is not constituted as an immutable 'object', for study, nor is it reducible to ideas, rather it is precisely, particular ideologies which are *objects* for study and particular ideologies, far from being immutable, vary everywhere and always. Ideology in general i.e. the concept of there being an ideological level of societies, is a concept of Marxist science and philosophy; it is a Theoretical concept (with a capital T, i.e. in Althusser's terminology Marxist theory) and in this sense it is a recent theoretical invention.

Althusser constitutes ideology as an immutable object of study only in the "philosophical" and self-reflexive sense that Marxism constitutes any other theoretical concept as an immutable object of study. In an exactly parallel argument about the status of history Althusser says

"that the *concept of history* can no longer be empirical i.e. *historical* in the ordinary sense, that, as Spinoza has already put it, the concept dog cannot bark."<sup>107</sup>

To treat "ideology" in general itself as an 'object' of study, requiring the justification and explication of the concept as it originated in Marx's theory,

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<sup>106</sup> Larrain *op. cit.*, n. 98 above, p. 160.

<sup>107</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 65 above, p. 105.

was developed by Lucáks, Althusser etc., is to do Marxist philosophy rather than Marxist science. The fact that “ideology” as a concept has developed at all shows that it is not immutable. In this way we can understand both Althusser’s early view of dialectical materialism as meta-theory (and theory as meta-practice) and his later remarks that philosophy does not have an object “in the sense that a science has an object ... Although philosophy has no object....there exist ‘philosophical objects’; objects internal to philosophy.”<sup>108</sup>

Larrain's error is in treating Althusser as promoting a correspondence theory of truth with a physical object that theoretical discourse corresponds to. But as Althusser makes plain, and as we shall see in the deeper discussion of “theory” in the next chapter, philosophy, like science, is a holistic form of coherence theory which in part constructs the objects recognised by theory and through theory.

Where Larrain is correct is that *insofar* as Althusser wishes to view the conceptual categories of Marxism as the final answer for the social sciences, as a problematic which they must necessarily continue to work in, then these categories gain transcendental theoretical status. This is however a problem which faces all Marxists and transcendental theorists, not just Althusser.

### Conventionalism.

The claim that only Marxism can explain itself, and is therefore the only ‘true’

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<sup>108</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 68 above, p. 77

theory, is an attempt to combat conventionalist critiques of coherence theories. An important influence on Althusser's philosophy of science was Gaston Bachelard under whom Althusser studied. The concepts of "problematic" and "epistemological break" owe much to Bachelard's influence. In conventionalism, as in coherence theories, scientific theories are structures within which concepts obtain a particular meaning. The structure will exclude certain questions from consideration and make other of crucial importance. A problematic develops which that particular science is concerned to explain within its own terms, for

"the categories structuring the conception of reality must be those employed in the expression of the objective knowledge of it." <sup>109</sup>

Scientific concepts can only have meaning within a structure which includes a conception of what constitutes an adequate scientific explanation. Even the conceptions of adequacy change. As Mary Tiles puts it, the question of what a science is trying to discover

"is specifiable only against the background of a structural epistemological field, it is not independent of the forms structuring the field, but is constituted as possible knowledge, possible content by them." <sup>110</sup>

Prescientific theorising is, according to Bachelard, marked by its closed structure, as opposed to the open-endedness of science. The science emerges after an epistemological break when a new 'theoretical' structure takes over. This epistemological break is akin to Kuhn's later conception of paradigm shifts within science, but, in Bachelard's case, it marks the

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<sup>109</sup> Mary Tiles *Bachelard: Science and Objectivity* p. 184.

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, p.183. Here again one can see similarities with Lakatos' concept of a research programme. See above, n. 10.

boundary between science and prescience.<sup>111</sup>

Bachelard's conventionalism entails that theoretical works, whether scientific theories or philosophies, are relative to both historical and social "place".

Scientific conventionalism grew from the work of Poincaré and Duhem after the immense upheaval caused by the overthrowing of Newtonian physics at the turn of the Twentieth century. In conventionalism "theory" is underdetermined by empirical evidence and theoretical reasoning. There are always other possible explanations for events or happenings. For Bachelard the structure of a science cannot be fixed once and for all.

"the scientific activity of any period takes place within an epistemological field (a problematic) which is structured by its explanatory ideals, its conception of the goal of objective knowledge. The description of this goal can only be schematic in character. It requires a schematic account both of the nature of reality (a metaphysics) and of what it would be to have objective knowledge of that reality."<sup>112</sup>

Althusser's work cannot ultimately withstand the conventionalist critique for the simple reason that it could always be the case that there is more than one potentially suitable theory - even more than one self-reflexive theory. The only defence against this kind of critique is to hold a metaphysical position akin to Spinoza's parallelism which as noted includes a necessary element of *one to one* correspondence to the world. However, Althusser's Bachelardian background never allows him to hold the coherence position

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<sup>111</sup> Thomas Kuhn 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions'.

<sup>112</sup> Tiles *op. cit.*, n. 109 above, p. 183.

with Spinoza's confidence.<sup>113</sup> Marxism is always open to revision but is nevertheless the basis for an understanding of all societies. The ever present tension is the necessity to accept the social and historical constraints upon his own and Marx's theories whilst assuming their transcendental accuracy. By assuming a fully conventionalist position in regard to the possibility of other explanations emerging he could avoid this but political (and humanist) pressure pulls his work in the direction of absolutism.

The importance of placing Althusser firmly in the context of Spinoza and Bachelard can be seen when reading critiques that follow what can only be termed a positivist line like Kowlakowski's.<sup>114</sup> Kowlakowski's shallow analysis presumes to find in Althusser only "common sense banalities expressed with the help of unnecessarily complicated neologisms" compounded by a crypto-Stalinism.<sup>115</sup> Yet despite these bold statements one wonders whether he had actually read any Althusser at all! He claims that Althusser is vague about his definition of ideology,<sup>116</sup> and nowhere explains what practice means.<sup>117</sup> This is simply untrue, indeed both are explicitly defined in the glossary to *For Marx* and their explication is implicit in many pages of text for those who can be bothered to read them carefully. Kowlakowski treats Althusser's anti-empiricism as merely an anti-

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<sup>113</sup> Spinoza's formulation is not however designed, as Althusser's is to uphold the privilege of *one* particular theoretical discourse i.e. Marxism. Instead it represents a general privileging of the principles of rational thought themselves. It is a testament to our potential to escape the mundane, passively received, and inadequate knowledge of the first kind using our critical faculties. Althusser restricts the effectiveness of theoretical discourse to the physical sciences and to Marxism as the science and philosophy of social formations.

<sup>114</sup> Lezek Kowlakowski *The Socialist Register*.

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*, p. 127n.

essentialism and goes so far as to claim that science is about “empirical verification”.<sup>118</sup> He nowhere grasps the importance of a holistic coherence theory to Althusser or even shows any inkling that there might be non-correspondence theories of truth. The fact that Kowlakowski has since published a three volume history of Marxist thought (which incidentally hardly treats of Althusser at all) in no way reduces the appalling ignorance he shows in this paper which is typical of those who have dismissed Althusser without understanding him.

Althusser tries to occupy a ground which is in one sense between a historicised conventionalism and an a-historical coherence theory, a ground which corresponds roughly to the area now termed “critical theory”.<sup>119</sup> (In this sense despite all his differences with the Frankfurt School he can be aligned with them in this attempt to find a role for theory, in attempting to escape an all encompassing ideology. The following two chapters will assess Althusser’s success in this manoeuvre.)

### Conclusions

The preceding exposition cannot hope to have covered in any detail all the issues raised in Althusser’s philosophy. This was in any case not its purpose. Certain issues and influences have been underplayed. Perhaps the most obvious exclusion is any judgment on the accuracy of his readings of Marx. Other omissions include his relation to Balibar with whom he co-

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<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*, pp.116-117.

<sup>119</sup> The reference here is to the epistemological positions of critical theory and Althusser with respect to ‘reason’ not their attitudes towards science which are often quite opposite.

wrote *Reading Capital* and the deep influence of the works of Lenin and Comte. This chapter has sought to place Althusser in a philosophical context as the heir not only to Marx but to Spinoza, influenced not only by materialism but by Structuralism, and whose constructivist theory of knowledge exhibits aspects of holistic coherence and conventionalist epistemologies. He was, I claim, a philosopher who was hermeneutically aware. Such a variety of influences are bound to create tensions within any problematic and it is a mark of his brilliance that his theory was at all coherent. Some of these tensions have been highlighted here as important theoretical elisions which point the way to a constructive critique and application of his theories. This critique will be the subject of the next chapter.

### Excursus on Althusser and Structuralism

Given Althusser's obvious indebtedness to Structuralism what are we to make of his repudiation of Structuralism? The distinction between Althusser's Spinozistic metaphysics and his Marxist dialectical epistemology is the key to this repudiation and points to the differences between Althusser and professed Marxist structuralists like Maurice Godelier.

Godelier draws heavily upon the writings of Lévi-Strauss but there is an ambiguity in the ontological status given to structures in both Lévi-Strauss and Godelier that Althusser would find problematic. Thus Lévi-Strauss

states

“The term ‘social structure’ has nothing to do with empirical reality but with models that are built up after it... social relations consist of the raw materials out of which the models are built, while social structure can, by no means, be reduced to the ensemble of social relations in a given society.”<sup>120</sup>

The anti-empiricism is obviously grist to Althusser’s mill but the metaphor of models is ambiguous, for there is a possibility of interpreting this to mean that the models are *directly* comparable to society, that the sociologist’s theories somehow ‘correspond’ to reality. This is the line taken by Godelier when he speaks of structures expressing a hidden ‘deeper reality’.

“what is visible is a *reality* concealing *another*, deeper reality, which is hidden and the discovery of which is the very purpose of scientific cognition.”<sup>121</sup>

From Althusser’s perspective this is to fall back into the very abstractionist empiricism which the dialectic is concerned to overcome. Social structures do not represent the deep reality of the world, we can only ever work with those relations made visible to us in practices. The structures which Althusser posits do not *reflect* the ‘truth’ in empirical terms at all. The deep structure, the real organisation of the world remains forever unknown and unknowable whether by science or any other means. The only guarantee of Althusser’s structures conforming to reality is the interactive nature of the dialectic, the fact that practice necessarily fuses human and nature, subject and object. Structuralism itself has to be seen as a theory trying to give a coherent understanding of the world, it is not a defect of this theory but a

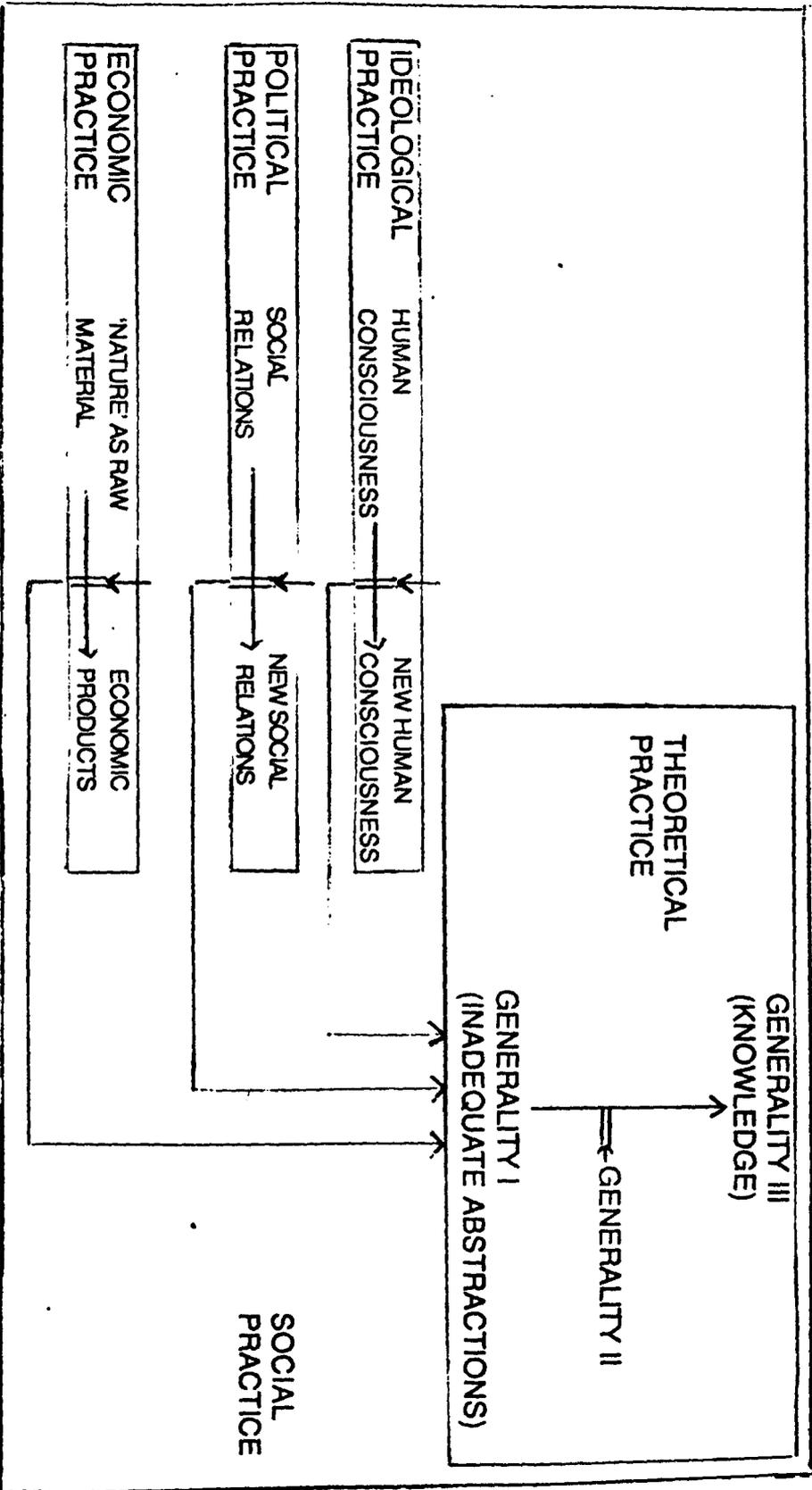
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<sup>120</sup> Levi-Strauss *Structural Anthropology* p.279.

<sup>121</sup> Maurice Godelier ‘The Problem of the ‘Reproduction’ of Socioeconomic Systems’ p. 267.

necessary condition, according to dialectic materialism, that it can never ground itself in the structure of the world *per se* but only in the structure of social experiences of that world. This is the crucial distinction between the metaphysical claims of structuralism *qua* Godelier and dialectical materialism *qua* Althusser.

DIAGRAMMATIC REPRESENTATION OF ALTHUSSER'S CONCEPTION OF PRACTICES.



KEY

→ represents in each case a transformation of a determinate raw material into a determinate product effected by a determinate form of human labour and using determinate means of production.

⇔ represents the "practice in a narrow sense", *For Marx op. cit.*, n.2 above, p. 166. i.e. the moment of the labour of transformation which is also where humans gain experience of that particular aspect of the world giving rise to abstractions.

“With philosophers you know what to expect: at some point they will fall flat on their faces.....Scientists can also fall flat on their faces...But when a philosopher falls.... things are different: for he falls flat on his face within the very theory he is setting forth in order to demonstrate that he is not falling flat on his face. He picks himself up in advance! How many philosophers do you know who admit to *having been mistaken?* A philosopher is never mistaken!”<sup>1</sup>

## CHAPTER FOUR: SCIENCE, THEORY AND IDEOLOGY

### Introduction

The previous chapter attempted to give a generally sympathetic account of Althusser’s theoretical position, defending it against a variety of previous misrepresentations. This chapter takes a more critical approach towards his epistemology, in particular his absolute insistence on the qualitative difference between ideology and theory (or science) which, I suggest, contains the seeds of its own *deconstruction*.

This distinction between ideology and theory as two levels of knowledge, separated by an epistemological break, inevitably raises historical questions concerning the emergence of theoretical practices. Can they be uncompromised by the ideological structures inherent in any particular social formation? Can Althusser’s epistemology sustain his claims to provide a scientific critical appraisal of the very society in which it developed? What features, if any, of “theory” facilitate such an epistemological privilege

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Althusser *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* p. 77.

enabling it to escape from ideology; how is one to decide whether any given conceptual scheme or practice is theoretical / scientific or ideological?

To consider these questions it is necessary to appraise the roles of “science”, “ideology” and “philosophy” both inside Althusser’s theoretical framework and in relation to influential alternative discourses. To this end related concepts of ideology found in the work of Karl Mannheim, Georges Canguilhem and the early work of Michel Foucault are sketched. The critical comparison of these various perspectives on ideology is carried forward in chapters 5-9 to produce a revised synthesis which nevertheless maintains many of the original features of Althusser’s framework. I shall argue that Althusser cannot maintain a *rigid* ideology / science distinction which places Marxism, together with positive sciences, on one side of the divide whilst classifying all non-Marxist philosophy as ideological. There are three main reasons for the unsatisfactory nature of Althusser’s division;

- 1) Althusser’s inability to provide a convincing demarcation principle or a coherent account of the origins of the ideology / theory divide.<sup>2</sup>
- 2) His failure to appreciate fully the complexity of scientific practices and the differences between them in their interactions with philosophies, ideologies and the wider world.
- 3) The powerful arguments for a more ‘conventionalist’ approach which arise once the importance of social and historical factors in the production of knowledge are conceded. Such conventionalism need not entail a full blown relativism and I argue that Althusser is correct in seeking to maintain the *relative* autonomy of certain critical practices from other aspects of the

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<sup>2</sup> The very attempt to institute such a dichotomy between science and non-science reveals the positivist and humanist aspects of Althusser’s theorising. See appendix 1.

societies in which they occur. I hold that certain theories, particularly those found in the natural sciences, are not conventional in the sense that they are arbitrary inventions of scientists or simply mirror in theoretical form the customary presuppositions of everyday social practices. Rather they consist of active critical endeavours which exert a relatively autonomous influence on other components of the social formation. Althusser unfortunately exaggerates this autonomy, opting for a simple two tier “epistemology”. In contrast to this, I claim the degree and form of autonomy is not identical for all theoretical practices; varying with the subject matter concerned, the methodology utilised and that theory’s articulation with other components of the social formation.

### Philosophical Criticism of Althusser’s Epistemology.

There are several areas in which Althusser’s justification of the science / ideology divide and his own theory’s scientific status have appeared to be problematic. In particular his justification is often held to be circular. This first form of criticism is exemplified by Benton who states that Althusser’s theory “fails on account of its circularity: the correspondence of scientific discourse to its object is what has to be proved whilst the method of proof presupposes this, at least in his own case.”<sup>3</sup>

However, as the last chapter argued, Althusser is not concerned with *correspondence* as the criterion for scientific or theoretical knowledge. Indeed, Benton’s evocation of “correspondence” makes it obvious that he has not grasped the central role played by a holistic coherence theory of

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<sup>3</sup> Ted Benton *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism : Althusser and his Influence* p. 184.

meaning and truth in Althusser's work. That Althusser should continue to be read in this humanist fashion by many Marxists, like Benton, who are generally sympathetic to his philosophical project is ironic. It stems from a failure to take Althusser's interpretation of dialectical materialism seriously. Althusser's theory is not a view of science as *corresponding* to its object at all. Rather, science *produces* its theoretical 'objects' via a practical operation on ideological generalities.<sup>4</sup> Knowledge is a product of a dialectical practice, not the reflection of reality. The essential nature of the world in itself is always beyond our ken. The connection between the "concrete in thought" and the "real concrete" is to be understood via the metaphysics of the theory of dialectical materialism which *presupposes* that all objects can *only be known in thought and not in their 'real' state*. It is precisely for this reason that Althusser does *not* argue that there is any necessary correspondence between the form taken by the 'object' in theory and the object outside theory.

"knowledge is knowledge of a real object (Marx says: a real subject), which (I quote) 'remains, after as before, outside the intellect and independent of it'."<sup>5</sup>

Knowledge proceeds from the abstract to the concrete, it proceeds

*"in thought, while the real object, which gives rise to the whole process, exists outside thought."*<sup>6</sup>

The 'objects' of our thought are constructed through our practical interactions with the world. They do not *mirror* the world or *represent* it, they are not Plato's distorted shadows. These ocular metaphors all too easily produce a

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<sup>4</sup> See fig. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 1 above, p. 227.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 226.

humanist epistemological problematic which results in a correspondence theory of truth. For Althusser, the practical interaction between the world and society which produces knowledge remains irreducible. We are inside a hermeneutic circle and cannot achieve knowledge of either 'object' or 'subject' independently of each other. Just as there is no pure data about the world there are no transparent thoughts about the self, these categories are themselves creations of social practices.

Many Marxists fail to grasp the epistemological implications of Althusser's interpretation of dialectical materialism. One possible reason for this failure, which has already been aired, is that political considerations make it difficult to accept the anti-common sense implications of a coherence theory of truth. i.e. one not *grounded* by direct understanding of objects but only grounded indirectly by the *dialectical practical and irreducible* relation of theory and experience *as a whole*. They continually fall back into the ideological and in Althusser's terms empiricist trap of seeing Marxism as truly corresponding to reality. However, Althusser continually stresses the necessary self-justificatory nature of theory.

"it is *in fact* because and only because we have a true idea that we can know that it is true, because it is *index sui*." <sup>7</sup>

Benton sees Althusser as caught between a conventionalism, dictated by due regard for history, and the need for his (Althusser's) theory to correspond to reality. The actual tension in Althusser's problematic is between a coherence theory of meaning and truth (i.e. dialectical materialism) and a conventionalism / constructivism which would suggest that one must see Marxism not as universally transcendental but as a theory suited to, and

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 221.

developing in, particular times and places. The easiest way for commentators to avoid the conventionalist critique, the call of *tu quoque*, is to insist that that Marxism does *correspond* in some way to reality in a stronger sense than the dialectic would seem to allow. Thus Benton sees the problem as one of Althusser's

“attempting to reconcile the ‘conventionalist’ commitment to the socially constructed character of knowledge, with the requirement that at least some knowledge-claims make an objective reference to a reality independent of the mind.”<sup>8</sup>

But this is not Althusser's problem at all, it is Benton's. Althusser recognises that all claims *can* make some reference to a reality independent of the mind, indeed they necessarily do, for they are, in part, the result of that reality. Althusser's problem, and indeed a problem for Marxism in general, is rather that he has to reconcile a historical conventionalism with a commitment to a transcendently applicable Marxism. Althusser recognised that in epistemological terms the only form such a reconciliation could take was as a type of all inclusive, and hence self justifying, coherence theory.

Althusser is a materialist, but a materialist who holds that only one particular coherence theory has been found which explains the nature of materialism itself. Thus Benton is also wrong to suggest that

“the requirement, for the possibility of objective knowledge, of a determinable correspondence of these irreducibly separate and incommensurable ‘objects’ (the real concrete and the concrete in thought) is at the root of all Althusser's uncomfortable shifts of position on the question of the distinction between science and ideology.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Benton *op. cit.*, n. 3 above, p. 192.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 181.

In no sense does Althusser need a *determinable* correspondence, indeed the nature of dialectical materialism means that, although the relation between the real-concrete and the concrete in thought is *determinate*, it *cannot* be determinable for this would require that we somehow have access to the material word as it 'really' is and not as it is experienced in social practice. This experience achieved through our daily practices and its subsequent structuring in other "theoretical" practices is all there is for knowledge to be. Althusser's uncomfortableness over the science / ideology distinction is caused, largely, by his adherence to historical materialism as a final (but as yet incomplete) social theory.

That Althusser has understood the nature of the difficulties inherent in his position and Benton has not is shown by the features Benton picks to prove that Althusser has shifted towards relativism. First, his decentering of the human subject as the locus and arbiter of meaning, and second, his "exclusion of the function of reference from the theory of linguistic meaning" i.e., Althusser's coherentist epistemology. These moves towards 'relativism' are the direct result of overcoming the humanist subject / object dichotomy and are the central tenets of his philosophy, not some overlooked error on Althusser's part. Any and all forms of Marxism that take the implications of dialectical materialism seriously need to face this epistemological dilemma posed by conventionalism / historicism. The point overlooked by Benton is that it is the metaphysics of dialectical materialism which provides its *own guarantee* of the connection between objects and our conceptions of them. Where Spinoza posits a necessary parallelism between *idea* and *ideatum* and thus avoids falling into idealism

"Marx protects himself in another way, more seriously, by use of the

thesis of the *primacy of the real object over the object of knowledge, and by the primacy of this first thesis over the second: the distinction between the real object and the object of knowledge.*"<sup>10</sup>

Althusser does not have a theory of linguistic meaning *as such* or indeed a theory of knowledge in its traditional analytic form. i.e. one where ideology and theory might be seen as levels of knowledge which the individual has purely epistemological grounds for believing better or worse. This change of emphasis is in part due to his decentering of the subject. Thus there is no discussion in his work about what it is for a *person* to know something but rather about the social roles and forms taken by types of human social production, including the production of knowledge. The extent of Althusser's 'traditional epistemology' is limited to the relations between an unknowable material 'reality' on the one hand and our social experience on the other. This relation is set out in the theses of dialectical materialism. Since the actual nature of the material elements of this relationship are strictly unknowable he concentrates on the social roles and internal structures of different forms of knowledge, their relations to each other and to other components of social formations. He does not explicitly discuss problems of linguistic meaning i.e. the relation between practical experiences and the linguistic expression of them. However, as will be shown later, much of his emphasis on social practice is amenable to a parallel Wittgensteinian interpretation of linguistic meaning as embedded in the network of practices which make up the forms of life.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 1 above, p. 228.

<sup>11</sup> I do not mean to imply by this that Althusser's and Wittgenstein's conceptions of "practice" are identical but that there are many similarities in their epistemologies. See chapter 5.

This in turn explains what is often seen as Althusser's 'rejection' of epistemology in his later work. Althusser states in a later review of his work that he "introduces neither a 'theory of knowledge' nor its surrogate, an epistemology; I think that it only expresses the minimum of generality without which it would not be possible to perceive and understand the concrete processes of knowledge."<sup>12</sup> This is not to claim that there are no differences in the quality of knowledge produced in ideological and theoretical practices, but serves to demarcate his own project from those traditionally associated with philosophical epistemology, particularly correspondence theories. The epistemology of Althusser has a wholly different emphasis. The guarantor of 'truth' is not the content of a theory's propositions, but the form of practice which has produced it and its articulation with other aspects of that practice and other theoretical practices. It is an emphasis on dialectical materialism replacing epistemology, an emphasis on a *theoretical production* that is necessarily always in thought, the concepts of which depend on the perceptions and images, "the stand-ins", for real objects obtained in our practical relations with the world.

The failure to appreciate the nature of Althusser's coherence theory has led to a second objection which claims that dialectical materialism is circular

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<sup>12</sup>Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 1 above, p. 225. This claim is somewhat disingenuous because this minimum of generality includes the full epistemological implications of dialectical materialism. As Piaget notes, the major concern of Althusser was to provide the "...means to furnish Marxism with an epistemology..." *Structuralism* p. 125. Descombes *Modern French Philosophy* p. 135 posits a break in the work of Althusser suggesting that he moves away from his early epistemological concerns towards political concerns. Although there is some truth in this it does not mean that Althusser rejects his earlier epistemology, rather, he refuses to refer to his work as epistemology, a term associated with overt theoreticism and which he personally associated with empiricism.

because of its self-justification, i.e. Althusser fails to produce an acceptable rationale for non-Marxists to justify Marxism's view of itself as *the* privileged discourse. But, as pointed out in chapter 3, this is not a problem specifically for Marxism, but for any coherence theory which claims to be all inclusive. The nature of a coherence theory of knowledge is such that any claim about the epistemological status of that theory can only be justified by recourse to itself. Such circularity cannot be held to be an argument against coherence theories, indeed Althusser is not alone in making Marxism's ability to *explain* itself a positive point in its favour. As Habermas says,

"Historical materialism aims at achieving an explanation of social evolution which is so comprehensive that it embraces the interrelationship of the theory's own origins and application."<sup>13</sup>

Of course this circularity does entail that it is difficult for those 'outside' the theory to find external grounds for believing that theory true. In this sense the belief in the scientific nature of the epistemological break seems to require a Kierkegaardian leap of faith. However, Althusser not only refuses to provide external philosophical grounds for accepting his theory, but, in his early work at least, remains consistent by refusing to appeal to extra-theoretical considerations like pragmatism as a justification.<sup>14</sup> His theory is not right *because* it achieves a particular end or provides a useful technique. It is able to instigate reactions within society because of its coherence. A theory is of use because it provides a coherent framework for understanding social practices. The only 'proof' of a coherence theory can be its ability to make ideas, concepts, and our practical experiences of the world cohere and thus

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<sup>13</sup> Jurgen Habermas *Theory and Practice* p. 1-2.

<sup>14</sup> A tendency to justify his theory in politically pragmatic terms creeps into his later works.

our acceptance or not of Althusser's theories will depend upon their abilities to coincide with, and make sense of, our own practical experiences.<sup>15</sup>

The important deficiency in Althusser's theory is neither a failure to justify its correspondence to the real world nor its self justificatory circularity but in its inability to justify the rigid demarcation it draws between ideology and science in its own terms. The justification of the privileged status of historical materialism, *qua* the science of society, is *incoherent* since his theory does not provide a mechanism to allow or explain the possibility of a qualitative leap by science and dialectical materialism out of ideology. Althusser lacks a proper account of the differences between sciences and ideologies. This lack can perhaps be most clearly felt in the absence of any justification for aligning experimental sciences, like biology, chemistry etc., together with meta-theoretical discourses, like dialectical materialism, in a single practice of theory.<sup>16</sup> Despite their obvious differences these disparate practices are all automatically consigned to the realm of the theoretical. This humanist (scientific) taxonomy of practices actually receives very little evidential support from Althusser's texts. Even disregarding the differences between individual sciences, one needs some explanation as to why Marxism is the only social theory which is held to cohere with the sciences in general.

To accept the transcendental nature of Marxist theory we need some account

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<sup>15</sup> As mentioned in chapter 3, Althusser's epistemology might be referred to as a "constructivism" where knowledge is *produced* in theoretical practices. The products of each theoretical practice cohere with knowledge derived from other such practices. This emphasis on coherence is partly responsible for the synchronic tendencies of Althusser's theoretical perspective as it tends to fix the relations between different sciences.

<sup>16</sup> Indeed Althusser frequently seems to forget about the experimental aspects of the natural sciences altogether.

of why the sciences should have this ability to escape the ideological limitations of time and place whereas alternative philosophies, even coherent ones, cannot. This problem cannot be solved by claiming the divisions of the social world recognised in historical materialism, including that between ideology and theory, are justified by the theory of dialectical materialism. For one could hold an epistemological theory akin to dialectical materialism and yet still dispute the ultimate separability of theory and ideology.

Althusser's determination to maintain a strict boundary between ideology and science is actually undermined, to some extent, by his own metaphysics. For, according to this metaphysics, practices are only ever *relatively autonomous*, yet he wishes to defend a monolithic Marxism which holds that historical materialism is, epistemologically speaking, *wholly autonomous*: that Marxism's theoretical account of society can continue to be seen as *the* account of all social formations yet remain uninfluenced by the social formation in which it emerged. It is a theory of historical development and change which excludes itself from any *radical* change.<sup>17</sup> The only argument that Althusser presents to support his transcendental claims is the exceptional coherence of a Marxist theory able to explain even its own origins. But this very attempt to privilege Marxism introduces a radical incoherence, for he nowhere explains how such a theory can come to have transcendental status with respect to particular social formations. Indeed, on

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<sup>17</sup> Althusser is certainly not against developments within a Marxist framework, indeed he states that "Marxist theory can fall behind history, and even behind itself, if ever it believes that it has arrived." *op. cit.*, n. 1 above, p. 231. However, he does not countenance the replacement of Marxism's central tenets e.g. the epistemology of dialectical materialism, nor does he question Marxism's applicability to other cultures. His scientism is also ethnocentrically occidental.

all accounts historical materialism's emphasis on the social particularity of the production of ideas should undermine any claim it might have for its own theoretical omniscience. Althusser sidesteps the issue by making dialectical and historical materialism's close alignment and special relationship with the natural sciences the guarantor of its transcendent status. However, as the remainder of this chapter demonstrates, this only pushes the problem one stage further back, as Althusser gives no account as to why *science* is so privileged.

The question of "science" is best evaluated in the light of a second but contiguous debate in the sociology of knowledge where "ideology" is again a central and contested term. The status of theoretical practices can be linked with the tension between a purely *epistemological* stance demarcating different *qualities* of knowledge some of which transcend social particularities, and a sociology of knowledge which emphasises the social relativism of any epistemological claims. On the 'epistemological' reading, "theory" is a second order discourse developed from, but qualitatively different from, ideology, which remains always tied to other aspects of society. In contrast, the sociology of knowledge emphasises the impossibility of escaping social influences even at the level of theory. To explore this tension I shall introduce different conceptions of ideology and theory found in the work of three philosophers and sociologists who hold a range of positions spanning this issue. In briefly discussing the work of Mannheim, Canguilhem and Foucault the complexities of the relations between the sciences and social ideologies will become obvious. The following discussion is not meant to provide a comprehensive or exhaustive coverage of the terms "ideology" and "science" but, in outlining a variety of positions

from the extreme social reductionism of Mannheim to the 'scientism' of Canguilhem a number of important issues arise which will be further developed in the next chapter.<sup>18</sup>

### Karl Mannheim

Karl Mannheim has exerted a profound influence on the theory of ideology and the sociology of knowledge in the Twentieth Century.<sup>19</sup> He distinguishes between two descriptions of ideological influence; the "particular" and the "total". "Particular" accounts refer to the determination of particular 'mistaken' aspects of an individual's views or actions in terms of the influence of wider social and psychological explanations; e.g. "Sharon only believes that cars are necessary because she owns a petrol station". The clear implication is that her opinion is not an objective judgment but is biased by personal financial considerations. By contrast, the "total" conception of ideology is concerned with the underlying world-views (*Weltanschauung*) of whole classes of society, indeed of whole societies, i.e. "the composition of the total structure of the mind of this epoch or of this group"<sup>20</sup>

The total view "attempts to understand... concepts as an outgrowth of the

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<sup>18</sup> For a comprehensive historical survey of the term "ideology" see Jorge Larrain *The Concept of Ideology*.

<sup>19</sup> Durkheim too has a theory of ideology with similarities to Althusser's later formulation. Durkheim also sees ideology as epistemologically prior to science and as a necessary and pervasive aspect of human societies. Paul Q. Hirst uses an approach derived from the work of Althusser to interpret and criticise Durkheim's epistemology in *Durkheim, Bernard and Epistemology*.

<sup>20</sup> Mannheim *Ideology and Utopia* p. 50.

collective life in which he partakes.”<sup>21</sup> The occupants of discrete social formations are inhabitants of different intellectual worlds - worlds without common ground and with fundamentally divergent thought systems. There are obvious similarities between this total conception of ideology and Althusser’s all encompassing ideology, especially when taking into account the implied anti-humanism of Mannheim’s total conception.

“the total conception uses a more functional analysis, without any reference to motivations, confining itself to an objective description of the structural differences in minds operating in different social settings.”<sup>22</sup>

We describe the world in this functional manner when we “consider not merely the content but also the form, and even the framework of a mode of thought as a function of the life situation of a thinker”. When we make such a description we are involved in *theory*, and in particular in a sociological theory of ideology. Mannheim develops a “relationism” whereby he maps ideas onto the social system in which they develop. Since all ideas are socially derived, and hence value laden, the sociologist makes no value judgments about the merit of these ideas but only investigates the relation of ideas to the observable phenomena of society.

Mannheim’s concept of ideology is, however, dissimilar from Althusser’s in that it refers to *ideas* or thoughts rather than particular ways in which social structures function. Althusser’s conception is more complex, treating ideology as a separate practice involving material aspects of societies e.g.

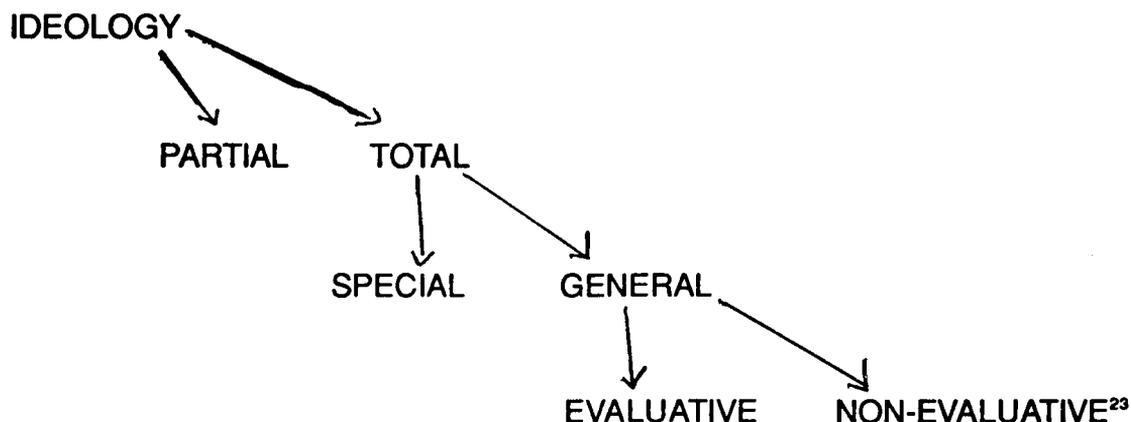
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<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 51.

the I.S.A's. and not just 'ideas' in a *conceptual* sense. Nonetheless he is close to this Mannheimian view in many respects.

Mannheim presents us with a scheme of the following form.



The job of sociology is to provide a non-evaluative, general and total account of particular ideologies. Mannheim's distinction between partial and total ideology refers to the *kind of explanation* given for holding a particular view and is not an intrinsic feature of the views themselves. For example an aspect of a scientific theory could be explained by reference to the personal history, psychology etc. of the holder and would therefore be explained in terms of partial ideology. Alternatively, it can be explained as a part of a general world view present in that person's social formation, hence total. An example of a partial explanation of ideological influence might be that of explaining the racist theories of intelligence by referring to the scientists' personal histories. Thus one might interpret the racist use of intelligence tests by people such as the American scientist C. C. Brigham biographically, by referring to past events in his life.<sup>24</sup> A total (but specific) analysis would

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<sup>23</sup> Adapted from Brian Longhurst *Karl Mannheim and Contemporary Sociology of Knowledge*.

<sup>24</sup> See S. J. Gould *The Mismeasure of Man*[sic] p. 224.

focus instead upon the general attitudes towards immigrants prevailing amongst early Twentieth Century white Americans and on the roles played by different races in the prevailing social structures.

We can examine Mannheim's views by utilising widely acknowledged examples of ideology's interference with scientific practice, for instance that of the Lysenko scandal in the U.S.S.R. In this case, the Soviet authorities decided that Mendelian genetics did not fit with a strict interpretation of elements of Marxist-Leninism, and because of this "no genetics text books were published between 1938 and the early 1960's and genetics was not taught to generations of medical students."<sup>25</sup> An equally obvious example from the western world can be seen in the role played by Sociobiology in supporting the 'traditional', i.e. modern capitalist, views of the family, race and sexual stereotypes. Thus E. O. Wilson, the doyen of Sociobiology, states bluntly that "In hunter-gatherer societies, men hunt and women stay at home." And, since "Human sociobiology can [supposedly] be most directly tested in studies of hunter-gatherer life" (which Wilson presumes is the primitive form of all human societies) we are left with the inevitable conclusion that women are naturally fitted to play a domestic role. This conclusion fits neatly with Western male stereotypes. (This despite the fact that women actually produce two thirds of the worlds food.)<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bob Young 'Getting started on Lysenkoism' p. 83.

<sup>26</sup> The political ideological implications of sociobiology and other genetic debates are exposed in Steven Rose, R. C. Lewontin and Leon J. Kamin *Not in our Genes* which is only a part of the immense literature that this area has stimulated. Elizabeth Badinter provides a destructive analysis of the appeal to genetic rather than historical and social causes for the roles played by women and the family in her history of motherhood in Eighteenth Century French society. *The Myth of Motherhood*.

In these latter two cases no psychological or partial explanation will suffice by itself to explain the theories' general social acceptance. One can only account for these cases of social bias by appealing to the structure of society as a whole. But in invoking a total conception of ideology one cannot without being inconsistent leave one's own perspective unquestioned: i.e. why do we come to see aspects of Lysenkoism and Sociobiology as politically biased? How can the social sciences provide a 'total' account of ideology when this science is itself part and parcel of society?

Mannheim recognises this problem and the need for reflexivity it entails. He holds that to apply social theory to other views and not ones own is inconsistent. What is needed is a "general" application of the theory rather than a "special" one.

"As long as one does not call his own position into question but regards it as absolute, while interpreting his opponent's ideas as a mere function of the social positions they occupy, the decisive step forwards has not yet been taken."<sup>27</sup>

To say that one needs a general rather than a special application of the theory of ideology is to say that it must be reflexive, questioning its own position in the same light as its opponents'. This, of course, leads to a rather paradoxical role for any theory of ideology. As Paul Ricoeur states,

"The extension of Marx's concept of ideology itself provides the paradox of the reflexivity of the concept according to which the theory becomes a part of its own referent. To be absorbed, to be swallowed by its own referent, is perhaps the fate of the concept of ideology."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Mannheim *op. cit.*, n. 20 above, p. 68.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Ricoeur *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* p.8.

On one level Althusser appears to agree with the need for reflexivity, but although he emphasises the all pervasive nature of ideology, which is present even in socialist societies, he never goes far enough in accepting its influence upon either the later Marx or himself. Whilst his whole epistemological edifice is necessary because of the omnipresence of ideology, the practice of theory is supposed to be able to break out of these ideological constraints into a realm of coherent 'truths'. But, as Mannheim points out.

"There is scarcely a single intellectual position, and Marxism furnishes no exception to this rule, which has not changed through history and which even in the present does not appear in many forms... It should not be too difficult for a Marxist to recognise their social bias."<sup>29</sup>

Claims to possess the truth are always open to conventionalist arguments that truths only hold for particular places and times.

Both Althusser and Mannheim wish to create a standpoint which evades, at least to a degree, simply reflecting society's norms. However, they differ over the form which their epistemological escape route from ideology takes. Mannheim regards the sociology of knowledge as this "new intellectual standpoint" whose aim is to discover the "situational determination" of ideas and see these as functions of its "life conditions".<sup>30</sup> This new standpoint is objective i.e. non-partisan, due to the social position of the scientists employed and the 'disinterested' social groups from which scholars are to be recruited (the social scientists are members of a 'free intelligentsia'). The

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<sup>29</sup> Mannheim *op. cit.*, n. 20 above, p. 69. Unfortunately, in the past Mannheim often proved over-optimistic in his assessment of some Marxists' ability to recognise this need for change.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p.69.

sociology of knowledge is the “non-evaluative” study of the empirical relations of knowledge to social practice and as such it becomes simply descriptive, leaving no place for epistemological (*qua* philosophical) concerns. This non-evaluative model is one which “challenges the ‘autonomy’ of theory”<sup>31</sup> and as such is obviously antithetical to Althusser’s attempts to maintain the autonomy of *some* types of theory.

The ‘objectivity’ of Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge is maintained by dubious claims about intellectuals’ ‘distance’ from the social settings they are to study, and at the cost of reducing sociology to a practice of correlative empiricism and a theory of social functionalism. In contrast, Althusser retains the critical bite of theory in a different way. Instead of appealing to the ‘value-free’ study of the sociology of knowledge he appeals to the paradigm of science and to its theoretical practice as ideology-free. (Or at least as transforming ideology into a new theoretical product.) Perhaps the most glaring bias in Althusser is his willingness to account for ideology in almost purely functional terms but his refusal to countenance that theory may also be so explicable. Although one may agree that dialectical materialism is not reducible to the terms of a sociology of knowledge we are left in the dark about just why it is that so called “ideological philosophies” can be so reduced. Although Althusser is aware of the theory-ladenness of empirical data he shows relatively little awareness of the value-ladenness of scientific theories. Putting to one side the very real structural and material differences between Althusser’s and Mannheim’s concepts of ideology their recourse to ‘new standpoints’ as breaks with the past are remarkably similar. Despite their initial claims to the contrary both end with partisan and monolithic

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<sup>31</sup> Tim Dant *Ideology, Knowledge and Discourse* p. 15.

interpretations of society justified by the supposed all-inclusiveness of their particular theory of ideology. In this sense the study of Mannheim's system has important implications for Althusser since it underlines the conventionalist argument that coherence *by itself* is not enough to justify a theory's claims to transcendence since there can be many theories with such potential.

Althusser is however right to reject some aspects of Mannheim's push towards sociological functionalism. He is right not to overemphasise the role of the social setting of knowledge to such an extent that knowledge is reduced to a mere function of social conditions. Theory, including philosophy, needs to retain a (relative) autonomy as distinct social practices. Althusser's metaphysics provides a theoretical resistance to the reduction of all theory to its social concomitants. He denies Mannheim's simple formula that,

"With the emergence of the general formulation of the total conception of ideology, the simple theory of ideology develops into the sociology of knowledge" <sup>32</sup>

### Scientific Practice, Philosophy and Ideology

Althusser explicitly states that the status of all philosophies is determined by their relationship with the sciences as the archetypal theory.

"The relation between philosophy and the sciences constitutes the *specific* determination of philosophy... "[T]his relation is *constitutive* of

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<sup>32</sup> Mannheim *op. cit.*, n. 20 above, p. 69.

the specificity of philosophy. Outside of its relationship to the sciences, philosophy would not exist.”<sup>33</sup>

The difference between dialectical materialism and other philosophies is that “the majority of philosophies, be they religious, spiritualist or idealist, maintain a relation of *exploitation* with the sciences.”<sup>34</sup>

They use science to bolster their own positions rather than facilitating its investigations in the world. In contrast dialectical materialism is unique in its denunciation of such exploitation, and Althusser claims, scientists know this to be the case. He offers no evidence for his claims and indeed as his own writing notes, in certain cases, such as the scandal of Lysenkoism, the very opposite has been the case.

Althusser was greatly influenced by Gaston Bachelard’s view of science as an open ended practice, a practice that does not assume that its answers or explanations need be in accordance with religious or ideological presuppositions. This Bachelardian inheritance, which stresses a break between social normativity and scientific practice, is expressed in passages like the following

“In the theoretical mode of production of ideology (which is utterly different from the theoretical mode of production of science in this respect), the formulation of a *problem* is merely the theoretical expression of the conditions which allow a *solution* already produced outside the process of knowledge because imposed by extra-

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<sup>33</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 1 above pp. 108-109.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129. It is interesting to note that Althusser refers to the *majority* of philosophies and excludes reference to those alternative materialist philosophies (such as the conservative anti-religious humanism of many empiricist philosophers e.g. A. J. Ayer) which see their function as one of winning philosophical battles against religion and for science. Such an omission can only favour his interpretation of the relations between philosophy and science.

theoretical instances and exigencies (by religious, ethical, political or other interests)..."<sup>35</sup>

Once again this is both to denigrate all non-Marxist theories and to refuse to recognise the very real influence of external social values on all scientific research. To be fair Althusser does attempt to give some account of science as it is actually practised and of the relations between scientists in their social setting and their objects of study. The gist of this account is that scientists work with a spontaneous philosophy which they believe explains their relations to their objects of study. This spontaneous philosophy has two distinct aspects.

Element 1 - which is the basically materialist belief in the reality of the 'objects' of scientific practice.

Element 2 - which is of "extra-scientific origin - it is a reflection *on* scientific practice by means of philosophical Theses elaborated *outside* this practice by the religious, spiritualist or idealist-critical 'philosophers of science'."<sup>36</sup> In other words to explain (or explain away) the value-laden nature of science itself he has to resort to claiming that all such values are infections of scientific practices rather than inherent parts of them. The questions then remain as to what comprises "pure and unadulterated" science and how to recognise it. Althusser's answer seems to be that only Element 1 is pure science i.e. those aspects of scientific theories which agree with dialectical materialism! Hence it is hardly surprising that Althusser can claim that dialectical materialism does not obstruct true scientific progress because by his definition they necessarily have a mutually determining relation.

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<sup>35</sup> Althusser *Reading Capital* p. 52.

<sup>36</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 1 above, p.133.

This division of the spontaneous philosophy of scientists into two Elements is an attempt to overcome the static nature of his conception of science and take account of the reality of constant theoretical changes within science. There seems little doubt that the natural sciences actually evolve a new terminology and create a new domain for themselves over a (sometimes considerable) period of time. They do not suddenly appear ready made. As they develop they become more clearly demarcated from their past and develop into relatively autonomous practices. There may also be conceptual revolutions within a scientific practice, for example between Newtonian and Einsteinian physics. Althusser seems unable to capture this evolutionary aspect of a science's internal and external development because of his insistence that the science springs forth ready formed and demarcated as the result of the simple application of a theoretical transformation. Althusser's position is one of theoretical revolution followed by a stasis, or only gradual change within the now constituted scientific theory.

Althusser wants to protect the integrity of scientific theory which plays so necessary a part in his defence of Marxist epistemology. He therefore faces serious problems because of the theoretical dynamism which genuine historicism would seem to imply. There is an inevitable tension between a historical *evolution* of science as a practice away from the ideology of everyday life and Althusser's continual emphasis upon science as a *revolutionary* break from preceding ideology. It is in an attempt to defuse this tension between a historical view of science and science as it figures in his epistemological thesis that Althusser introduces the conception of competing Elements of philosophy in the spontaneous philosophy of practising

scientists.<sup>37</sup> By this he hopes to maintain both the revolutionary nature of the change between science (as Element 1) and ideology (as Element 2) and show how the tendency of Element 1 to overcome Element 2 leads those involved in scientific practice towards an increasingly scientific perspective.

The important thing to note is that Althusser is attempting to displace an argument about the *ideological penetration of scientific theories* with a debate about the *ideological penetration of the philosophy of scientists themselves*, his motivation being to keep the actual day to day theories and practices of science pure and unadulterated by ideology. Scientific progress is a process of weeding out the idealist concepts present in the *philosophy* of the individual scientists. This distinction between the ideological influence upon the scientist's philosophy of practice and those practices themselves allows us to see that Althusser's attempt to marry evolution and revolution fails: for it is not only the scientists' accounts of the status of their theories, but these theories themselves which have ideological ramifications. It was not Galileo's *philosophy* of science that so upset the papacy but his actual theories themselves and the practical implications for religion of a solar centred rather than an earth centred cosmos. Althusser's introduction of these two elements within the philosophy of science does not resolve the problem of the degree of autonomy of science itself.

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<sup>37</sup> Rather than positing a developmental model, where science becomes ever more separated from other practices, it might be more fruitful to recognise a genuine dynamism in the interactions between scientific theories and wider social ideology. At different times a science might find itself closer to, or further from, prevailing ideological presuppositions and as such will be a potential focus for supporting or opposing the current *status quo*. One example of this phenomenon might be the change in attitudes towards a concept of evolution in general, from its original radical political overtones at the time of Darwin's youth to its more general acceptance by the rising Bourgeoisie at the time of the publication of the *Origin of Species*. See Adrian Desmond and James Moore *Darwin*.

Althusser seems to believe that it is the exogenous philosophy of the scientists (Element 2) which is responsible for placing fetters upon scientific development and that the greater the extent to which a materialist philosophy is adhered to the greater the autonomy granted to the science itself and the more open-ended its practice can become. If only scientists could free themselves from 'idealist' elements of philosophy then their practice would flourish. However, this does not actually maintain the purity of scientific practice: for if the ideological component (Element 2) of scientists' philosophy does retard science's theoretical development then it can only do so by restricting the nature of scientific theories themselves; in other words there must be the equivalent of, or at least the results of, Element 2 at the level of theory and practice, i.e. science is never pure but always partially ideological.

Althusser needs to explain how an unchanging theory of historical materialism can always remain aligned with science, if the content of the sciences changes continuously. Althusser does not recognise any internal dynamic within the structure of the sciences because he wishes to maintain a fixed relation between them and dialectical and historical materialism. If individual scientific problematics change then one would expect that the relations between these problematics would also alter. In positing a formal relation between science in general and Marxist Theory Althusser seems at odds with his Spinozistic metaphysics.

## Canguilhem

The work of Georges Canguilhem is closely akin to Althusser's, sharing as it does a common Bachelardian heritage. Although Canguilhem lacks, in some respects, the epistemological sophistication of Althusser he makes the tension between static and dynamic conceptions of science mentioned above central to his problematic. He wishes to retain a universal distinction between science and ideology but at the same time recognises that science itself changes. To do this he introduces a special prescientific ideology distinguished from other types of ideology and defines its boundaries by a historically *recursive* method.<sup>38</sup>

Althusser and Canguilhem both hold that a newly emerging scientific practice simultaneously explains an area of knowledge and creates it. Creates it in the sense that it becomes demarcated from other practices and discourses both scientific, and more importantly, ideological. The scientific practice works upon its ideological raw material and reorders it into a coherent theoretical whole. This re-ordering changes the relations and hence the meanings of old ideological terms. It forms a new problematic, a research programme, enhanced and developed by the introduction of novel terminology and practices.

Where Althusser's conception of science appears excessively static Canguilhem's approach is more dynamic. Rather than confine ideology to the spontaneous *philosophy* of the scientists Canguilhem recognises that

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<sup>38</sup> Canguilhem posits a scientific ideology which in every domain "precedes the institution of science". *Ideology and Rationality in the History of the Life Sciences* p. 38.

science itself contains elements of past ideologies which are, he claims, then removed over time by a process of critical correction. This internal criticism is a feature of science, indeed for Canguilhem the *process* of correction is *the* important distinguishing feature of scientific practice. “A science is governed by critical correction.”<sup>39</sup>

Canguilhem continues to see the distinction between ideology and science as one which is epistemological in form. Sciences are practices which inherently provide a qualitatively different form of knowledge from previous practices

“it [scientificity] is precisely a question of merit, for ‘science’ is a kind of title, a dignity not to be bestowed lightly.”<sup>40</sup>

Canguilhem holds a view of science as a pragmatically successful critical practice which proceeds under its own momentum. This, it must be said, is hardly an adequate definition or demarcation for many areas of knowledge can be said to have their own canons of critique. His view of science is adapted from that of Bachelard which was developed for mathematical disciplines in which a theory’s successor is to be preferred, as Cavailles says

“not because the present contains or supersedes the past but because the one necessarily emerges from the other.”<sup>41</sup>

Canguilhem realises that there are problems in merely applying this conception to other sciences but nonetheless holds fast to its central tenets. This perspective gives an almost complete autonomy to science; its

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>41</sup> Jean Cavailles from *Sur la Logique et la theorie de la science* Quoted in; Canguilhem *ibid.*, p. 14.

development is seen as the working out of its own intrinsic programme. He argues against Lecourt's claim that

“epistemologists are wrong to attempt to reconstruct the history of science without referring to the history of society.”<sup>42</sup>

Science is a teleological process of unfolding and purification, removing past ideological influences and expanding to become ever more complete in its scope.

As a historian of science Canguilhem has the great merit of incorporating a critical dynamism into his description of the relations between those aspects of society from which science proper emerges. The recognition of prescientific ideology has to be recursive, that is it can only be recognised as such after it has been replaced by a fully formed science

“A scientific ideology comes to an end when the place that it occupied in the encyclopaedia of knowledge is taken over by a discipline that operationally demonstrates the validity of its claim to scientific status, its ‘norms of scientificity’.”<sup>43</sup>

There are, then, two important elements to Canguilhem's position. Firstly, that we can distinguish science as a practice by certain critical methodological norms different from those in non-scientific areas. Secondly, that a scientific ideology is recognised retrospectively by the historian of science. Scientific ideology ‘stands over’ (*superstare*) the position eventually to be occupied and altered by the emergent science. This relationship can only be recognised and discussed from the *present* understanding of that science. Thus, as Canguilhem states, a history of the

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Canguilhem *ibid.*, p. 17

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 33.

precursors of Genetics written before the discovery of D.N.A.'s structure in 1953 will recognise different antecedents from one written after this date. Science itself changes and "what is now obsolete was once considered objectively true."<sup>44</sup> This is at variance with a static view like Althusser's which posits a scientific plateau which once reached is filled by the *accumulation* of theoretical knowledge. For Althusser purification is only necessary at the philosophical level where the scientifically derived Element 1 increases over time at the expense of the ideological Element 2. What Canguilhem stresses is that what is considered to be scientific at one stage of reflection will be seen from a later perspective to have been mistaken. It is not so much that the older theories were themselves simply ideological, but that such a progression is a necessary part of the critical process of science. Scientific ideology is that which is recognised *post hoc* as the theory prevalent in an area before science proper arrived. Nor should one see scientific ideology as being wrong or mistaken; it is simply that which is prescientific. It *aptes* a scientific theoretical stance in a realm as yet untouched by the scientific process.

"a Scientific ideologies are explanatory systems that stray beyond their own borrowed norms of scientificity.

b In every domain scientific ideology precedes the institution of science. Similarly every ideology is preceded by a science in an adjunct domain..."<sup>45</sup>

The break from scientific ideology to science proper is one in which the imitator of scientific method is replaced by a new critical form of knowledge untied to its past. Scientific ideologies are subject to a theoretical revolution

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, p. 38.

which reconstitutes them as a discipline with a new successful and coherent paradigm which can be regarded as a science in its own right.

In this recursive history of science, one continually has to rewrite the history of the sciences as the present perspective changes. The scientific content of a theory, which in Althusser's theories is formal and set, becomes neither formal nor set. Although one can still maintain a distinction between science and ideology from any given stage in a science's development, what one once took as the importance, nature and the relevance of the moment of the epistemological break may have to be revised in the light of that science's subsequent development.<sup>46</sup> There may be ideological elements in any theory which lie hidden until a later perspective reveals them. Those elements which form the scientific ideologies are revealed as they develop into a new science, the mistakes are expunged.

"The events of science are linked together in a steadily growing truth....At various moments in the history of thought the past of thought and experience can be seen in a new light."<sup>47</sup>

Thus despite his recognition of the conventional or normative nature of the description of a science's past, Canguilhem (like Bachelard and Althusser) is involved in "an epistemological history of the sciences", a description which as Foucault says,

"takes as its norm the fully constituted science; the history that it recounts is necessarily concerned with the opposition of truth and

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<sup>46</sup>This may be what Althusser refers to when he says of Canguilhem "Canguilhem has not used this term [epistemological break] *systematically*, as I have tried to do." *op. cit.*, n. 35 above, p. 323.

<sup>47</sup>Bachelard Quoted in Canguilhem *op. cit.*, n. 38 above, p. 11.

error, the rational and irrational, the obsolete and fecundity, purity and impurity, the scientific and the non-scientific.”<sup>48</sup>

Instead of positing a formal and transcendental distinction between the content of ideology and science, Canguilhem develops a perspective which though allowing us to distinguish a science from its preceding ideology recognises that changing boundaries and content are an inevitable outcome of a practice which lives by criticism of its own theses. Sciences are inevitably subject to discontinuity. Canguilhem recognises too that an epistemology of discontinuity should not dismiss the importance of periods of continuity in the history of the sciences. In this sense he may be seen to be accepting a picture at least superficially like that of Thomas Kuhn. Kuhn gives an account of the everyday practice of ‘normal science’ which occurs within a paradigm accepted by the scientific community. This is punctuated by periodic crises comprising a loss of confidence in the prevailing paradigm followed by a ‘revolutionary’ upheaval from which a new paradigm emerges.<sup>49</sup> Yet Canguilhem is opposed to Kuhn’s reduction of “normal science” to a “mere social psychology”. The view he espouses is one that recognises the relevance of epistemological claims and is one of Bachelardian epistemological “normality” rather than the sociological reductionism of Kuhn.<sup>50</sup>

For Canguilhem a formal and transcendental distinction between science and ideology is impossible, but a historian of science needs to be able to mark a discontinuity between science and non-science whilst at the same

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<sup>48</sup> Foucault *The Archaeology of Knowledge* p. 190.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Kuhn ‘The Structure of Scientific Revolutions’.

<sup>50</sup> See Canguilhem *op. cit.*, n. 38 above, pp. 12-13.

time recognising the developmental links between the two. Canguilhem thus has a twofold concept of science

a) Science as an ongoing process, a critical cultural form

b) Science as whatever is currently endowed with this 'meritorious' title.

Whether or not the normative content and the critical process aspects of this position are fully compatible is not my concern here, but one can at least see how the building of a relation of sorts between science and non-science is of central importance to any historical account.

"Distinguishing between ideology and science prevents us from seeing continuities where in fact there are only elements of ideology preserved in a science that has supplanted an earlier ideology.

Hence such a distinction prevents us from seeing anticipations of the Origin of Species in Rousseau's Dream of D'Alembert

Conversely, recognising the connections between ideology and science should prevent us from reducing the history of science to a featureless landscape."<sup>51</sup>

That is, we would be wrong to see a recursive reading as drawing superficial links between views that appear similar yet are from completely different contexts, yet we should not see science as emerging fully formed from 'nowhere'. Where there are prescientific discourses that have influenced and formed parts of a later discipline these need to be given due recognition.

It is important to realise that Canguilhem's view of the autonomous unfolding of the critical process of science means that he has to make a distinction

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39. The reference to Rousseau here is puzzling for it was Diderot who is generally accredited with preempting some of Darwin's evolutionary ideas in a work of this title. See Peter France *Diderot* p. 58. Foucault correctly refers to Diderot as the author in *The Archaeology of knowledge* p. 183.

between scientific ideology and other forms of ideology and that his epistemological bias leads him to reduce other non-scientific ideologies to the status of simple falsehoods. He states that “scientific ideology, unlike a class ideology, is not false consciousness. Nor is it false science.”<sup>52</sup> In one sense this begs the question about the relationship between science and ideology posed by thinkers like Althusser, for Canguilhem is only concerned with the relationship between scientific ideology and science and scientific ideology is itself dependent upon the existence of a science to ape. There still exists a formal barrier between ideology in the sense of the wider views and ideas held by society on the one hand and scientific ideology and science on the other hand. Canguilhem only seems to introduce an emasculated form of ideology, one that has been severed from all connections with the more general social and historical background; he cannot speak of the relations between the social formation as a whole and the scientific theories which originate in it.

Canguilhem represents the “epistemological” end of the spectrum of views on the status of scientific knowledge. His importance lies in his historical perspective which necessitates the introduction of a recursive methodology, a dynamic normative historicism which, when not focused on the question of locating demarcations, could provide a basis for an account of (relatively) autonomous scientific change which Althusser lacks. (See the section entitled, Althusser, Ideology and Science below.)

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<sup>52</sup> Canguilhem *op. cit.*, n. 38 above, p. 32. Althusser uses the term “scientific ideology” but simply to represent those obstacles in the path of development of a science. See *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* p.88.

## Foucault

There is a genuine tension between the extreme view of science as constituting a purely *epistemological* break with previous forms of 'knowledge' and the perception of science as a family resemblance of practices to be reductively described simply in terms of their social and historical correlates. On the one hand Althusser and Canguilhem posit a level of discourse that is autonomous insofar as it generates a discourse not dependent on *agreement* with other aspects of the current social background. On the other hand, Mannheim claims that all discourse is socially perspectival and that knowledge is merely an epiphenomenon of certain forms of social practice.

These sociological / historical and epistemological perspectives meet in a constructive fashion in Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. In no sense does Foucault have Mannheim's faith in the objectivity of social scientists or historians of science but he is nonetheless concerned to translate the epistemological claims of the sciences into functions of their place in the wider social formation, or more accurately the background of a discursive formation.

"...in any discursive formation one finds a *specific relation* between science and knowledge; and instead of defining between them a relation of exclusion or subtraction... archaeological analysis must show positively how a science *functions* in the element of knowledge. It is probably there, in that space of interplay, that the relations of

ideology to the sciences are established.” [my emphases] <sup>53</sup>

It is important too that Foucault is not seen to be engaged in a sociological reduction *a la* Mannheim, he is not interested in ‘grounding’ science in social practices so much as drawing connections between scientific disciplines and the discourses associated with a variety of other practices. He states that

“To tackle the ideological functioning of a science....is not to uncover the philosophical presuppositions that may lie within it; nor is it to return to the formulations that make it possible, and that legitimated it: it is to question it as a discursive formation; it is to tackle not the formal contradictions of its propositions, but the system of formulation of its objects, its types of enunciation, its concepts, its theoretical choices. It is to treat it as one practice among others.” <sup>54</sup>

In other words a history of any particular scientific theory can be constructed from a plethora of preceding discourses in its social and historical background. Rather than treating science’s claims to knowledge at face value one should see these claims themselves as resulting from that science’s role in the interplay of a variety of discourses. The emergence of a new discipline from the previous *bricolage* of background discourses, i.e. the discursive formation, might be said to be overdetermined by those discourses’ interactions with each other as loci of power in society.

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<sup>53</sup> Foucault *The Archaeology of Knowledge* p.185. This book was written at a time when Foucault was heavily influenced by structuralism despite his refusal to accept such a label for his work. It precedes his later concentration on the mediation of power by and in discourses. In this discussion I focus almost entirely upon Foucault’s early ‘structuralist’ works as my intention is not to provide an exegesis of Foucault’s work but to throw light upon certain aspects of an anti-humanist problematic in general, in particular as it relates to ideology.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p.186.

Here we have a *non-epistemological* perspective on the ideology / science divide, one which condemns the drawing of *formal and transcendent* boundaries and sees the history of science as a particular recursive re-ordering and break from elements of other discourses which preceded it. But, Foucault's view of ideology is by no means as limited in its discursive contents as Canguilhem's 'scientific ideology.' In *Madness and Civilisation* Foucault sought to establish the development of a 'discipline' of psychiatry from the previously existing discursive formation of nervous diseases, delirium, melancholia etc.<sup>55</sup> Before these became a coherently formulated whole under the influence of what might be termed historical 'accidents', i.e. the social conditions that happened to be prevailing at that time, there was a discursive formation without a discipline. But, Foucault asks,

"By discursive formation, does one not mean the retrospective projection of sciences on their own past, the shadow that they cast on what preceded them and which thus appears to have foreshadowed them?"<sup>56</sup>

In complete contrast with Canguilhem he answers this question with a decisive no! Foucault has a sophisticated position to which I cannot do justice here. He does not make the common mistakes either of seeing ideology as simply a reflection at the level of ideas of social norms or of science's appropriation by extraneous political forces to predetermined technological aims. But nor, unlike Canguilhem's scientific ideology, does he see the discursive formation as that which breaks the ground where science proper comes to tread. The discursive formation is the complex background of socially and historically particular communicative practices on which, and

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<sup>55</sup> Michel Foucault *Madness and Civilisation*.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, p.180.

because of which, the science comes to emerge as a coherent practice in its own right with specific social functions, a discipline.

“If the question of ideology may be asked of science, it is in so far as science, without being identified with knowledge, but without either effacing or excluding it, is localised in it, structures certain of its objects, systematises certain of its enunciations, formalises certain of its concepts and strategies... In short, the question of ideology that is asked of science is not the question of situations and practices that it reflects more or less consciously; nor is it the question of the possible use or misuse to which it could be put; it is the question of its existence as a discursive practice and of its functioning among other practices.”<sup>57</sup>

Foucault effectively opposes the positivist and humanist elevation of science as a privileged form of knowledge. He does not deny the differences between particular practices and their respective forms of knowledge, but he wishes to trace the history of their development in the multiplicity of social discourses which shaped their present form. The function of Foucault's discursive formation is to remind us both of the holistic nature of society and that science does not emerge from a linear singular prescientific ideology. For example, Biology is frequently seen as merely an extension and development of Natural History. The historian of science notes affinities and connections between certain of these discourses and creates a genealogy of science recursively from one of many possible positions. The background elements from which the genealogy is constructed include amongst the relevant determining factors in that science's development “Fiction, reflection, narrative accounts, institutional regulations and political

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<sup>57</sup> Foucault *op. cit.*, n 53 above, p.185.

decisions.”<sup>58</sup> This serves as a salutary reminder of the dangers inherent in Canguilhem’s conception of science as autonomously progressing within the confines of its own particular area of practice seemingly independent of political influences.

Althusser’s more sophisticated demarcation between scientific and political ideology does not fall into Canguilhem’s overt scientism. Althusser has explicitly recognised the importance of Foucault’s work in showing that ‘scientific’ disciplines like psychiatry and the concepts which they use were overdetermined by a

“whole series of medical, legal, religious, ethical and political practices and ideologies in a combination whose internal dispositions and meaning varied as a function of the changing place and role of these terms in the more general context of the economic, political, legal and ideological structuring of the time.”<sup>59</sup>

Also, Althusser’s conception of ideology is wider and less restricted in at least one sense than Foucault’s, for it is not only, or even primarily, as concepts or ideas carried by discourse that ideology functions but as a whole level of the structure of social formations with its own material apparatuses.<sup>60</sup> Foucault does not find the concept of an ideology particularly useful because he starts from a position which regards all discourses as ‘epistemologically’ equivalent. Some discourses, like the sciences, carry with them a self-authenticating epistemological privilege but, Foucault says

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, pp.183-184.

<sup>59</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 35 above, p. 45.

<sup>60</sup> Althusser’s social formations are in one sense, (and insofar as the differences in problematics allow) the holistic equivalent of Foucault’s discursive formations. They are the background practices out of which all disciplines emerge and with which they must articulate.

“I believe the problem does not consist in drawing the line between that in a discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false.”<sup>61</sup>

One cannot therefore identify the discursive formation recognised by the recursively constituted history of science as its original background with ideology in either Althusser's or Canguilhem's terms. It is neither a prescientific practice, nor a non-scientific social background, but simply the discursive whole including other 'scientific' disciplines out of which a new science is seen to have emerged. Foucault, whilst recognising that science does make claims about its epistemologically privileged status, believes in a manner akin to Mannheim that

“[t]he intellectual can [though in a limited fashion because of her still existing class and professional associations] operate and struggle at the general level of that regime of truth which is so essential to the structure and functioning of our society. There is a battle 'for truth' or at least around truth.”<sup>62</sup>

Epistemology is on this view a form of rhetoric and the philosopher's job is to identify not what constitutes truth but

“the ensemble of rules according to which the true and false are separated and specific affects of power attached to the true.”<sup>63</sup>

Foucault's emphasis on language in his early work to the exclusion of *all* other forms of social relations does however signify a return to what

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<sup>61</sup> Foucault *Power / Knowledge* p. 118.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, p. 132.

Althusser could only see as an idealism, where discourse operates by itself to determine the form of the world rather than as a material but only *relatively* autonomous part of the world.<sup>64</sup> However this defect is overcome to a large extent in Foucault's later work which concentrates on the links between power and knowledge and sees discourses as only one form of power relation.

"Against modern theories that see knowledge as neutral and objective (positivism) or emancipatory (Marxism), Foucault emphasises that knowledge is indissociable from regimes of power. ...The circular relationship between power and knowledge is established in Foucault's genealogical critiques of the human sciences."<sup>65</sup>

A more genuine point of difference between Foucault and Althusser is their attitude towards 'totalising' theories. Roughly speaking, for Althusser, the greater the degree of coherence and inclusivity a theory has the greater its epistemological value (hence the overwhelming importance of Marx's materialism). But for Foucault, and for many others who may be provisionally labelled 'post-structuralist', such theoretical structures are loci of potential if not actual oppression. Where Althusser seems to see theory in an uncritical manner as uniformly liberatory some post-structuralists go so far on occasion as to suggest that theories may be indifferently oppressive. (See Chapter 8.)

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<sup>64</sup> Althusser puts it like this. "Foucault: his case is quite different. [from Canguilhem's] He was a pupil of mine, and 'something' from my writings has passed into his, including certain of my formulations. But... in his thought even the meanings he gives to formulations he has borrowed from me are transformed into another quite different meaning than my own." Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 35 above, p. 324.

<sup>65</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner *Postmodern Theory: Critical Investigations* p. 50.

### Althusser. Ideology and Science.

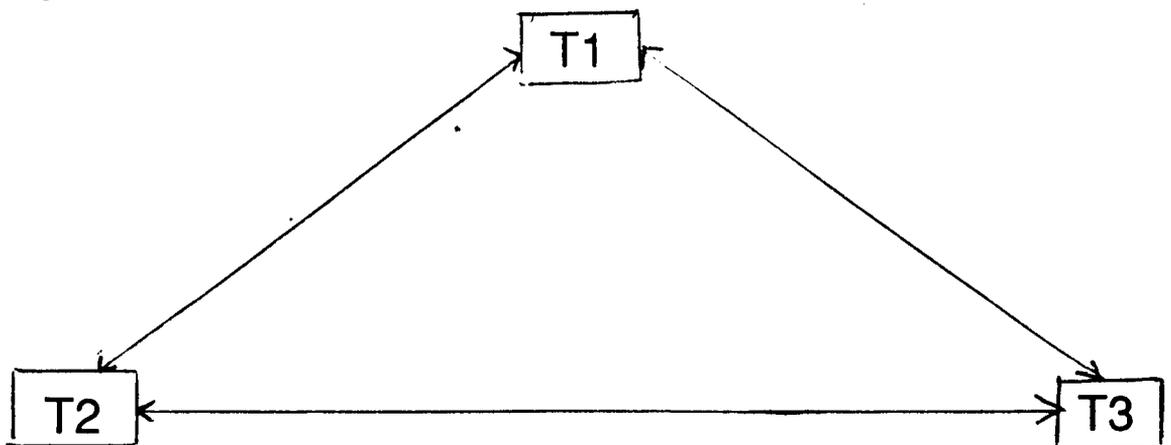
It appears that discussions of the relations between ideology and science (the archetype of theory) reach something of an impasse. The optimism of Canguilhem in the in-built epistemological superiority of science and its separation from ideology seems misplaced. On the other hand, Mannheim's total and general conception of ideology reduces every discourse to epiphenomena of society i.e. theory lacks both autonomy and effectivity. The discourse relativism of Foucault, whilst avoiding these faults, dismisses ideology as a term of little practical value once epistemological questions in their traditional form are abandoned.

However, the usefulness of "ideology" as a concept lies not, as Canguilhem and Foucault (in their very different ways) see it, as the opposite to true or scientific knowledge, but rather in its sociological and political role, i.e. in the role that Althusser gives it as a structural and relatively autonomous aspect of society which operates to reproduce the social structure through the interpellation of individual subjects. Perhaps we should take Althusser's remark that he did not intend to produce a theory of knowledge or an epistemology at face value. This does not mean that his work is a reductionist variant of the sociology of knowledge *a la* Mannheim. Although his work indubitably leans in this direction he nevertheless gives a relative autonomy and privileged status to theory over and above the ideological raw materials it depends upon. This has been puzzling to many, but it should not be, for once one has exorcised the ghost of the correspondence theory of knowledge "epistemology" becomes something very different. In making a

formal separation of ideology and theory he makes the only sort of epistemological claim now open to him. He claims that there are different loci around which knowledge can cohere and that one of these loci (science) does not have a dependent relation upon the ideological presuppositions currently holding sway in society at large but maintains a degree of autonomy that enables it to transcend particular social formations. Althusser makes a very simple point, which despite its importance is constantly overlooked. Namely, that there is a crucial asymmetry in the internal form of relations between sciences and other theoretically expressed ideologies.

At the end point of the transformation of raw ideological material (which Althusser refers to as Generality 1, see figure 1.) into theoretical structures (Generality 3), theories cohere as part of a unified level of society. There are reciprocal relations whereby each science is seen to *mesh* within a structured organic framework composed exclusively of other sciences. Each science to be accepted must articulate 'positively' with the others in a relation which is mutually informative, critical and strengthening. (See fig. 2 below.)

Fig. 2.



For example genetics is moulded by, and at the same time informs, other constituted disciplines in the field of biology, evolutionary science, biochemistry, chemistry etc. Genetics is a relatively autonomous practice, whose relations are primarily with other sciences. This coherent relation of reciprocity between the sciences is touched on in the course of Althusser's discussion of the ideological nature of interdisciplinarity.<sup>66</sup> Althusser rejects interdisciplinary studies between sciences and non-scientific subjects as ideological fabrications. By contrast, regarding those apparently interdisciplinary studies between sciences, subjects like biochemistry, biophysics etc. Althusser remarks

"These exchanges are organic relations constituted between the different scientific disciplines without external philosophical intervention. They obey purely scientific necessities purely internal to the sciences under consideration."<sup>67</sup>

Althusser describes these differences in terms of relations of 'application' and 'constitution'. "Application" as the term suggests, is a relation of externality where one practice is applied instrumentally to another. By contrast the relation of constitution is one of internality within the sciences concerned, one of "mutual exchange". Although one may apply a science like mathematics to a subject outside its pure domain, unless it is actually working in tandem with that subject, and is therefore closely and intrinsically related to that subject (as for example maths is, according to Althusser, to all the sciences), then the relation is not one of interdisciplinarity in a genuine

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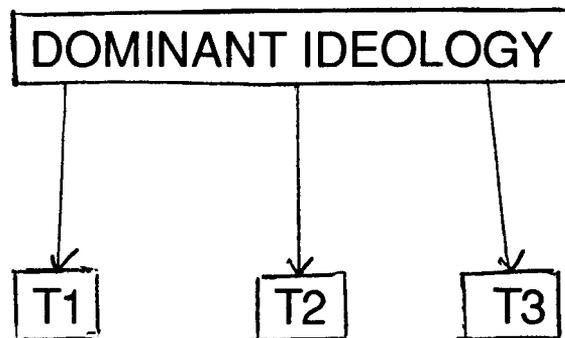
<sup>66</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n 1 above. See also chapter 3 of this thesis.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, p. 87.

sense but a simple instrumental application.<sup>68</sup>

The relations between 'theoretical' constructs at the ideological level are qualitatively different. These relations are not reciprocal and mutually informative but much more unidirectional and uncritical. This is because ideologies are arranged hierarchically with the dominant ideology always being that of the ruling classes. Thus at the level of 'bourgeois theory' (e.g. the non-Marxist philosophy which forms part of Generality I) relations have to be pictured quite differently. (See fig. 3. Below.)

Fig. 3.



Here theories are acceptable only insofar as they mesh with the dominant ideology, and their role is primarily supportive or communicative of this ideology. They are consequently restricted in their own internal workings because of the necessity of conforming to a limited social particularity.

One can speculate, although Althusser does not, that the Natural Sciences'

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<sup>68</sup> Whilst not agreeing with Althusser's formal separation of the scientific from the ideological realm, his notions of relations of constitution and application have important applications in the realm of environmental studies. The study of the environment is currently dominated by the latter whilst, what is really needed is a genuine organic interdisciplinarity. See my criticisms of humanist attempts to *apply* ethical theory to the environment in chapter 3.

apparently socially transcendent explanatory power is due to their being engaged in a dialectic with 'nature' which is relatively unmediated by other aspects of society. (See chapter 6.)

I would suggest that holding a simple two tier system of knowledge based on a formal methodological or epistemological distinction is untenable. Althusser is guilty of this fault, to an extent, but not to the extent usually attributed to him. His work can be read and developed in a different direction which brings him close to critical theorists like Adorno and Horkheimer. Althusser takes the establishment of the natural sciences for granted. It would be easy to criticise him for not realising the possible ideological nature of this unquestioning acceptance but to do so would miss the point. It would be to treat Althusser's work as one of pure epistemology and to forget the social setting that his inherently Marxist approach always brings to the foreground. Sciences *do* hold a privileged place in the iconography of Twentieth Century Western society: this privilege has to do with their success at explaining the world in their own terms, in their autonomy from the general background of society. Science does not have some magical ability to reach the heart of the matter where the world is concerned, to reveal ultimate reality. Dialectical materialism specifically repudiates this quest for a direct correspondence between theory and the world. Rather sciences, because of the extra-societal material of their study, have been given and fought for a degree of autonomy not reached in other areas of discourse. Their success has been due to the fact that they do not continually have to mesh with all the underlying ideological and socially variable aspects of particular social formations. Attempts like Lysenkoism to so treat them fail.

It is possible to square the Enlightenment perception of science as a new level of knowledge dispelling superstition with Althusser's concept of science as relatively autonomous from the prevailing ideological background. This is not because the scientific method gives us privileged access to the way the world is but because science gives us a new body of knowledge (which a social theory like Althusser's can attempt to cohere with and inform rather than dominate). Theory becomes merely a locus of relatively independent knowledge, relatively independent from the hegemony of current ideologies; a body which is open-ended and forms an alternative focus for other theories to converge upon. Science is historically and socially so structured as to rely largely upon internal coherence rather than relations of external submission.

Althusser's reconceptualisation of the difference between science and ideology is a subtle form of scientism that, unlike most, does not try to import and impose a distinctive scientific methodology upon social sciences, politics and philosophy, as a guarantor of epistemological purity. Instead he recognises the importance of science as a locus in society, an alternative standpoint, which critical theory can cohere around. The imposition of ideological limits on a science's development reduces its autonomy and alters the focus of its primary articulation from that of other sciences to that of the dominant ideology. It therefore hampers its ability to develop theoretical innovations necessary to maintain its coherence with other sciences.

By pushing Althusser's problematic beyond his explicit statements we can unearth his criteria for any new science or theoretical practice. In producing a new domain of theoretical practice it seems necessary, but not sufficient, that the new practice be *internally* coherent, for this might also be the case

with many 'idealist' systems of thought. It must also *mesh* with other areas of scientific knowledge. Indeed it is this *external* coherence with other scientific theories which guarantees its scientific and privileged status. Just as importantly, and corresponding to this scientific coherence is its separation whether gradual or revolutionary from its ideological past in which it was held in fetters. The new science as part of an autonomous practice is free to develop in an open-ended fashion without restraint from other ideological practices.

To give an example. Genetics was not simply a 'scientific' description of previous ideologically accepted 'facts' about inheritance. Before a theoretical genetics came into being there were no 'facts' for genetics to explain. Genetics creates a subject area - a domain which did not in a sense exist before. This is not to deny that inheritability was recognised prior to genetic theory nor to deny that there were a number of explanations for it (and it is certainly not to claim that the physical nature of the world has changed). It is simply to say that there was no sufficiently coherent body of theory and practice which meshed with other recognised sciences. Genetics has a role to play in other subject areas; taxonomy, evolutionary biology, ecology and so on. In these areas it operates not in isolation but in tandem with other scientific theories. To understand population dynamics, genetics has to be conjoined with evolutionary theories, theories of resource utilisation etc. These conjunctions are 'internal' to scientific practice - they are relations of 'constitution'. It is the ability of genetics to mesh with other accepted scientific theories which is as important in its establishment as a source of satisfactory explanations as its proficiency in its own area.

This explanation seems to fit with Althusser's description of his own problematic and it explains why it is he does not believe that he is involved in producing an epistemology, which he associates with correspondence theories of knowledge. Importantly, it also explains how it is that Althusser sees science and historical and dialectical materialism to be mutually supportive of each other and why science might provide a basis for a critical and to a degree socially transcendental perspective on the society of which it is still a part.<sup>69</sup>

Of course such divisions of social practices are not unproblematic and massively oversimplify the real situation. An obvious question is that of how, if sciences are to a large extent justified in their privileged status by their coherence with other sciences, any science first came to obtain this privileged position. Since Althusser nowhere introduces any pragmatic considerations, his only option is to refer to the open-endedness of scientific practice, its self-constituting role. But open-endedness and self-constitution would, by themselves, not be enough to explain science's origins. A science would also have to be a practice which helped explain its own practice in relation to other non-scientific areas of social life and initially at least these other areas would be wholly ideological. The early sciences cannot have broken radically with ideology but must have cohered with aspects of that

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<sup>69</sup> Importantly it also shows why an anti-humanist environmental problematic need not be anti-science. Science is not essentially tainted by humanism, but can actually provide an alternative theoretical locus from which to criticise the hegemony of humanism. Ecology, as a science, has certainly played this role on many occasions by highlighting the dangers and damage associated with our current way of life. Almost every book on environmentalism will reveal this critical relation between society and ecology. But see for example Hannah Bradby *Dirty Words: Writings on the History and Culture of Pollution* and David Cooper & Joy A. Palmer *The Environment in Question: Ethics and Global Issues*.

ideology. Althusser seems to recognise this to a degree and supposes that sciences (or at least scientists' philosophy of science) has a historical *tendency* to distance itself from ideology, a tendency facilitated by materialist philosophy. However, as we have seen, he holds a very formal distinction between science and ideology and only allows this tendency to occur within the philosophy of science rather than the practice of science itself.

In summary, there are five other important points highlighted by this comparison. First, there is no obvious reason why science should provide the basis for a philosophical critique of society as a whole. Insofar as it is an autonomous practice it may be used for a buffer or defence of social privileges, to consolidate the hegemony of humanism, just as easily as to criticise it. If science gains its transcendental privilege by its separation from society there is no *a priori* reason why it should prove an ally of radical critique rather than reactionary ideology. (Any theory can be politically reactionary. Even Althusser's theories themselves may, on occasion be used by reactionary parties or states.) Conformity with science is no guarantee of a theory's political status and role. There is no radical *essence* to any theory and it is only its articulation with the other components which will determine its political stance. Thus science can be appealed to by both anti-humanist radical environmentalists and by humanist supporters of the status quo.

Second, theory does not necessarily escape from an ideological background just by dint of its coherence. Foucault criticise this as a form of scientism. "By correcting itself, by rectifying its errors, by clarifying its formulations, discourse does not necessarily undo its relations with ideology. The role of

ideology does not diminish as rigour increases and error is dissipated.”<sup>70</sup>

The incredible tangle which Althusser weaves to distinguish elements of scientific theories is only necessary to distinguish ideology from science and maintain the scientific nature of Marxism. Yet everywhere one tries to draw this demarcation line ideology creeps back. To hold a formal and transcendental demarcation one requires more and more theoretical adjustments and auxiliary hypotheses. Ideology is present

i) as part of the raw material of scientific practice, i.e. Generality 1

ii) as the “usually dormant” Element 2 in the spontaneous philosophy of the scientists

iii) in the social interpellation of the scientist herself in society via education etc. and in many other less direct ways via other practices, e.g. the political decisions made as to which research to fund, who to employ etc. Given all these factors it is difficult to imagine how science and theory in general can claim to be ‘epistemologically’ wholly autonomous from the social formation which, in part, it seeks to explain. We need to change the balance of Althusser’s arguments back in favour of the *relative* autonomy of the sciences which his thesis of a definitive science / ideology distinction contradicts.

Third, ‘totalising’ theories, like Althusser’s overlook the particularity of events and practices by their very generality. This is a criticism which is applied to the history of science itself by Michel Serres.

“Everyone talks about the history of science as if it existed. But, I don’t know of any”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Foucault *op. cit.*, n. 48 above, p.186.

<sup>71</sup> Serres Quoted in Canguilhem *op. cit.*, n. 38 above, p. 18.

There can, according to Serres, be histories of individual sciences but not of science as such. For all sciences have different relations to the other components of the social formation of which they form a part. They each articulate in different ways, to greater and lesser degrees, and generalisations about them are difficult to make or even impossible. This criticism, which is akin to Foucault's, goes right to the heart of Althusser's concept of science as a singular cohesive practice.

Fourth, we must, like Canguilhem's recursive histories of science, take into account that science and ideology can only be distinguished from our present perspective. Any division we make between science and ideology cannot be absolute but is open to emendation. Althusser's conception of ideology as all pervasive is one that is akin to Mannheim's total and general ideology. Because of this, we must assume that ideological presuppositions occur precisely where they are *least* obvious. Past experience has shown us that the assumed and unquestioned aspects of theories do not provide neutral grounds or certain foundations. The fact that some aspect of theory is today recognised as 'obviously' materialist and coherent does not guarantee that it will not, in future or from some other perspective, come to be seen as ideologically inspired. Even though we recognise certain elements of a practice or philosophy as cohering with scientific practices and theories there may still be deep seated underlying ideological assumptions behind this recognition.

Fifth, the majority of theories utilise a mixture of both the dominant ideology and a scientific perspective; this is, I claim, the case with ethics.

“...and write with confidence “in the beginning was the deed””

Goethe (quoted by Wittgenstein<sup>1</sup> )

“All social life is essentially *practical*” Karl Marx<sup>2</sup>

## CHAPTER 5: PRACTICE AND THEORY

As we have seen, Althusser emphatically rejects those theories he refers to as “empiricist”, which includes all those with a representational epistemology, a view of language (and theory) as mirroring nature. He replaces this with a concept of theory as a relatively autonomous field of practice. Theory does not correspond to ‘reality’ but constructs theoretical ‘objects’ in theoretical practices, for which the natural sciences provide the role model.

However, despite the complex nature of his epistemology, Althusser lacks a theoretical account of how language is connected to social practices, of how language comes to function in particular ways in particular contexts. This re-contextualisation of language can, I argue, be largely provided by the later works of Wittgenstein. For this reason, this chapter first examines the production of theory and different interpretations of theoretical practice, it then turns to an examination of Wittgenstein’s work. The critique of Althusser’s attempt to separate theory from ideology in terms of denoting two separate kinds of discourse - one of which is epistemologically privileged

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein *On Certainty* §402

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx ‘Thesis on Feuerbach §1’ in *Early writings* p. 423.

over the other (see chapter 4) - proves to be a necessary preliminary for the development of a theory of practice which can reflexively explain its own origins. I aim to outline a general anti-foundationalist model within which theories, including 'bourgeois' philosophies such as humanism, can all be seen as expressions of, and influences on, particular times and places, and then judged on their *relative* merits and demerits hermeneutically, from within a particular social and environmental world. This removes the last remnants of Althusser's attempt to produce an absolute philosophical epistemology in favour of a hermeneutic critical theory.

The preceding chapters placed in context the formal and transcendental nature of Althusser's taxonomy of social practices; his recognition of four "essential levels"<sup>3</sup> of society, the "economic", the "political", the "ideological" and the "theoretical". The epistemological status of Althusser's own theory was questioned. It seemed implausible that these levels could be the *only* coherent way of classifying social practices and elucidating the structural relations of *all* social formations. What vantage point could possibly enable Althusser to justify such a theoretical analysis? His position, although complex, boiled down to a belief in science's ability to transcend otherwise dominant social ideologies. More specifically it claimed that dialectical and historical materialism provide such a vantage point because of their organic relations to the natural sciences. Althusser claims that Marxist theory is the only theoretical explanation of society which coheres with the sciences, supports them, and yet does not fetter them. These arguments were challenged on a number of grounds,

a). It was argued that science, *qua* theory, is not completely autonomous but,

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<sup>3</sup> Althusser *For Marx* p. 167.

even in Althusser's professed metaphysics, only relatively autonomous. Science cannot therefore be unaffected by ideology, indeed it depends upon ideology in a number of important ways. Sciences are not independent points of reference from which to examine society, but practices within that society with a limited degree of freedom in their own formulations.

b). The transcendental claims of dialectical materialism and historical materialism cannot be supported by coherence with the contents or methodologies of the sciences since these are not timeless and unchangeable but alter constantly.<sup>4</sup> Scientific theories, to be sure, may change at rates not *wholly* determined by the dominant ideology, but they change nonetheless. As dynamic processes the natural sciences cannot thus provide firm and final foundations or grounds for theories of society. As the nature of the sciences change, so may the relevance of dialectical and historical materialism. This recognition of the historical evolution of the sciences applies not just to the current theoretical content of physics, chemistry etc. but to the relations between and existence of these branches of science as a whole.

One might read Althusser as claiming that Marxist theory coheres with scientific methodology rather than specific scientific theories. For example the sciences seem to reject explanations couched in subjective terms as does Althusser's Marxism. This however leads to two problems. First, there are obviously vast differences between the operation of Marxist theory and most of the natural sciences, most glaringly in the importance attached to experimental and empirical data in the natural sciences. We will examine

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term "transcendental" here in terms of an absolutism which sees theories as uncovering timeless truths which can be *applied* outside of the particular historical and social circumstances which gave birth to them; i.e. as attaining a God's eye view, rather than simply being innovative - going beyond current conceptions.

this disparity below. Second, this relationship seems to be too vague to justify any confidence in the actual content of Marxist theory. There are many systems of thought which Althusser would regard as ideologies, ranging from Buddhism to forms of postmodern theory, which also reject this humanist grounding of explanation in the abstract individual subject. Why should Althusser's be preferred to any of these? There is also more than one possible meta-theory of society which would fit the criteria of coherence with, and non-interference in the natural sciences. For example, Mannheim's view of knowledge would not hinder the 'open-ended' development of science. (Although the guarantors of scientific objectivity might not be proletarian but bourgeois intellectuals.)

These arguments provide a necessary preliminary to understanding the meaning and importance of "practice" in Althusser's problematic. This chapter attempts to develop a conception of practices, in particular ideological and theoretical practices, in the light of these criticisms and by introducing aspects of the later thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein.<sup>5</sup>

If we approach the question of Althusser's levels of society from an epistemological angle, i.e. as the four main social practices through which we come to experience and understand the world, certain problems arise concerning the status of the practices themselves. What exactly are these practices and how do they relate to each other? I shall outline three different interpretations of Althusser's concept of practices. First an objectivist or naive *materialist* interpretation and then its opposite *idealist* interpretation. These are rejected as falling back into humanist modes of thought. The third

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<sup>5</sup> In particular Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations and On Certainty*.

option presented I refer to as a *hermeneutic* interpretation.

### i) Practices as Material Objects.

The last chapter brought out a tension in Althusser's problematic which resulted from the requirement of retaining a privileged scientific position for a theoretical Marxism *vis-a-vis* ideology. However, in one sense, this ideology / science division is symptomatic of a greater tension throughout his work. This tension might be portrayed in terms of an apparent clash between his relational Spinozistic metaphysics and what often seems to be an essentialist and transcendental notion of social practices. Althusser is not a naive essentialist, that much is obvious, for as demonstrated in chapter 3 his appropriation of Spinoza, rather than Hegel, entails a rejection of any view of society as the development of a "single essence".<sup>6</sup> However this conception seems to be rejected only to be replaced with a view of society as the predetermined working out of four essential levels, the major practices which constitute the social formation.<sup>7</sup>

How should one interpret these levels and the claims Althusser makes for them? One approach might be to see these levels as simply divided on the basis of their material concerns - the material they work upon, the material they produce together with the appropriate means of production. This might seem to be Althusser's position when, following Marx, he makes the distinctions between levels dependent upon the "type of object (raw

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<sup>6</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 3 above, p. 202 and see also chapter 3 of this thesis.

<sup>7</sup> Obviously Althusser's taxonomy of practices cannot be completely timeless because theory is admitted to be a relatively new participant allowing the analysis of social formations.

material) which it transforms, its type of means of production and the type of object it produces".<sup>8</sup> (See fig. 1.)

"We think the content of these different practices by thinking their peculiar structures, which in all these cases, is the structure of a production; by thinking what distinguishes between these different structures, i.e., the different natures of the objects to which they apply, of their means of production and of the relations within which they produce..."<sup>9</sup>

This in turn may suggest to some a simple ontological thesis whereby practices become completely autonomous at the level of the material they transform and produce or the type of labour employed.

Presented with such a taxonomy of social formations an initial reaction might be to inquire which category certain 'objects' in that social formation fall into. e.g. Is a cash register a material part of economic practice? Or a speech in Parliament a part of political practice? These questions arise naturally in what Althusser in his very broad definition terms the "empiricist" problematic i.e. a problematic which still works with an objective / subjective dichotomy at its heart. But, the wording of this question about 'objects' should alert us to the presence of an incipient tendency towards 'objectivism', a tendency to reify the components of theory as elements of the external world. As Bernstein states

"political economy' is not a single, selective dimension of human life; it is a congealed or crystallised form of human activity - of praxis. To

<sup>8</sup> Althusser *Reading Capital* p. 59.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 58.

think of economic categories as referring to a single abstract dimension of human life is to be guilty of what Marx himself called 'fetishism'." <sup>10</sup>

Althusser's claim about the material nature of the raw materials and products of each level has to be understood in the context of the dialectic itself. In other words Althusser is not espousing a naive materialist thesis which abstracts the essence of certain objects as necessarily political, economic etc. Nor is the operative category which justifies this distinction simply the type of labour involved. It would be mistaken to see Althusser's taxonomy of the social formation as cutting society up into boxes or levels all with separate material contents from each other whether the 'objects' concerned are discursive or otherwise. This would obviate the whole point of introducing the dialectical notion of practice in the first place, which was to understand the apparent properties of objects in the context of the relations perceived through human social action. It is to ignore Marx's opening remark in the 'Theses On Feuerbach' that

"The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism ... is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively." <sup>11</sup>

To essentialise the material bases of production and transformation in this way is ironically to treat practices themselves as "objects of contemplation", as elements of philosophical ideology rather than Marxist "science".

Althusser actually makes practices their own criterion of demarcation by their

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<sup>10</sup> Richard J. Bernstein *Praxis and Action* p. 58.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 421

combination (*Verbindung*) of their various components of material, modes and relations of production. For example, economic 'objects' are only recognised as objects because of their role in the processes which accomplish their transformation by economic labour and their insertion into economic relations. We can only recognise economics as a practice because of our relation to, and participation in, economic practices.

However, having said that practices are not definable in terms of their 'objects', it does seem that to the extent that Althusser tries to make certain discursive statements elements of a scientific practice and contrasts these with other discursive statements, e.g. in philosophy, which he claims are inherently ideological, Althusser falls into this essentialist and objectivist trap. To revert to an essentialism about the objects of practice, as one does when claiming that the products of theoretical practice are essentially superior to that practice's raw material, theoretical ideology, is to dissociate the products from the the social formation as a whole.

The division of society into neat and apparently well defined levels results in an almost irresistible tendency to translate these terms into a view of a society divided materially into formal categories all with exclusive contents. This can only be avoided by realising that, in a taxonomy of *social practice*, it is not *just* the 'object' and its inherent properties which are classified but the 'object's' role, function and relations. Any particular 'object' or activity may be playing more than one role at a particular time, and therefore may be a component of more than one practice. For example, an 'object' might easily be part of an *economic* exchange which in turn is *politically* motivated and *ideologically* active all at the same time. Of course the 'object' is only

knowable through practices, but these practices may combine to overdetermine a particular conception of an object, mutually reinforcing each other (or alternatively they may lead to contrasting and competing perspectives where the nature of the object is under-determined).

Althusser is actually positing the existence of four (relatively) independent forms of involvement in the world, forms which are self-referential levels of practical experience and in which are constituted the 'objects' of their own raw material, those they produce, and those that provide part of the means for these transformations. Here one must bring to mind the analogy made previously with Spinoza's attributes of substance. (See above p. 138 n.105.) Althusser can be interpreted as positing four attributes of the social formation. For example, the objects of economic practice are only knowable insofar as they relate to the actual practical interaction of labour's transformative action upon raw material to produce certain products. Thus it is wrong to ask whether a cash register, *qua material object in isolation*, is a part of economic practice, because, strictly speaking, it can only ever be known through one or other of these practices. In other words the cash register, by itself, is not an *object* of any practice, indeed *by itself* it cannot be *known* at all. It is only when it is part and parcel of a practice that it becomes 'objectified', a part of a public practice open to public scrutiny i.e. an object of knowledge. As an integral part of an economic practice it becomes an object of that practice, an integral part of that activity. Which practice it becomes a part of depends not only upon its own properties but upon its *relations* to the (labouring) activities of humans.

This of course has precisely the outcome Althusser wants where theories,

the objectified products of theoretical practices, are concerned. For one cannot simply appropriate the terms of a theoretical discourse, such as biology, physics or historical materialism, and apply them outside of their *self determined* remit. To do so would be to cease to be engaged in theoretical practice, hence these theoretical concepts would cease to be theoretical 'objects'. The epistemological guarantee of theoretical knowledge comes not from the 'object' of that knowledge by itself but only from its application theoretically, within the bounds that theory has delimited for itself. This enables Althusser to operate with a very strict demarcation principle for science, and by including Marxist theory within the realm of the theoretical he isolates it *absolutely* from ideological contamination.

Thus when used as a repository for Party funds or thrown from the twelfth floor of an apartment block at a passing head of state a cash register becomes primarily part of a political practice. It is not arbitrary that it does so. As a materialist one must presume that it has properties which help it to fulfil this function, such as a certain mass. In its day to day use the register might play a role in interpellating its user into a certain place in society and so act as a part of ideological practice. The point is that there is nothing *inherently* or exclusively part of such objects which links them *essentially* with any particular practice. Furthermore, the object's roles within any practice may be either reactionary or radical, conservative or critical. This is equally true of discursive propositions, problematics etc. Just as the cash register, produced to fulfil a particular role in an economic practice, may serve as a symbol of oppression or a weapon against a dominant hierarchy so too there is nothing about a given "theory" or "science" which makes its content *essentially* non-ideological or critical of society. A scientific theory can, and

usually does, play an ideological role, even if only in interpellating those scientists who come across it into a particular scientific practice which forms a part of the larger social formation. A scientific theory can be used to support a dominant hierarchy and ideology, e.g. in the application of eugenics in Hitler's Germany, or it can be used disruptively as Ecology is today by certain environmentalists in both capitalist and communist societies.

In attempting to make a formal distinction between ideology and theory, Althusser has fallen into precisely this trap of giving certain 'objects' (in this case scientific theories) an essential and unchanging role in societies. By giving an unquestioned privilege to science which then acts as the point around which Marxist theory turns, he hopes to ensure both their persistence and epistemological privilege over time. This implies a static essentialism which sees certain theoretical constructs as inherently radical, critical and in constant opposition to any non-socialist dominant ideology. Both Althusser's faith in the objects of science and his essentialism seem indefensible and radically at odds with his relational metaphysics and dialectical epistemology. The boundaries between ideology and theory cannot be drawn in this manner if indeed they can be drawn at all in any definite and final sense. Just as sciences (and Marxism) have frequently been used in conservative roles to uphold the dominant ideologies of oppressive states, so called 'ideological' discourses have frequently been major contributors to social change in opposition to dominant ideologies. For example, one need only look at the importance of the religious discourses of the disestablished

churches in the origins and growth of the labour movement in Britain.<sup>12</sup>

Althusser seems to make his levels transcendental in an absolute sense, he rejects a self-reflexive historicism which would deny the very possibility of science (and hence Marxist theory) escaping wider social influences. From this historicist perspective science would be seen as producing coherent but not *qualitatively* (in any absolute sense) different frameworks for conceiving the world from other theoretical frameworks. In summary, Althusser's distinction between ideology and theory has been criticised for being too rigid, making these two practices wholly autonomous rather than relatively autonomous. If theory is *completely* autonomous as a practice, then theoretical discourse seems to run the risk of losing any obvious relation with other aspects of the world; its concepts merely articulating, in an ill defined way, with other truly theoretical problematics. This tendency is well expressed in the following passage.

*"theoretical practice* is indeed its own criterion, and contains in itself definite protocols with which to *validate* the quality of its product.... This is exactly what happens in the real practice of the sciences: once they are truly constituted and developed they have no need for verification from *external* practices declare to the knowledge they produce to be 'true' i.e. to be *knowledge* ... the truth of this theorem is a hundred percent provided by criteria purely *internal* to the practice."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>E. P. Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class* chapter 11. In his later work Althusser recognised that this emphasis upon the *content* of Marxist theory leads to a theoretical paradigm which seems divorced from other aspects of Marxism. Hence Althusser's redefinition of dialectical materialism. See below p. 217.

<sup>13</sup>Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 8 above, p. 59.

This self-validation of practices has important repercussions for Althusser's anti-humanist metaphysics and epistemology and to fully understand it we need to make a short detour into Gaston Bachelard's philosophy of science, for Althusser's conception of science is genetically related to that of Bachelard. This discussion will also bring us to examine the charges of idealism levelled against Althusser's conception of practices.

## ii) Practice and Idealism.

Althusser's construal of historical and dialectical materialism *as science* is an extension of the applied rationalism of Bachelard and Canguilhem.

Bachelard too rejects the subject / object divide. On the one hand he states that

“Our task will therefore be to show that rationalism is in no way bound up with the imperialism of the subject, that it cannot be formed in an isolated consciousness.”<sup>14</sup>

But, on the other hand, theory does not simply depict objects as they appear to be - representing them in discourse - it makes a theoretical break with past conceptions of the world.

“We have only to speak of an object to think that we are being objective. But, because we chose it in the first place, the object

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<sup>14</sup> Gaston Bachelard quotation from ‘*Le Rationalisme Applique*’ in Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Chamboredon & Jean-Claude Passeron eds., *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries* p. 224. For a much more detailed account see ‘The Epistemological Break: Beyond Subject and Object in Modern Science’ in Mary McAllister Jones *Gaston Bachelard: Subversive Humanist: Texts and Readings*.

reveals more about us than we do about it... Sometimes we stand in wonder before a chosen object; we build up hypotheses and reveries; in this way we form convictions which have all the appearance of true knowledge. But the initial source is impure: the first impression is not a fundamental truth. In point of fact, scientific objectivity is possible only if one has broken first with the immediate object.”<sup>15</sup>

For Bachelard, scientific progress is a process whereby critical discourse and practice purifies its material by detaching it from its illusory first appearances. Science rejects common-sense views of the constitution of the world and formulates new theoretical problematics which lead to a deeper understanding of the world. It reconceptualises the obviousness of an ‘object’ in a novel and coherent discourse forming part of a new scientific practice, including also its own appropriate methods of investigation. Thus, for example,

“Chemistry, guided by its rational *a prioris*, gives us *substances without accidents*, frees all matters of the irrationality of their origins.”<sup>16</sup>

What this application of scientific practice entails can best be seen through an example. In the ‘Psychoanalysis of Fire’ Bachelard describes how

“Fire, that striking immediate object, that object which imposes itself as a first choice ahead of many other phenomena, no longer offers any perspective for scientific investigation.”<sup>17</sup>

Originally fire was held to be one of the four primary elements and as such

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<sup>15</sup> Gaston Bachelard *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Bachelard in Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron *op. cit.*, n. 14 p. 233.

<sup>17</sup> Bachelard in Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron *op. cit.*, n. 14 above, p. 2.

had a central place in the explanation of phenomena. Today most chemistry text books hardly mention fire at all. It has been replaced as a term in any mode of explanation by a theory utilising concepts like "oxidation". "Fire is no longer a reality for science."<sup>18</sup> Rather, what is now important are the processes theoretically envisioned at atomic and sub-atomic levels. This is not to deny that fire still has other important roles in our culture, as an object of reverie, as an object for the poet, the writer etc., but it is no longer an object for science or theoretical knowledge - it is not a part of scientific practice.

As Gary Gutting has pointed out, Bachelard, prefiguring Althusser's confidence in the content of Marxist Theory, believes that some scientific achievements must be seen as permanently valid. There "are concepts so indispensable to a scientific culture that we cannot conceive being led to abandon them."<sup>19</sup> There is a degree of permanence about some concepts, a timelessness such that even after a change in scientific paradigm (brought about by what Bachelard refers to as an "epistemological act") these concepts nonetheless remain valid as special cases of the new more general thesis. For example, Newtonian mechanics might be seen as a limited formulation of relativistic physics still suitable for dealing with certain circumstances.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Bachelard 'L'activité rationaliste de la physique contemporaine' in Gary Gutting *Foucault and the Archaeology of Scientific Reason* p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> This however is a hotly contested issue in the philosophy of science. Some writers such as Paul Feyerabend hold that consecutive scientific theories are literally incommensurable with each other. "The content classes of certain theories are incomparable in the sense that none of the usual logical relations (inclusion, exclusion, overlap) can be said to hold between them." Paul Feyerabend *Against Method* p. 223.

Bachelard's science, like Canguilhem's makes a complete break with its unscientific theoretical precursors.

"Technical materialism essentially corresponds to a transformed reality, a rectified reality, a reality which has precisely received the human mark par excellence, the mark of rationalism."<sup>21</sup>

Ironically, the humanist rationalism inherent in Bachelard's formulations is used by Althusser to provide a scientific and anti-humanist view of humanity itself where human nature and the abstract human individual no longer exist as scientific 'objects'. Society is thus purified from its past ideological associations by a new Marxist science of social relations.

An initial objection to a close analogy between Bachelard's conception of science and an Althusserian science of society arises when we begin to consider the scientific status of Althusser's theory itself, as a part of dialectical materialism. This, it seems, constitutes less a new science than a new contemplative philosophy. The vital area of experimentation seems under-theorised in Althusser's framework. In a natural science like chemistry there are definite practical connections between theoretical concepts and experimental work which guide and influence each other as a unified whole, as an experimental and conceptual scientific practice.

Bachelard makes theory *qua* theoretical formulations and practice *qua* experimentation combine in a theoretical practice which is genuinely co-

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<sup>21</sup> Bachelard in Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron *op. cit.*, n. 14 above, p. 224. This statement brings out Bachelard's views on the mutual interdependence and co-constitution of subject and object in any scientific project. Bachelard is both a rationalist and a realist at the same time. Scientific theories must reflect both the patterns of human thought and the patterns of the objects of study, but his dialectical methodology enables him to avoid falling into any form of subject or object essentialism.

constituting - where both are inter-dependent. Althusser neglected the relation of his formulae to the question of political change - he seems, as many Marxist critics have charged, to produce a theoretical practice which is actually wholly composed of theoretical formulae divorced from any transformative intent. In making theory an autonomous practice in its own right, he seems to sever the connection of theory to the material world, and to the world recognised in economic and political practice. In Bachelard's problematic theory and practice are co-constitutive of each other.

“...if scientific activity is experimental, then reasoning will be necessary; if it is rational, then experiment will be necessary.”<sup>22</sup>

Althusser seems in danger of falling into a form of theoretical idealism where an unconstrained rational process simply creates the objects of theory. He seemingly develops an inward looking critical theory with no actual theoretical correlation with the world. For example, Roy Bhaskar claims that Althusser's “...failure to give any apodeitic status to the real object rendered it as theoretically dispensable as the Kantian thing-in-itself and helped to lay the ground for the worst excesses of post-structuralism.”<sup>23</sup> Bhaskar sees Althusser's error as an inadequate theoretisation of the relation between the “real-concrete”, which he refers to as the “intransitive” dimension, and the “transitive” ‘object’ of theory. Whilst agreeing with Bhaskar, it is important to see that this failure to speak, in depth, about the role of the real-concrete stems from Althusser's humanist scientism, his wish to defend the autonomy of the sciences in opposition to ideology.

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<sup>22</sup> Mary McAllister Jones *Gaston Bachelard: Subversive Humanist: Texts and Readings* p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> Roy Bhaskar *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy* p. 188.

Michael Sprinker has attempted to rebut Bhaskar's charges. He emphasises the differences between Althusser's earlier and later formulations of Marxist philosophy. He claims that this represents a change from a "philosophy of science" to a "philosophy for science".<sup>24</sup> However, this makes little difference to Bhaskar's point. Althusser's evolutionary change is important because it attempts to regain the practical (experimental) connections of theory to other aspects of the social formation. His formulation of "philosophy as class struggle at the level of theory" goes some way towards defusing politically motivated charges of idealism by re-emphasising the relevance of Theoretical practice to political practice. It does little to re-articulate the real-concrete which underlies *all* social practices with the 'objects' of knowledge. This is what I take the point of Bhaskar's criticism to be. This omission on Althusser's part, this failure to recognise the fundamental importance of the real-concrete, the unknowable non-human world which underlies all our activity, is one more example of the anthropocentric humanism latent in Althusser. This is not Althusser's fault alone but is shared by any theories which see human labour as the only active input into the transformative processes of the dialectic. Any proper account of the dialectic must attempt to include the inevitable effects of this active, but unknowable, ingredient; of the "intransitive" world, on our societies. (This point is taken up in detail in chapter 6.)

It is this apparent lack of experimentation - the loss of the element of practice which is in part constituted by the active involvement of the real-concrete - which Althusser refers to when he admits that,

"If I did lay stress on the vital necessity of *theory* for revolutionary

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Sprinker 'The Royal Road: Marxism and the Philosophy of Science'

practice, and therefore denounced all forms of empiricism, I did not discuss the problem of the 'unity of theory and practice'... No doubt I did speak of the union of theory and practice within 'theoretical practice', but I did not enter into the question of the union of theory and practice within *political practice*... I did not examine the *concrete forms of existence* of this fusion." <sup>25</sup>

From this later emphasis which appears from his 'Elements in Self-Criticism' onwards Althusser makes explicit that Marxist theory is irreducibly bound up with political practice, its experimental aspect *is* that of revolutionary practice.

"behind the theoretical options opened up by Marxism there reverberates the reality of political options and a political struggle." <sup>26</sup>

But, as I remarked in chapter 3, this lays him open to the very charge of political pragmatism which he strove to reject.

### iii) Practices as Hermeneutics.

So far I have outlined two different interpretations of Althusser's practices, the objectivist conception which sees them as transcendental strata each with their own objects, and the idealist interpretation of his theoretical practice which sees it as essentially divorced from other levels of the social formation. In his later philosophy Althusser is fully aware of the possibility of being read in these objectivist or idealist manners. He also realises that many have misinterpreted Marx in precisely the same way.

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<sup>25</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 3 above, pp.14-15.

<sup>26</sup> Althusser *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* p. 243.

“...he no doubt employs formulae that can be interpreted in the sense of a transcendental philosophy of practice. And some have persisted in resorting to this active subjectivity, conceiving it as legitimising a humanist philosophy, while Marx is referring to something different since he expressly declares it to be ‘critical’ and ‘revolutionary’. But in this enigmatic sentence [Thesis on Feuerbach §1] in which practice is specifically opposed to the ‘object-form’ and the contemplative-form, Marx has not introduced any philosophical notion on a par with the ‘object-form’ and the contemplative-form’. and hence destined to replace them in order to establish a new philosophy, to inaugurate a new philosophical discourse. Instead, he establishes a reality that possesses the particularity of being at one and the same time presupposed by all traditional philosophical discourses, yet naturally excluded from such discourses.”<sup>27</sup>

Marxism, says Althusser, sees purely contemplative philosophy as merely a struggle for ideological hegemony, “a kind of theoretical laboratory in which... the constitution of the dominant ideology is experimentally perfected in the abstract.”<sup>28</sup> Yet although Althusser claims that [Marxism] “never presented itself in the direct form of a philosophical theory”,<sup>29</sup> he never fully rectifies this lack of an account of theory’s articulation with other practices. Indeed Althusser seems, in places, to want to save theory from contamination by common-sense ideology by removing from it any reference to the objects recognised in ideology, politics etc. It is not spurious to expect an account of how the ‘objects’ of science, including practices, relate to the objects of everyday life in ideology - just as it is one of the functions of chemistry to

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 247-248.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 247.

explain how fire as an object is related to the 'objects' of chemical theory like atoms. If chemistry failed to make these two forms of discourse commensurable at some level it would quite rightly be thought somehow inadequate. In eliminating the last vestiges of empiricism he runs the risk of making his theoretical discourse *incommensurable* with everyday practical experiences of the world. In making theory one hundred percent self referential he faces the even greater danger of losing all sensuous contact with the world at all i.e. idealism. This pronounced tendency could be accounted for as part of Althusser's critical anti-Stalinism, his wish to insulate theory from political predation.

Althusser's later work can be seen as an unsuccessful struggle to reforge the links between theory and practice which he broke under the influence of the Bachelardian inheritance of applied rationalism. In his 'Elements of Self-Criticism' he makes the fatal error of bending the stick too far towards a political pragmatism (see Chapter 3). Later attempts were less reductionist and strove to keep theory as a relatively autonomous field, distinct from, but not unconnected to, politics.<sup>30</sup> Yet this tension remains and Althusser's mature theory requires that politics be at one and the same time the practical (*qua* experimental) side of Marxist theory and a practice (*qua* level of society) in its own right.

It is important not to make a hard and fast distinction between "theory" and

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<sup>30</sup> The "Transformation of Philosophy" written in 1976 (and included in the collection *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*) was an attempt by Althusser to redress the balance between theory and political practice. To my mind it does not make the fatal error of his earlier *Elements of Self-Criticism* where he had been too accommodating to pressure from the P.C.F. and was reduced to stating that dialectical materialism was "in the last instance, class struggle in the field of theory." Althusser *Essays on Ideology* p. 67.

“practice” as if they were two separate entities. Theory is always connected to the non-theoretical even if the connections sometimes appear tenuous. As Althusser himself points out there is a tendency to treat theory as a counter to practice. But we must avoid this trap and

“recognise that there is no practice in general, but only *distinct practices* which are not related in any Manichean way with a theory which is opposed to them in every respect. For there is not one side to theory, a pure intellectual vision without body or materiality - and another of completely material practice which ‘gets its hands dirty.’”<sup>31</sup>

It is certainly the case that theory can hold a dialogue with itself and that as it thus turns inwards it can produce what can only be seen as a theoretical practice. Philosophy is perhaps a perfect example of this, but there are others whose connections with the wider world appear even more tenuous e.g. theoretical physics. However, even in these cases theory *cannot* separate itself entirely from non-theoretical aspects of the social formation and those that ignore this are likely to invite ridicule. Such ridicule has justifiably fallen on the heads of some philosophers who have lost their balance walking the tightrope between theory and practice and fallen into the most bizarre interpretations of the world. The end result of this systematised foolishness is to inculcate and foster an indifference to anything but a ‘common-sense’ approach, thus ensuring the predominance of interpretations made ‘obvious’ by the dominant ideologies.

We are perhaps now in a better position to judge the nature of Althusser’s practices. The interpretation of the nature of practices themselves exactly

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<sup>31</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 8 above, p. 58.

mirrors those available for other worldly 'objects'. There are three basic options available. The materialist (objectivist) and idealist options have already been alluded to. The third option is to hold that our very notions of practices are themselves achieved through our socio-practical experiences of the world. If this is so then they are neither 'real objects' nor 'arbitrary concepts' but socially mediated concepts achieved through immersion in, and interactions with, particular forms of social environment and articulated theoretically. As such they can have *no* essential and transcendent nature but are themselves in their very constitution part and parcel of given social formations. The upshot of this is that if one wishes to retain the dialectical aspect of any conception of social formations one must be willing to give up claims about the *essential* characteristics of those practices which compose society.

If practices themselves can only be defined hermeneutically through the dialectic - for Marxism the socially productive interactions between the world and humanity - then they can have no objective reality in a non-dialectical sense. They do not simply express properties of certain 'objects' in the world. Indeed, practice is by its nature something which is inherently dependent upon the social relations of a society. The very existence of, for example, economic practice requires that there be a certain form of social formation with particular structures and relations. This hermeneutic perspective has certain implications.

- 1). New practices may arise and attain import - old practices may disappear or become irrelevant.
- 2). We cannot hold that certain discourses are essentially theoretical in any timeless or transcendental sense. Discourses constitute a part of theory only

insofar as theory is now recognised as a separate practice and only from certain positions within the social formation.

3). The very notions of practice and dialectic themselves may at some stage become inappropriate or outmoded.

If we exchange Althusser's synchronic emphasis on scientific theory, for a diachronic dynamism where theory is presumed to change, we move beyond any temptation to essentialise and therefore necessarily objectivise or idealise objects in the world towards a truly relational metaphysic. This in turn opens the way to forging links between practices and in particular to link theoretical discourse with other social practices.

The recognition of practices has to become less constrained, more expansive, and historicised. "Practice" is used to identify the constitutive components of the social formation, the predominant fields of socially mediated experiences. Specific conceptual schemes are moulded, formed and constituted by and within these social practices. The identification and taxonomy of these practices and their components becomes an important part of epistemology, to illuminate the particular arrangement and historical genealogy of conceptual schemes and to understand the effects of these practices upon the beliefs and values of those engaged in them. However, these practices can only be defined from within the society itself, hermeneutically. (This is also to recognise a particular site of ideology's functioning, for particular standpoints within these practices lead to unconscious and obvious conceptions of the relations between practices and their elements.)

The remainder of this chapter attempts to outline an alternative non-essentialist, but not functionalist model of social practices. In so doing I will alter the place and form taken by the demarcation line between ideology and science in Althusser's problematic, but try to retain, insofar as is possible, the many positive aspects of Althusser's theories. The model suggested will also incorporate points made by the three social thinkers treated in the last chapter. In particular Canguilhem's concern for a recursive history of the science / ideology divide, Mannheim's view of total and general ideology and something of Foucault's idea of the discursive formation.

As we have seen, the lack of a proper account of the relations between theory (*qua* discursive and conceptual elements) and practice (*qua* experimental elements) is a serious drawback to Althusser's theory. In positing too rigid a demarcation between levels by following the applied rationalism of Bachelard and Canguilhem, he makes contemplative philosophy and Marxist philosophy two completely different phenomena. They are apparently created from different materials, by different means and with different results. This (as chapter 4 showed) is a difficult position to maintain in the light of a reflexive critique of the social origins of Althusser's own Marxism.

It also seems to conflict with Althusser's exposition of ideology as operating largely unconsciously and structurally. For at least some of the participants in contemplative philosophy have to be admitted to be self-reflexive and critical at a very conscious level. All things considered, it seems better to drop Althusser's qualitative distinction between Marxist philosophy and bourgeois philosophy and allow that they are both forms of theory to be

judged on their relative merits as coherent accounts of how the world is structured. This judgment cannot of course be an objective one but must come from the social situatedness of those making such judgments. For my part I have argued that dialectical materialism can provide the basis for an epistemology superior to that of any representational theory of truth and meaning. In this light I want to propose a common theoretical framework for linking “practice” and “theory”. The prime focus of this attempt to link the practical-experimental with the discursive-theoretical will depend heavily upon the later work of Wittgenstein.

### Wittgenstein and Practices

Drawing connections between Wittgenstein and Althusser may initially appear bizarre. Could any two philosophies be more different in style and emphasis than Althusser with his explicitly political stance and Wittgenstein's apolitical detachment? Politics and style are not the only points of difference. Althusser states that “Philosophy consists of words organised into dogmatic propositions called theses.”<sup>32</sup> The primary function of these theses is to “draw a line of demarcation between the ideological ... and the scientific.”<sup>33</sup> But, as Johnston has pointed out, “the fundamental premise underlying Wittgenstein's method is the claim that philosophy should be descriptive, that it should advance no theses.”<sup>34</sup>

The advancing of theses and the descriptive project of philosophy are

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<sup>32</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 8 above, p. 77.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Johnston *Wittgenstein and Moral Philosophy* p. 2.

perhaps not as distinct as Johnston imagines,<sup>35</sup> but nonetheless there is no doubt that Althusser and Wittgenstein do start from positions situated within radically different philosophical traditions. The interesting point is that Althusser's work does connect very well with Wittgenstein's later philosophy. In particular both philosophers utilise varieties of holistic coherence theories and both place "social practice" at the centre of their philosophical agendas. In this they show the influence of 'anthropological' rather than purely philosophical considerations. This might be explained, at least in part, by the indirect influence of Marxist sociological thought upon Wittgenstein.

There is a tendency to see Wittgenstein as the archetypal philosopher recluse, and indeed for long periods of his life he was, but he was also profoundly influenced by other contemporary thinkers and especially, in his later philosophy, by the Italian Marxist economist, and fellow exile from fascist Europe, Piero Sraffa. Sraffa, forced to leave Italy after openly criticising Mussolini, was found a post at Cambridge University by Keynes. Wittgenstein and Sraffa met on a regular weekly basis for philosophical discussions over the period that Wittgenstein was composing the work now

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<sup>35</sup> This can be seen when Wittgenstein states "We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems: they are solved, rather, by looking into the working of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognise these workings; *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language." *Philosophical Investigations* §109. The emphasis on the theoretical rejection of both 'common-sense' and empiricism and the need for a theoretical re-ordering of our conceptions of the world to overcome these problems is very reminiscent of Althusser's and Bachelard's applied rationalism. However, as other parts of this passage show, Wittgenstein's conception of philosophical theory is only distantly related to his conception of natural science which is always referred to as empirical.

known as *The Philosophical Investigations*.

In his comprehensive biography of Wittgenstein, Ray Monk states that “Sraffa had the power to force Wittgenstein to revise, not this point or that point, but his whole perspective”<sup>36</sup> We also have Wittgenstein’s own word for the importance he placed on these discussions in the development of his later philosophy and in repudiating many aspects of his earlier work. Even more than the influence of discussions with Frank Ramsey, Wittgenstein said,

“I am indebted to that [criticism] which a teacher of this university, Mr. P. Sraffa, for many years unceasingly practised on my thoughts. I am indebted to *this* stimulus for the most consequential ideas of this book.”<sup>37</sup>

Such an explicit statement cannot be treated lightly and, I would suggest, of the ideas developed in the *Philosophical Investigations* none are more consequential than the derivation of meaning from a word’s uses within social practice together with the concept of “forms of life”. That is, Wittgenstein not only points out that language finds its meaning in its use, but it also follows from this that “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.”<sup>38</sup>

This shift from a representational theory of meaning to the primary importance of the connection between languages and social practices is the

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<sup>36</sup> Ray Monk *Ludwig Wittgenstein the Duty of Genius* p. 260.

<sup>37</sup> Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* p. viii. The word “practised” is unlikely to be used accidentally.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, §19

single most important characteristic of his later work.<sup>39</sup> As Monk notes

“Wittgenstein once remarked to Rush Rhees that the most important thing he gained from Sraffa was an ‘anthropological’ way of looking at philosophical problems.”<sup>40</sup>

My purpose in making these and the following remarks is not to belittle the originality of Wittgenstein’s work, far from it; but to point out its connections with a wider set of influences than is generally recognised, especially where the social aspects of his philosophy are concerned. The general consensus seems to be that Marxism’s influence upon Wittgenstein was limited to the attraction of the Soviet Union as a place where he might live an ascetic and morally uplifting life. (He tried to obtain employment in the Soviet Union through a number of Marxist contacts in Britain.) Although it is certain that at the theoretical level he was at least ambiguous in his attitude towards Marxist *politics* he was perhaps closer in philosophical terms than either his aristocratic social background or empiricist philosophical *surroundings* would suggest possible.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> The best known adaptation of Wittgenstein’s arguments to social science is that by Peter Winch in his *The Idea of a Social Science*. The debates surrounding this work are however outside the scope of the present thesis. See also Ted Benton ‘Winch, Wittgenstein and Marxism’ pp.1-6. Also Alasdair MacIntyre ‘The Idea of a Social Science’.

<sup>40</sup> Monk *op. cit.*, n. 36 above, p. 261. Susan M. Easton ‘Humanist Marxism and Wittgensteinian Social Philosophy’, notes that Von Wright also suggested that Sraffa was “largely responsible” for Wittgenstein’s changes in his later philosophy. “It was above all Sraffa’s acute and forceful criticism that compelled Wittgenstein to abandon his earlier views and to set out upon new roads. He said that his discussions with Sraffa made him feel like a tree from which all the branches had been cut.” G.H. Von Wright in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: a Memoir* p.15.

<sup>41</sup> It would also be easy to overestimate the similarities between Wittgenstein’s conception of practice and that of Marxism which is always a form of *productive* practice mediated by human labour. (This particular difference is taken up in chapter 6.)

Althusser and Wittgenstein share their common rejection of a naive correspondence theory of meaning and truth, a rejection which is epitomised in Wittgenstein's repudiation of his own earlier 'picture theory' of meaning presented in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.<sup>42</sup> In his later work he rejects entirely the representationalist view that the meaning of a word *is* the object it stands for. In complete contrast to this he states "the idea of 'agreement with reality' does not have any clear application."<sup>43</sup>

His rejection of the representational theory of meaning and truth is total.

"Well if everything speaks for an hypothesis and nothing against it -- is it then certainly true? One may designate it as such. ---But does it certainly agree with reality, with the facts? --- With this question you are already going round in a circle."<sup>44</sup>

'Reality' is chimerical - one can only know the world as mediated in social practice.

"Unlike Kant, and much more like Marx, Wittgenstein considers the experience of the world to be mediated through social training, and through other forms of social life, rather than through the synthetic power of consciousness. Our language, defined narrowly, is only part of the social construction of reality."<sup>45</sup>

Wittgenstein attempts to overcome the idealism-conventionalism / objectivism-naturalism divide. Language has neither an arbitrary connection with the world nor is it determined by it. Consequently reality is not determined by thought but nor are thoughts simply reflections of an external

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<sup>42</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

<sup>43</sup> Wittgenstein *op. cit.*, n. 1 above, § 215.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, §191.

<sup>45</sup> David Rubenstein *Marx and Wittgenstein* p. 174.

reality. As Susan Easton puts it

“Language for Wittgenstein as for Marx, is an activity in which one engages when interacting with the natural world, imposing a structure upon it. The world may be presented to us in an organised fashion but this classification and organisation is undertaken and acquired in learning the language, which is an activity inseparable from learning how to live in the world.”<sup>46</sup>

Easton provides an informative comparison between Marxism and Wittgenstein’s later work. However, her humanist and Lukácsian influences mean that Althusser is almost entirely neglected and that ideology is treated primarily in terms of individual and class consciousness, underplaying its unconscious effects. Her humanist presuppositions exclude her from recognising many of the important similarities between Wittgenstein and Marxist anti-humanism, in terms both of his decentering of the subject as the locus of meaning and of his anti-essentialist metaphysics.<sup>47</sup> Hanna Pitkin has explicitly characterised Wittgenstein’s epistemology as dialectical.

“Wittgenstein... attempts to hold a dialectical balance between the mutual influences of language and the world.”<sup>48</sup>

Wittgenstein holds that language is necessarily a social phenomenon, there is indeed no possibility of a private language. As such there have to be some similarities between participants in a common language-game so that the possibility of their speaking to each other remains open. Language is

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<sup>46</sup> Easton *op. cit.*, n. 40 above, p. 84. Rubenstein thinks that “the concept of ‘social praxis’, derived from Marx and Wittgenstein, can resolve many central facets of the debate between objectivism and subjectivism, in large measure by undermining some of the implicitly shared premises of both perspectives.” Rubenstein *op. cit.*, n. 45 above, p.1.

<sup>47</sup> These points of criticism are echoed in John Burnheim’s review of Easton’s book.

<sup>48</sup> Hanna Pitkin *Wittgenstein and Justice*.

'rule governed', but those rules can only exist because of the genuine similarities between people at a number of levels from the biological to the social. Here again we can see the connections with aspects of Marxism

"As regards the individual, it is clear e.g. that he relates even to language itself *as his own* only as the natural member of a human community. Language as the product of an individual is an impossibility. But the same holds for property. Language is the product of a community, just as it is in another respect itself the presence (*Dasein*) of the community, a presence which goes without saying." <sup>49</sup>

In this sense, as Rubenstein has remarked, it is also true to say that

"...Describing Wittgenstein as a linguistic philosopher is potentially misleading, for in his view language is inconceivable apart from social life, and the understanding of language thus requires an analysis of the forms of life in which it is implicated." <sup>50</sup>

Wittgenstein's work does not just agree with Althusser's in a negative sense of rejecting correspondence theories, he also accepts what can only be referred to a holistic coherence theory of meaning and truth. This can be seen in the similarities of his pronouncements on the *meaning* of words to Althusser's conception (discussed in chapter 3) where the concept's place in a problematic is vital. For Wittgenstein the relevant context is even broader than that of a theoretical problematic, depending upon the whole linguistic context of which concepts form a part i.e. the language-game.

"When language games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meanings of the words change." <sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Karl Marx *Grundrisse* p. 83.

<sup>50</sup> Rubenstein *op. cit.*, n. 45 above, p. 173.

<sup>51</sup> Wittgenstein *op. cit.*, n. 1 above § 65.

Beliefs only have a sense when placed in relations to other aspects of a particular system and cannot be isolated, abstracted and dissected for their essential meaning. We need to look at the totality of their relations, their place within a discourse.

“When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole)”<sup>52</sup>

Of course a discourse is not isolated from the world of its practical application. Although discourses may have a relative autonomy from it, a word gains its significance through its use; this may be a theoretical use or it may be a “practical” use: “[a] meaning of a word is a kind of employment of it.”<sup>53</sup>

The meaning of terms is always tied to concrete social practices and “in the last instance” their use can only be explained by reference to the social practice of which they form a part. It is in this sense that Althusser and Wittgenstein can both be said to employ holistic theories of meaning. The meaning of a word depends not only on its relations with other words and concepts but on its relations with the complex whole of society which must of necessity also include the physical non-human world.

However, in Wittgenstein, the connection between the theoretical (qua discursive) and the practical is drawn more explicitly and filled out in very different ways from Althusser. Of vital importance in understanding how Wittgenstein fills out the theoretical relation of discourse to practice in a non-essentialist manner is the concept of “forms of life”. The phrase “form(s) of

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, §140.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, § 61.

life” appears only five times in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and only seven times in the whole of Wittgenstein's published works, but it is more important by far than the frequency with which it occurs might suggest. That “forms of life” are central to an understanding of Wittgenstein’s arguments is recognised by almost all commentators, including Norman Malcolm, Stanley Cavell and P.F. Strawson.<sup>54</sup> As the phrase occurs only a few times it would be well to list their contexts.

1.) “It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders or reports in battle.--- Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no. And innumerable others.---- And to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life”<sup>55</sup>

2.) “Here the term “language game” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or a form of life.”<sup>56</sup>

3.) “So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false? ---It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is, not agreement in opinions but in form of life.”<sup>57</sup>

4.) “Can only those hope who can talk? Only those who have mastered the

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<sup>54</sup> For references to these and other authors together with commentary on ‘forms of life’ see Nicholas Gier’s excellent article ‘Wittgenstein and Forms of Life’. Other references to forms of life can be found in Guido Frongia & Brian McGuinness *Wittgenstein; A Bibliographical Guide*.

<sup>55</sup> Wittgenstein *op. cit.*, n. 37 above, §19.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, § 23.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, § 241.

use of language. That is to say, the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life. (If a concept refers to a character of human handwriting, it has no application to beings that do not write)."<sup>58</sup>

5.) "What has to be accepted, the given, is---so one could say----*forms of life*."<sup>59</sup>

6.) "Why shouldn't one form of life culminate in an utterance of belief in the last judgment?"<sup>60</sup>

7.) "Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life.. But that means I want to conceive it as something beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal."<sup>61</sup>

These then are the sum total of Wittgenstein's references to form[s] of life and at first sight they seem to be used in a variety of contexts which are difficult to relate to each other in any coherent manner. Hunter proposes four possible interpretations which can be approximately summarised as follows.<sup>62</sup> That "form of life" is

- A) equivalent to a "language game".
- B) a package of related behavioural tendencies
- C) a fashion or style of life linked to certain aspects of society like class

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>60</sup> Wittgenstein 'Lectures and Conversations' quoted in Gier *op. cit.*, n. 54 above, p. 242.

<sup>61</sup> Wittgenstein *op. cit.*, n 1 above, § 358-359 - abridged here following Gier *ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>62</sup> J. F. M. Hunter "Forms of Life" in Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations'.

structure, values and religion.

D) Something typical of a living being, that is a biologically based phenomenon.

Hunter finds the fourth alternative the most promising and his analysis, which is confined to the material of the *Philosophical Investigations*, would seem to gain support by the inclusion of the last Wittgenstein quotation from *On Certainty*; that they are “something animal”.

I think that Hunter’s summary dismissal of the third option in a few paragraphs is mistaken, and that the options he proposes are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Phillips develops a more sophisticated view of Hunter’s biological thesis and interprets “forms of life” as “referring to various differences in biological and mental properties amongst different organisms.”<sup>63</sup> Despite this rather limited perspective, what he says about Wittgenstein’s relation to relativism is supportive of the position I try to develop here.

“For Wittgenstein, various language-games are partly dependent on certain contingent facts of nature: that human beings think, use language, agree in judgments and reactions and share certain common interests. In this sense language is a *product* of human activity in the world, it is a product of the facts of human and physical nature. But, at the same time, language is also a *producer* of meaning and new forms of human activity. Wittgenstein, then, does not want to endorse a position which holds that facts of nature *completely* determine language; nor, on the other hand, does he want to say that

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<sup>63</sup> Derek L. Phillips *Wittgenstein and Scientific Knowledge* p. 80.

the facts of nature are *totally* creations of language.”<sup>64</sup>

I propose to argue that “form(s) of life” represent the variety and totality of social practices and their contexts found in given social formations, in which, and against which, our activities take *place* and are understood. ‘Forms of life’ are the background of our social activities: a background which is, at the same time largely composed of social activities and can only be understood through social activity. I will take each of Wittgenstein’s uses of the phrase ‘forms of life’ in turn to show how they can be seen as supporting the interpretation of a background against which language games are played and of which they form a part.

1) “It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders or reports in battle.--- Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no. And innumerable others.---- And to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life”

This quotation makes a specific connection between a language and the context of that language, the form it takes - orders, reports - and the use it has, its functional role in battle. In the early sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein imagines a very simple language used by a community of builders consisting of just the phrases “slab”, “block” and so on. Even in this very simple example the practical context of the word’s use is seen to be all important in determining its meaning. There is always a necessary connection between practical social context and linguistic meaning, between a language’s development and its use. The language cannot be separated from its context and to think of a word’s meaning is to

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p. 83.

imagine the context in which it is found. Thus 2) "Here the term "language game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life.*

3.) "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false? ---It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life."

This should be read as an argument against a naive conventionalism - one which holds that definitions are merely arbitrary decisions made by collective agreement. This form of conventionalism reintroduces a form of idealism in the sense that it leaves it open for humans to decide upon *any* theoretical taxonomy of the world which they choose. Wittgenstein transcends this natural / conventional distinction, for him rules are certainly not arbitrary but they could have been otherwise given different circumstances. The emphasis on forms of life points to the necessity of a common linguistic 'framework' which is itself only produced because there are similarities in our modes of experiencing the world. Our engagement in social practices ensures that experience is shared, not in an essentialist manner but in terms of similarities at a number of levels, through having similar sensory equipment, similar social background and so forth. Definitions are not then arbitrary in any strong sense but only in a weaker sense that they are not predetermined by the *world alone* prior to engagement in a practice.

4) "Can only those hope who can talk? Only those who have mastered the use of language. That is to say, the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life. (If a concept refers to a character of human

handwriting, it has no application to beings that do not write.)”

Wittgenstein here emphasises that our concepts are ineluctably tied to the sort of animals we are and the sort of society which we inhabit. We only have certain concepts, e.g. calligraphy, letters, postmen, because of the development of particular practices e.g. hand-writing. Hoping for something entails conceptions of certain desired ends which can only be done (Wittgenstein claims) within a language - thus to talk of a dog ‘hoping’ for its owner’s return would be inappropriate if one were to take it literally. Certain human activities depend intimately upon language acquisition and this in turn depends upon certain biological features which humans tend to have but squid or earthworms might lack.

5) “What has to be accepted, the given, is---so one could say----*forms of life.*”

This shortness of this passage belies its importance. “Forms of life” are given, not in the sense of being unchangeable essential features of the human situation but because, as a concept, “form of life” plays the role of highlighting all those unspecified elements of the background, whether physical or discursive, which allow a particular language-game to proceed. What these elements of background actually are depends upon the context and particular situation, but for a discourse to be possible at all there have to be at least some common features, whatever they might be. I take this passage to undermine any claims that there might be a neutral philosophical rationality which underlies all argumentation.

6) “Why shouldn’t one form of life culminate in an utterance of belief in the last judgment?”

The possibility aired here is that one's background might easily be effective in producing a deeply held religious belief; that the conceptual understanding of the world generated by involvement in particular social practices is such that a belief of this form may spring 'naturally' from them. This by itself is not a radical thought but what Wittgenstein is suggesting that there may be limits to how, for example, the arguments of an atheist could reach such a person. For the starting point of any argument has to be within the experiential totality of that person's past. 'Rational argument' may find no common basis from which to get a foothold. Indeed the very features of the world which could provide such a basis may be interpreted completely differently in the religious and non-religious forms of life.

To give proper sense to the last reference 7) one needs to quote it in a larger textual context, something which Geir fails to do.<sup>65</sup> By omitting this he also obscures Wittgenstein's reservations about this particular formulation.

"My "mental state", the "knowing", gives me no guarantee of what will happen. But it consists in this, that I should not understand where a doubt could get a foothold nor where a further test was possible.

One might say: "I now express *comfortable* certainty, not the certainty that is struggling."

Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life. (That is very badly expressed and probably badly thought as well.)

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<sup>65</sup> Geir *op. cit.*, n. 54 above, p. 242.

But that means I want to conceive it as something beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal.”<sup>66</sup>

Once placed in these textual surroundings we can see that it occurs in the context of explaining what “knowledge” is and why we think that we have knowledge of something in certain circumstances. The explanation that Wittgenstein gives for this is not that it lies in a justification by correspondence to the world as it really is, nor yet is it a *purely* psychological state of the believer.<sup>67</sup> What matters is that it simply seems to the human subject, given their background, that there are *no* grounds for possible doubt. i.e. that X is obvious, or comfortable and fits so well with the background of that person that there is *no possibility* of any other interpretation. In other words it fits with the forms of life that person has experienced; it is *ideologically* successful, fully interpellating knowledge into the background of practices brought to bear upon it consciously and unconsciously.

To summarise: The role of the concept “form[s] of life” is not to pick out any particular feature shared by all members of a given society, but to express

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<sup>66</sup> Wittgenstein *op. cit.*, n. 1 above, § 358-359.

<sup>67</sup> This refusal to talk of the justification of knowledge in terms of representationalism (although Wittgenstein, like Althusser, does not deny that words are used in some circumstances to “stand in for” objects) caused confusion amongst early commentators. A. R. White, for example states “no attempt is made to explain how, e.g., the certainty of a person is related to the certainty of an event or how certainty is distinguished, on the one hand, from knowledge and, on the other, from such notions as confidence and conviction. At the beginning, indeed, Wittgenstein explicitly says ‘The difference between the concept of “knowing” and the concept of “being certain” is not of any great importance at all.’” A. R. White review of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*.

the many similarities that we experience on all planes of existence that allow us to understand, to place a word in the social context which determines its meaning. "Forms of life" are those aspects of any situation which serve to ensure the *commensurability* of discourse by locating the language game being played within particular social practices and linking the concepts' location and use to planes other than that of the original discourse itself; to biology, social structure, mythology or tradition etc. Forms of life are the contextualised backgrounds which serve to anchor discourses to each other and to the world experienced in social practices.<sup>68</sup>

Only when faced with a form of life that has no points of contact at all with our own does discourse become genuinely incommensurable. And of course this does not happen between societies made up of our own species because we always do have points of contact if only in similar biological needs and abilities. This is the point of Wittgenstein's reference to "something animal". It is, as Geir puts it, that "nature does have something to say"<sup>69</sup> about our use of language and the way we relate to the world and each other. Wittgenstein specifically tries to speak of cases where there might be thought to be no points of contact, no shared form of life, most specifically when he states "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him."<sup>70</sup> That we could not understand or translate "lionish" is not because we do not share a common history of linguistic derivations, as from Latin or ancient Greek, this is true of many more distant *human* languages; it is because we have *no* points of contact, no practices that are similar enough

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<sup>68</sup> There are also parallels here with Heidegger's concept of "*Dasein*" and Husserl's "life-world". But these are outside of the scope of the current thesis.

<sup>69</sup> Geir *op. cit.*, n. 54 above, p. 248.

<sup>70</sup> Wittgenstein *op. cit.*, n. 37 above, p. 223.

to us both. Of course, there are in fact similarities between lions and ourselves, largely biological similarities, we can understand such 'common' occurrences as hunger. We know when our pet cat wants to be fed and presumably a lion keeper understands her charges at least to this extent. To find an example of a society that was completely incommensurable would be difficult for the very reason that *we would not recognise it as a society, we would not know what to look for.*

This interpretation of forms of life is similar in many respects to that proposed by Lynne Rudder Baker. She attempts to explain why it is that Wittgenstein was so vague about the meaning of "forms of life". The point is that

"pervasive as they are, however, the practices that shape human life form no system. Wittgenstein, to the chagrin of many philosophers, would have deep reasons to reject a request for identity conditions for forms of life. It is no more promising to attempt to describe what would count as a form of life *per se* than to attempt to describe what would constitute a background *per se*." <sup>71</sup>

"the forms of life rest finally on no more than the fact that we agree, find ourselves agreeing, in the ways that we size up and respond to what we encounter." <sup>72</sup>

This is what Lear refers to when he speaks of a form of life as 'a community that shares perceptions of salience, routes of interest, feelings of

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<sup>71</sup> Lynne Rudder Baker *On the Very Idea of a Form of Life* p. 277.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p. 278.

naturalness".<sup>73</sup> Baker admirably sums up the place of forms of life in Wittgenstein's philosophy.

"The idea of a form of life emerges as the result of a transcendental argument: We have language that we use to communicate; we could have no such language if the focus of meaning were the individual or any facts concerning individuals; therefore, meaning requires a community. 'Form of life' is Wittgenstein's way of designating what it is about a community that makes possible meaning. Given this role of the idea of a form of life, it is hardly surprising that little meaningfully can be said about it."<sup>74</sup>

In other words the whole point of the concept "form of life" is to allow one to speak of the countless possible backgrounds that practices when treated in isolation have to be seen against. What that background comprises depends upon the practice being discussed, on the contexts of the discussion and upon those participating. The background is rarely the totality of all social practices but only a finite selection of those practices which are considered by those communicating to be important. In other words the background is not arbitrary but socially (and biologically etc.) determined and most likely unconscious. Discourses proceed by operating with a set of (usually unconscious) 'rules' governing the scope, meaning and relations between words and between words and the world. These 'rules' are not eternally fixed points of reference operating transcendently, but are contingent upon the forms of life in which they originate.

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<sup>73</sup> Jonathan Lear, *Ethics, Mathematics and Relativism* p. 40. Also quoted in Lynne Rudder Baker *ibid.*, p. 282.

<sup>74</sup> Baker *ibid.*, p. 288.

The largely unconscious and assumed backgrounds on which discourse depends function in a manner closely akin to Althusser's general and omni-historical practice of ideology. Different societies accept different points of reference, different stories of origins, different taxonomies of the world because of their different forms of social practice, their different relations to each other and the world. The individual is orientated around these largely unspoken background assumptions - the unconscious rules which govern social interaction at all levels - is interpellated and interpellates herself within this complex network of the 'obvious'. Ideology might then be said to function by limiting the recognition of and participation in the total possible set of 'rules' to a very limited subset 'accepted' within any particular social formation. Just as with Foucault's discursive formation this *ideological formation* determines what can and cannot be said by imposing unconsciously accepted limits to any discourse.

"a discursive formation is not distinguished by any unity of e.g., objects, concepts, method. Rather, a discursive formation is a "system of dispersion" for its elements: It defines a field within which a variety of different, even conflicting, sets of elements can be deployed. Thus, the unity of a discursive formation is due entirely to the *rules* which govern the formulation of statements..."<sup>75</sup>

It is these rules which operate like the rules of a Wittgensteinian language-game as an unspoken set of assumptions, taxonomies etc. - an unconsciously and socially contingent background which allows discourse and theory to occur but at one and the same time delimits what it can say. As both Althusser and Wittgenstein make clear, such limitations are necessary and inevitable. For Althusser the individual has to function in this way by

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<sup>75</sup> Gutting *op. cit.*, n. 19 above, p. 232.

recognising herself as a nexus in a particular set of social relations. For Wittgenstein, the shared background is precisely what makes meaningful language possible. Ideology, defined as the interpellative role of this background is inescapable.

Ideological practice thus includes all those attempts to order and classify society and the natural world. Indeed, ideology is pervasive in the same way that Mannheim's general and total conception of ideology pervades all discourse. Ideology operates by drawing connections within and between practices, by ordering, classifying, and explaining, that is by structuring the perceived components of social formations and the wider environment. Ideology situates, (*places*) objects and activities of all kinds in particular relations to each other. Always remembering that the 'objects' ideology structures are not 'real' objects, but our perceptions, ideas, and experiences of those objects gained in a variety of practices. This then is very similar to Althusser's position which sees ideology as

"....an organic part of every social totality. it is as if human society could not survive without these *specific formations* ... Human societies secrete ideology as the very element and atmosphere indispensable to their historical respiration and life." <sup>76</sup>

However where Althusser sees ideology as necessarily conservative and

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<sup>76</sup> Althusser *op. cit.*, n. 3 above, p. 232. Ideology is thus posited as a timeless and omniscient 'presence' in society but this should not be translated in terms of an *objective* reality but as the best way of *understanding* certain of our relations with the world. It is a theoretical term which does not *represent* a 'real' object but rather arises from our practical experiences of the world at the discursive level as we attempt to organise them within theoretical systems. It arises from an immanent critique of the shared ontology of (in Althusser's terms) empiricism and idealism - a critique which specifically denies that we can have knowledge of 'real objects' but only and always objects as experienced through the practical and social relations of the dialectic.

*static* (as a component ensuring the *reproduction* of society) I want to allow that even non-Marxist discourses can exhibit a dynamism able to produce a novel ordering and change our perceptions of the social structure.

Forms of life act as the background within which and against which ideology operates to create a particular co-constituting relation between the concrete subject and the material world by that subject's immersion in practical activity, in social practices. The "forms of life" and the subject's constitution in and interaction within them are responsible for the development of particular values, beliefs and presuppositions about the subject and the objective world themselves. When Wittgenstein states that "To be sure there is justification; but justification comes to an end", <sup>77</sup> that end is the particular 'given' form of life and the subject's practical relations to it.

"Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not certain propositions' striking us as true, i.e. not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language game." <sup>78</sup>

Forms of life are "...patterns in the fabric of human existence and activity on earth." <sup>79</sup> Geir advocates seeing them as frameworks.

"The concept of *Lebensformen* is not to be taken as a *factual* theory, one dealing with certain biological, physiological, or cultural facts. Forms of life are the formal framework that make society and culture possible, but they cannot serve any sociological theory - *Lebensformen* do not answer any why question; they have no

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<sup>77</sup> Wittgenstein *op. cit.*, n. 1 above, § 192.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, § 204.

<sup>79</sup> Pitkin *op. cit.*, n. 48 above, p.132.

explanatory power. They are found as the givens at the end of any chain of explanation.”<sup>80</sup>

Geir’s view is correct insofar as backgrounds can have no specific causal role assigned to them but this is not to say that they are without consequences for a sociological deconstruction of philosophy. Also one has to be careful about the use of the term “framework”. As Duerr states

“It can therefore be misleading to compare a form of life too much with a ‘framework’, or with something that *determines* experience. For the ‘framework’ exists only as a result of experience, and these experiences are not *fixed* in any particular way.”<sup>81</sup>

Perhaps now we can again approach the question of social practices. Social practices are domains of activity within social formations which are recognised (from a certain perspective, not *objectively*) as possessing a degree of relative autonomy. They would usually consist of a series of actions undertaken in particular social contexts (or a private context e.g. ‘reverie’ which is nonetheless recognised as occurring by the wider society, for otherwise there would be no name and hence no recognition by society of it as a separable practice) integrated together in some often complex manner. (They may be practices with a purpose but need not always be, as traditional Marxism claims, a form of production. See chapter 6.) As an integrated whole practices may have a specialised language associated with them, intermingled with ordinary language some of which may acquire specialised meanings in its new context. The language forms an integral part of the practice which may not in many cases be able to

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<sup>80</sup> Geir *op. cit.*, n. 54 above, p. 257.

<sup>81</sup> Hans Pater Duerr *Dreamtime* p. 97.

proceed without it. Take for example the plethora of new language associated with computing, some refer to physical elements of the practice of computing, e.g., “hardware”, “Mouse” etc. some to computers’ abilities, e.g. “memory”, some to actions involving computers, to applications e.g. “word processing” and so on.

Computing then is recognised as a practice with a degree of relative autonomy, it is something socially recognised because it has developed into an important part of society, influenced by it and in turn influencing it. Pressing button A on a computer is not recognised as a separable social practice as it stands, not because of any intrinsic quality it possesses or does not possess but because it is something which only ever occurs in the context of other practices whether they be producing electronic music, entering codes for fighting a war or whatever. The point is that practices are not ordinary linear slices through society, they do not divide it up into set elements as one would slice a cake, the components of one practice may be a part of many, many more very different practices and it depends upon the context which practice we deem them to belong to. i.e. where we interpellate things in relation to the social whole. For example we could take the curriculum taught at the Bauhaus school of Architecture as related by Walter Gropius.

- 1) *Practical Instruction* in the handling of Stone, Wood, Metal, Clay, Glass, Pigments, Textile-Looms; supplemented by lessons in the use of Materials and Tools, and a grounding in Book-Keeping, Costing, and the Drawing up of Tenders: and
- 2) *Formal Instruction* under the following headings

**(a) *Aspect*****The Study of Nature****The Study of Materials****(b) *Representation*****The Study of Pure Geometry****The Study of Construction****Draughtsmanship****Model-Making****(c) *Design*****The Study of Volumes****The Study of Colours****The Study of Composition <sup>82</sup>**

It does not take too much imagination to see how other practices overlap with the list of components presented here: how these elements find themselves considered as parts of other practices, sculpture, biology, weaving, accountancy, mathematics, etc., and how these practices interrelate in the complex network that compose any given social formation, meeting at both the theoretical and the non-theoretical levels.

A “practice” is at once both the most commonplace and the most mysterious of ideas. Common because we all engage in countless examples of practices every day, eating, brushing one’s teeth, thinking, building, farming etc. These practices are by no means all built on a general pattern which underlies them, but are rather activities which together comprise the setting for our social and personal contact with the material environment. It is through these activities that we come to understand the world around us and

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<sup>82</sup> W. Gropius *The Architecture of the Bauhaus.*

our particular place in it. "Activities" does not in this context necessarily mean conscious actions, it could equally well be applied to thoughtless reverie or 'instinctive' reactions to given circumstances e.g. a knee jerk in response to a blow.

Practices are only mysterious because when we try to count them or to demarcate them one from another we encounter immediate difficulties. We find that a single activity can be classified as part of many different practices, brushing one's teeth might be a practice by itself, or a part of hygiene, preparing for work etc. and the right description of it depends upon the context which surrounds that activity, who one is explaining it to, the purpose behind it, and a thousand other things. In other words our definition of any given practice is itself dependent upon the surrounding social context. Thus in choosing to use "practices" as the elemental components of social explanations rather than say human individuals one radically alters the picture of society. When society is seen as a mere agglomeration of individuals, knowledge is something to be accounted for in terms of individual human consciousness and perception. These individuals share certain faculties and properties and explanations are to be given in terms of these shared properties. But when the problematic centres on practices the whole perspective shifts. Practices do not have fixed essences but are relational and socially constructed divisions. Individuals may have similar experiences of, for example, "coal mining" but the way in which coal mining articulates with other aspects of their lives may be very different and thus the meaning and experience of mining may be very different. It may, for example, be valued by one person and abhorred by another.

There may still seem to be a rather puzzling gap between a practice like “coal mining” or “bricklaying” and the apparent meta-practices of Althusser’s social formations, the economic, political, ideological and theoretical. These practices serve to provide a taxonomy of social formations as a whole and their difference lies precisely in this *theoretical function* which they perform. (There are two points here. First, that in modern society the theoretical aspect of many practices has become increasingly important and second that the increasing presence of the theoretical leads to it becoming a practice in its own right, an attribute of society.) A practice like bricklaying might be said to be relatively (though only relatively) *self-contained* in the sense that needs little articulation at the theoretical level. Bricklaying, of course, has its own rules to learn - the use of spirit levels, mortar, ties etc.: but it makes no theoretical attempt to understand its relations with other practices. In contrast, Architecture as a whole might represent a practice with a substantive body of theoretical knowledge, both in its concerns with structures, designs and so forth, and in the criteria it uses to separate itself from other practices. Bricklaying operates within a very restricted field of the social domain but is nonetheless linked to all other aspects of a modern society. But if we want to understand the role and relations between bricklaying, architecture, and other areas of the social formation, this relation may need to be articulated at the theoretical level. (The role of abstract theory in modern society is further explored in chapter 9.) This is precisely the function of a theoretical practice like Althusser’s philosophy. In other words we need to take some account of the degree of theoretical abstraction involved. However, one should not accept as Althusser does that just because one is engaged in theoretical rather than a-theoretical practice one has somehow escaped ideology, one is now disconnected from the forms of

life which one is investigating.

This emphasis on practices implies a radical anti-foundationalism and anti-essentialism. In these respects as well as in the rejection of representational models of language and theory both Althusser and Wittgenstein are clearly anti-humanist. Althusser, however, refuses to recognise the full implications of this contextualisation of theory and tries to retain an epistemology which a-contextually privileges one type of discourse - theory, over another - ideology. This absolutism is not only unjustifiable given the basic tenor of his problematic but also detracts from the possibility of developing a less humanist conception of the relation of theory *qua* abstract discourse to other practices; one which would recognise the role played by ideology *qua* the practical inculcation of certain roles, values and beliefs in concrete individuals via theory itself.

Whilst Althusser makes the important first step of seeing theory as a part of practice, and in modern Western society as an important and relatively autonomous structure around which our experiences of the world crystallise, he fails to push this insight far enough. His retention of a scientific humanism leads him to posit two levels of discourse only one of which operates ideologically. He continually strives to attain a position of epistemological privilege. (Although he does not make the mistake of seeing this as privilege as an objectivity, a "view from nowhere", but one actively based in the practical experiences of the working class.) For this reason Althusser's concept of ideology has to fulfil two quite different functions. First, as the mode of society's interpellation of subjects into the social structure thus ensuring its own reproduction. Second, as a spurious

form of *incoherent* discourse. I shall suggest that we should abandon this latter interpretation which harks back to the concept of ideology as “distorted knowledge” and retain its more instructive anti-humanist meaning at the cost of being unable to privilege any particular discourse in an absolute sense.

The question of how abstract theoretical practice comes to be a constituent level of modern society and how it operates ideologically in its own way is left until chapter 9. It is now necessary to turn to another aspect of “practices” which has tended to ensure their anthropocentric bias, namely the concept of “production”.

## CHAPTER 6: PRODUCTION AND 'NATURE' IN SOCIAL PRACTICE.

The concept of “production” has retained a central role in all varieties of Marxism. Traditionally economic practices mediated by industrial or agricultural labour are the paradigmatic forms of the productive process. In the recent past, the specificity of this economic paradigm has lent Marxism an air of authority, underlining its relevance to the plight of the working classes in modern societies. But, as industrial labour seems to play an increasingly peripheral role in developed Western societies this very specificity has become detrimental to the development of Marxist theory and practice. Concepts like “production” which were regarded as inviolable by traditional Marxists have increasingly come to be regarded by critics on the left as anachronistic shackles on progressive thought. Many environmentalists who, for good reason, regard industry and agriculture as the major despoilers of ‘nature’ have an obvious rationale for rejecting this “economist” variety of Marxism. Unfortunately this frequently takes the form of a wholesale rejection of all strands of Marxism.<sup>1</sup>

This tension between theoretical orthodoxy and radical innovation has parallels in debates between other non-class based political movements and Marxism over the past few decades. For example, radical feminists claim that Marxism has undervalued those activities of women such as child-rearing, housework etc. which are accomplished largely outside of

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<sup>1</sup> Thus Jonathan Porritt declares that communism is as culpable as capitalism in ignoring the green critique of modern society, both being committed to economic growth above all else. *Seeing Green* p. 44. See also the reactions from the Green Party to suggestions by Robin Cook M.P. that socialism and environmentalism have a common cause. *Guardian*.

mainstream industrial processes. Marxist apologists have tried various strategies to link women's social roles to the modes of economic 'production' prevalent in capitalist societies.<sup>2</sup> If women's exploitation is at root economic then the overthrow of capitalism should result in the automatic re-evaluation of women's roles. Unsurprisingly, many radical feminists are skeptical of these economist claims for much the same reasons as environmentalists. The appalling record on both gender and environmental issues of those states like the Soviet Union which professed to be implementing a Marxist creed has not gone unnoticed. What has largely gone unrecognised by radical feminists and environmentalists is that, in general, twentieth century Western Marxism has show a distinct movement away from concerns with the economic mode of production *per se* towards a more general interest in the cultural sphere, i.e. in elements of the superstructure. This movement has potentially valuable implications for environmentalists and feminists alike but has not gone unrecognised or unchallenged by more traditional Marxists.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the criticisms of both non-Marxist radicals and orthodox Marxists a considerable volume of work critical of economist frameworks has been developed within the left itself. Althusser is only one, and perhaps in many ways one of the less radical, critics of economism. Initially regarded as heretical, the work of left environmentalists such as Rudolf Bahro and André

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, Lise Vogel *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory*.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Perry Anderson *Considerations on Western Marxism*. The Frankfurt School provide the perfect example of the expression of these wider concerns.

Gorsz has now started to gain widespread recognition.<sup>4</sup> With the collapse of the Soviet Union even the major communist parties have begun to question the relevance of past shibboleths. Thus David Cook, one time national organiser of the Communist Part of Great Britain writes that the

“...intersection between red and green traditions, transformed by feminism and the experiences of the ethnic and other minority groups, is the fertile seed bed for a distinctive politics which can inspire wide support.

There will be ideological clashes. The emphasis on production in much socialist economic thinking often undermines [sic] environmental needs.”<sup>5</sup>

I have been careful to speak so far of “economism” rather than “productivism” as the bone of contention between different factions. But, from the last chapter it must be obvious that the debate might be carried on in wider terms. Wittgenstein would obviously be opposed to any reduction of the concept of “practice” to one that merely reflected economic modes. His concept of “practice” is much more eclectic and elaborate than one which views all important social activities as “productive” in any sense, whether economical, ideological, political, etc. The Wittgensteinian conception is one of a plurality of practices each different from the next and having no essential features in common. From this anti-reductionist perspective “economism” might be seen as just a less restricted form of “productionism”.

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<sup>4</sup> Both of these writers have produced a considerable volume of work but see especially André Gorsz *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism and Ecology as Politics*. Rudolf Bahro *Socialism and Survival* and *From Red to Green*.

<sup>5</sup> David Cook *Socialist* p. 9.

We need first then to investigate the criticisms of *production in general*. I will argue that Althusser's rejection of economism can be amended to provide an adequate theoretical basis for a social theory which can reconcile the conflicting interests of both red and green. This social theory would also have to give full recognition to a Wittgensteinian brand of anti-humanism. I shall argue that those environmentalists who have found common cause with certain postmodern thinkers like Jean Baudrillard are mistaken. There is no need to regard (as Baudrillard does) all Marxisms as modernist theories which are mistakenly attempting to impose totalising descriptions on the social and natural worlds. (This line of argument is epitomised in the work of Jim Cheney and is taken up in chapter 8.) Baudrillard's critique of "production" does however provide an obvious starting point from which to discuss these issues.

In *The Mirror of Production* Baudrillard is concerned to argue that productivism of any form is indelibly stamped with an economic rationality. *The Mirror of Production* is described by Baudrillard's English translator, Mark Poster, as a marshalling of his earlier work "for a systematic critique of Marxism".<sup>6</sup> Not only is the work a critique of Marx's own writings but it

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Poster Introduction to Jean Baudrillard *The Mirror of Production* p. 1. Baudrillard's later work attacks the concept of rational thought itself. However, some critics have, on occasion, treated all Baudrillard's writings as if they were equally anti-theoretical and unreasonable. Thus Christopher Norris, in *What's Wrong With Postmodernism?* pp.166-168 prefers to argue against a brand of Rortyan relativism which he associates with Baudrillard rather than debate the specific points which works like *The Mirror of Production* raise. It is necessary to separate the earlier Baudrillard, who has serious points to make about the relevance of the production paradigm, from that progressively more obscure writer who descends in egocentric circles towards a variety of mental onanism. His writings perhaps reach their absurd apogee in his vacuous commentary upon the impending Gulf War. (A war he claimed could never be fought. *Guardian*.)

extends to all those philosophies which have emerged from Marxism and carry over the metaphor of 'production' into their new problematics. (This includes, for example, as Poster indicates, such postmodern thinkers as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari who refer to the *production of desire*.<sup>7</sup>) Baudrillard considers this retention of the production metaphor a conceptual conservatism which is both theoretically and practically stifling. "Production" becomes a singular and universal "sign" which rules our thought and actions.<sup>8</sup>

Baudrillard argues that the problem lies in Marx's critique of his contemporary political economists. Despite all appearances this critique was simply not radical enough. Marx only succeeded in replacing current myths with "a similar fiction, a similar naturalisation - another wholly arbitrary convention, a simulation model bound to *code* all human material and every contingency of desire and exchange in terms of value, finality and production."<sup>9</sup> Marx failed to deconstruct and hence escape the constraints imposed by the categories of production and labour. As Poster puts it "Marx's theory of historical materialism....is too conservative, too rooted in the assumptions of political economy."<sup>10</sup> The sign of "production" becomes reified as as an objective and essential process necessary to all human

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<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari *Anti-Oedipus and A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

<sup>8</sup> Baudrillard further claims that Marx's materialism epitomises 'modern' theory in so far as it replaces the spectrum of possible symbolic values with a simple dichotomy of use and exchange values to characterise of capitalist society. The radical shift which Baudrillard seeks is the reinstatement of a symbolic multiplicity which he supposes will subvert modernist values. See Steven Best and Douglas Kellner *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* chapter 4 especially pp.115-116.

<sup>9</sup> Baudrillard *op. cit.*, n. 6 above, pp.18-19.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Poster Introduction to Baudrillard *ibid.*, p. 1.

social being. Under this *tyranny* of the sign humans become 'productive' animals. In effect Marx merely substitutes "human labour" for "rationality" as the new universal human essence. According to Baudrillard Marxist epistemology and philosophy are irretrievably contaminated by their dependence upon economic categories. To see every practice in the light of production and labour implies far too reductive a view of human activities. Baudrillard questions the very possibility of extending a paradigm of production to cover the totality of human practices in all their different forms.

"A specter haunts the revolutionary imagination: the phantom of production. Everywhere it sustains an unbridled romanticism of productivity. The critical theory of the *mode* of production does not touch the *principle* of production. All the concepts it articulates describe only the dialectical and historical genealogy of the *contents* of production, leaving production as a *form* intact." <sup>11</sup>

The extreme reductionism of Soviet Marxism and those positions which hold rigidly to the base / superstructure model have obviously over-emphasised the role of the economic in determining the social formation. However, one might argue that this form of economic reductionism is precisely that which Althusser attempts to overcome. Althusser's concept of production is by no means tied strictly to the paradigm of *economic* production, for he introduces what amounts to separate paradigms of production for the political, ideological and theoretical spheres. All that they have in common is that they theoretise transformative processes. But this does not really touch Baudrillard's point. We can introduce, as Althusser does, different forms of production, but the question still remains as to why one should call e.g.

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 17.

theoretical practice *productive* at all? In what does theoretical practice's similarity to factory or agricultural labour lie? How can 'production' be an appropriate or adequate metaphor to signify the multiplicity of practices found in all societies?

Perhaps Althusser's attempt to reconstitute the category of productive labour is already stretching the concept both too far and not far enough. On the one hand Althusser still relies on the economic both for its primary role in structuring society and for furnishing a metaphor for all practices. On the other hand it seems simply bizarre to think that, so long as economic activity is regarded as the epitome of productive practice, all human activity could be accommodated within a framework of "production". Such things as taking country walks, mountaineering, playing chess or saving someone's life just do not fit into categories of *productive* practice without an immense and distorting effort, a theoretical contrivance that stretches credulity.<sup>12</sup> One could, if one so wished, argue that these practices were *productive* of enjoyment, or fitness etc., but this is a very etiolated conception of production and of labour. It seems that as Seidman states

"The category of "productive" activity either expands to include virtually all human practices, in which case it is useless as a conceptual strategy, or it narrows arbitrarily to economic labouring

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<sup>12</sup> Habermas too has noted the problems associated with the development of a concept of production by economic activity. Such a concept of practice appears absurdly narrow and restrictive. Habermas questions how "the paradigmatic activity-type of labour or the making of products ...[can be] related to all the other cultural forms of expression of subjects capable of speech and action." Habermas 'Excursus on the Obsolescence of the Production Paradigm' in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* p. 79.

activity.”<sup>13</sup>

Although Althusser's metaphysics manages to uphold, to a degree, the possibility of a holistic but anti-reductionist strategy, his continued reliance upon the economic metaphors of “production” and “labour” as the *only* forms of mediation between society and nature seems to reintroduce a constraining form of economic reductionism, an economism which is also a humanism because production is something that *all* humans engage in. Althusser is caught between his attempt to overcome the reductive base / superstructure model and the need to retain economic production, not as the sole determinant of social formations, but as the sole metaphor and paradigm for human activity. This might, after all, be thought of as the minimum requirement for anyone to retain Marxist credentials!

There is, however, a problem with Baudrillard's analysis. To some extent he reads *into* Marxism the very uniformity which his critique requires. It helps to paint Marxism as a totalising theory if one can present it as an essentialist endeavour. But one cannot, as Baudrillard does, simply excise the term “production” from the extremely variable problematics which provide the context to give it meanings and simply claim that they are all *inevitably* tainted by past economic associations. This is not to deny that a word's past associations do influence the way we interpret its meaning, but merely to point out that one must take each case as it occurs. Baudrillard must introduce an essential meaning of “production” to underpin his anti-

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen Seidman 'Postmodern Social Theory as Narrative with Moral Intent' p. 57. One 'Althusserian' solution might be to define all these non-economically productive activities as examples of ideological production. But to simply lump together such a variety of activities seems somewhat arbitrary. In any case these activities are not *primarily* concerned with the interpellation of individuals into the social formation.

essentialist critique. Many theoreticians use “production” in a manner which does not look for its archetype in Marx’s later economism at all.

Poster in his own work has tried a different critical approach. He notes that major economies such as the United States are now underpinned not so much by industrial or agricultural labour but by service industries which use information as their raw material. He claims that it is the transformation and utilisation of this *communicative* raw material which should now provide the paradigm for production. For, with the rise of mass communications soon “[p]eople will stay put while pulsations of electronic information will flow through the social space.”<sup>14</sup> But, to take this line, which might be clumsily termed informationism i.e. a reduction of society to flows of information, seems as blunt and unrewarding a direction as reductionisms of the economic kind. I would argue that the *production* of information is just as amenable to analysis as other forms of production. It does not mark a qualitative break with those societies which have gone before. (Marx and Althusser were well aware of the power of the printing press!)

Baudrillard himself amply demonstrates the danger inherent in removing the relative autonomy of the various aspects of society and making one feature paradigmatically prominent. *The Mirror of Production* might be termed a work of transition, marking as it does, the shift from Baudrillard’s, broadly speaking, Marxist problematic to semiotic anarchism. Baudrillard’s obsession with discursive communication means that in later works the

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<sup>14</sup> Foucault’s work, which is the main concern of Poster’s book, can be just as well accommodated in the general and non-reductive theory of productivism which I will sketch here. Mark Poster *Foucault, Marxism and History: Mode of Production versus Mode of Information* p. 53.

relative autonomy of the symbolic sphere is progressively transformed into a complete autonomy. Society can now be discussed wholly in terms of semiotics and, Baudrillard claims, no definite or necessary relations between signifier and signified exists. Signification becomes completely arbitrary, and language becomes a form of idealistic conventionalism. Further, this conventionalism is necessarily instilled with meanings which are part and parcel of the oppressive power structures of society. The 'progressive' individual must therefore strive to overcome this ideological function of language by constantly changing her terminology and subverting received meanings. The danger inherent in this approach is that in attempting to produce a private language, or at least a language restricted to a small 'intellectual' group of disciples willing to follow his continual discursive shifts, Baudrillard becomes less and less socially relevant. What is the point in producing a subversive language which no one except Baudrillard can use to relate to their everyday experiences? <sup>15</sup>

The meaning of the term "production" depends upon whether one interprets Marxism as a form of economic reductionism or as an anti-reductionist theoretical framework: a framework which attempts to understand the social world whilst maintaining the relative autonomy of the various components of society. Paul Ricoeur's analysis of Marx, like Althusser's, initially falls within this latter category. But Ricoeur, in opposition to Althusser, sees a trend of increasing economism from the early to the later works of Marx. That is, Ricoeur interprets the early Marx in a non-reductionist fashion and the later 'scientific' Marx as, generally speaking, an economic reductionist.

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<sup>15</sup> One might argue that Baudrillard succeeds in encapsulating the alienation and loneliness caused by mass culture, but his work seems to represent an acceptance and furtherance of this condition rather than an attempt to overcome it.

Marx states in the 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts' that religion, family, state, law, science, art, etc. are only particular modes of production and fall under its general law. However, Ricoeur holds that Marx did not mean by this that the economic base *determined* the superstructural elements. Instead, Ricoeur interprets this statement as proposing an *analogical* form of theory to encompass all human practices. The analogy used is that of economic practice and physical labour. But the term *production*, as Ricoeur points out, has a much wider application than simply physical transformation by labour.

"In German the word *production* has the same amplitude as objectification - thus Marx's statement does not express an economism. The reductionism of classical Marxism is nevertheless nourished by the word's ambiguity."<sup>16</sup>

In other words, Ricoeur believes that the later Marx and indeed many of his followers came to take this productive analogy too seriously and in attempting to disassociate himself from his Hegelian and Feuerbachian influences shifted his problematic inexorably towards an economism of society. The *political* capital to be gained by this manoeuvre was obviously an influential factor. "Production", once reified in this manner, lost its more general implications and instead its economic signification became fossilised in the base / superstructure model. A broader conception of production is exactly what Althusser requires to maintain the relative autonomy of his social levels. But the analogical conception in his mentor's early philosophy is unavailable to Althusser *precisely* because of his wish to

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Ricoeur *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* p. 59.

maintain the break between the pure theory of the later Marx and the ideology of his earlier works. So far as Althusser is concerned Marx's analogical conception of production is not a part of his science. Thus Ricoeur's wider interpretation of "production" falls outside the self-imposed boundaries of Althusser's philosophy.

So what exactly are the implications of Ricoeur's insight? The term "production" should on this reading be taken to mean something like "making available for society" or "interpellating into society through practical action". In this very broad sense production is not tied to economic activity at all but is equally relevant to the production of works of art, texts, policies and values. Nor need one carry over any of the more 'mystical' concepts linked with the term "objectification" in Hegel. One does not need a concept of *Geist* to make sense of objectification. What production entails is not the creation of an object as opposed to a subject, but rather creating something which becomes a part of society, something that is socially recognised, potentially utilisable, now of value, etc.

To revert to the Beethoven analogy which was used in chapter 3 to explain Althusser's anti-humanism. If Beethoven had composed for himself, in his head or alternatively had destroyed the composed material before anyone heard or saw it he would have had no effect on society *qua* composing. With respect to our present concerns we can say that in fact, no matter how complex and beautiful the works inside his head he would have *produced* nothing. No matter how long and lonely the process of individual thought (which neither I nor Althusser deny or underestimate), what becomes of crucial importance for any *social* theory is the production of some effect by

that thought. This is not a form of functionalism, it in no way reduces the thought of individual to the effects they have, it merely states that so long as they remain just private thoughts they are unlikely to have any effect at all (except, perhaps, making the thinker more likely to be run over by a passing car.) Theory must be married to practice, not in terms of physical labour but in terms of producing something which affects and reacts with society. Any introduction of new material into society causes a corresponding change in the relations of the components of that society, and just as terms change their meaning in different problematics so actions and theories change their effects in different social formations. Thus similar actions might *produce* very different political, ideological, etc. effects in different times and places.

Production happens at all levels of society. Thus although the transformation of 'physical material' into economic goods might be thought to be the paradigm for economic production, the transformation of social relations into new social relations becomes the paradigm of political activity. For example, a tree may be converted to sawn wood and then into tables or book shelves. Production is the process of transformation which marks its entrance and interpellation into the social structures of society. Not only is the table a material-physical product at which we sit or write our philosophy, it is also interpellated into other aspects of society. Its production might mark a shift in power relations between the tribal peoples of the tropical rainforests and industrial giants like Mitsubishi in the Northern hemisphere. In other words it is also politically interpellated. Similarly the tree and the table are associated with different social meanings, signs and values which all affect its use. It is also ideologically interpellated. This stresses the point made in the last chapter that one must avoid the temptation of treating these different

levels as separable elements of society. The forms of production do not exist in isolation from each other. Althusser is pushed close to this position, which Bernstein equates with a form of fetishism,<sup>17</sup> because of his inability to resolve the tensions inherent in the productive paradigm in any other way, e.g. by appealing to the earlier Marx's conception of *production*.

Although this interpretation derived from Ricoeur is open to criticism as an interpretation of Marx's own thought I believe that it provides a useful theoretical handle with which to grasp this analogical and philosophical understanding of society. From this perspective we can take on board Baudrillard's condemnation of reductionist economism and yet not dismiss entirely the power of production as a unifying analogy for social theory. Many Marxists have fought themselves into an economist corner by ignoring the more philosophical aspects of productive practices. Ironically, this interpretation and its use of the early Marx also supports Althusser's adaptation of the standard Marxist metaphysic, though not without considerable emendation.

If this first section has pointed the way to overcoming the different conceptions of practices in Marxist problematics it has done so at a certain 'cost'. Namely, it shifts the emphasis, in all cases, away from individual consciousness and towards a more socially structured arena. We shall also examine the implications of this anti-humanism, particularly as it relates to ethical values, in chapter 9.

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<sup>17</sup> "... 'political economy' is not a single, selective dimension of human life; it is a congealed or crystallised form of human activity - of *praxis*. To think of economic categories as referring to a single, abstract dimension of human life is to be guilty of what Marx himself called 'fetishism'." Richard J. Bernstein *Praxis and Action* p. 58.

It should also be noted that although these proposals raise many interesting questions about interpretations of Marx's theory the present work is not an exposition of the Marx's own problematic(s) but rather an attempt to re-structure Althusser's problematic so as to reduce the anthropocentric features which cripple it. This task will also require the extension of Althusser's anti-humanism from a simple critique of consciousness and anti-economism to one which also redefines the dialectic itself to include an *active* rather than a *passive* nature. Thus a further detour is necessary to examine these issues.

#### Nature and the Dialectic, Active and Passive Roles.

A growing environmental awareness has sparked some debate about how far Marxist theory might need to be adapted to retain its relevance. Reiner Grundman has portrayed three types of Marxist response in this debate. The first is to reject environmental issues as overplayed bourgeois concerns and to stick within a pure Marxist orthodoxy. He suggests that Ernest Mandel might belong in this category. The second is to argue, by selectively quoting from his works, that Marx himself was a 'Green', "albeit a Green *malgre lui*".<sup>18</sup> The third strategy he terms Marxist dissident, because those in this category abandon one or more of the central elements of Marxism, arguing that Green issues cannot be contained within so narrow a framework. One example of someone in this category would be Rudolf Bahro.

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<sup>18</sup> Reiner Grundman 'The Ecological Challenge of Marxism' p. 103.

I shall reject the first line of response out of hand. I hope that even the small amount of detail which is included later in this section will be enough to dispel the myth that environmental concerns are simply an invention of Twentieth Century bourgeois society. In all ages and all times there seem to be examples of environmental occurrences which have profoundly affected the way societies have developed. It should also be obvious that in most cases it has been, and still is, the poor who are least able to protect themselves against any deleterious results of these 'experiences' of the environment. The mediaeval poor left to die in the cities full of plague, the modern poor of the Third World left at the mercy of earthquakes and typhoons, the poor sleeping on the streets who feel the icy cold of winter nights. This being the case I take it as axiomatic that environmental questions are of import and deserve serious consideration, i.e. an unamended Marxist orthodoxy is completely inadequate.

The second strategy, of claiming that Marx was a Green before his time is described by Grundman as "wishful thinking".<sup>19</sup> This may be so given Marx's opposition to those theories, like that of Thomas Malthus, which emphasised such 'natural' limitations above all else. Thus Barbier writes

"...although Marx did write about the processes of environmental degradation - notably soil erosion - he did not consider the possibility of an absolute natural resource scarcity constraint on an economic system resulting from ecological collapse."<sup>20</sup>

Although Grundman does not believe that Marx was any more environmentally aware than the majority of his contemporaries he still holds

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>20</sup> Edward b. Barbier *Economics, Natural-Resource Scarcity and Development: Conventional and Alternative Views* p. 21.

that the framework which Marx created to analyse society is adequate to account for environmental problems and concerns. In this sense he rejects any radical reconstruction of Marx's theoretical problematic.

Grundman reduces environmental problems to three basic categories, those of pollution, depletion of resources and population growth. The anthropocentric bent of these categories is immediately apparent, habitat loss and species extinctions are simply subsumed under the depletion of *resources*, thus automatically excluding the "deep ecological" ethical case for environmental values by the use of a typically narrow humanist taxonomy. This anthropocentric attitude in defining environmental problems is mirrored in Grundman's technocratic attitude towards environmental influences upon human society in general; specifically in his apparent rejection of there being *any* natural limits upon production that can not be overcome by resource switching and technical knowledge. Thus Grundman assumes that nature has no *active* role in the dialectic - it simply consists of a material environment which constrains humanity. These constraints are to be overcome by a process of transforming nature's 'raw materials' into novel social goods. There is a simple dichotomy between negative natural constraints and positive human achievements. Grundman's main target is the work of Ted Benton who, Grundman holds, goes too far in his attempt to reconstitute Marxism.<sup>21</sup> For example, Benton has openly criticised the Marxist concept of productive labour; "...in a number of respects Marx's account of capitalist production employs a limited and defective concept of

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<sup>21</sup> The conservative nature of Marxist orthodoxy is well shown by the fact that even Grundman has been criticised for his (very slight) shifts from traditional Marxism. See John Mattaush Review of Reiner Grundman's *Marxism and Ecology*.

productive labour-processes.”<sup>22</sup>

Benton posits a tension in the later writings of Marx and Engels between economist strands of thought and their materialist philosophy. Like Ricoeur he recognises the extent to which economic categories come to dominate the later Marx’s thought and paraphrases Baudrillard when he remarks that the tension “derives, ... from an insufficiently radical critique of the leading exponents of Classical Political Economy, with whom he shared and from whom he derived the concepts and assumptions in question.”<sup>23</sup>

Benton is however, no ally of Baudrillard in his critique of production. He wishes to amend rather than replace the traditional conception of the dialectic between humanity and nature.<sup>24</sup> The debate thus becomes one between a rigidly economist reading of nature - where nature is simply passive (Grundman) and a less humanist stance where nature retains a degree of activity (Benton).

Grundman criticises Ted Benton’s claim that many productive processes (indeed all *transformative* processes like agricultural production where

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<sup>22</sup> Ted Benton ‘Marxism and Natural Limits: An Ecological Critique and Reconstruction’ p. 74.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> Benton however, retains some degree of economism in wishing only to produce of “an ecologically adequate economic theory” *ibid.*, p. 64. Although I agree with Benton that a form of economism lies at the heart of the traditional Marxist enterprise, I do not enter debates about the relations of ‘use values’ and ‘exchange values’ to nature. My reformulation of the dialectic may well have implications for these matters but I retain a focus primarily upon epistemological and ontological questions rather than economics. I address the natural limits imposed on the development of human societies’ knowledge and values, not the natural limits to the creation of wealth.

humans merely mediate already existing natural processes of plant growth etc.) have natural limits placed upon them which are relatively impervious to human action. By contrast Grundman claims that modern technology has brought about a situation where the possibility exists of overcoming all these natural limitations.

“...it is ironic that Benton stresses the rigid character of ‘contextual conditions’ and ‘natural limits’ in a world where actual industrial societies explore the possibilities of pushing these barriers further and further back - the substitution of raw materials, development of new synthetic materials, genetic engineering and information technologies being the main examples.”<sup>25</sup>

Grundman simply equates environmentalism with Neo-Malthusian concerns over the limits to growth.<sup>26</sup> The inevitable consequence of this partisan treatment of nature is that Grundman sees ecological problems as simply a lack of human control over the environment, one caused by insufficient domination rather than resulting from an attempt to dominate. He gives ecological systems no autonomy outside of their roles as the raw materials for human productive practices.

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<sup>25</sup> Grundman *op. cit.*, n. 18 above, p. 108.

<sup>26</sup> Benton quite rightly rejects those approaches from within Marxism which “equate the ecological perspective with neo-Malthusian conservatism”, Benton *op. cit.*, n. 22 above p. 52n, although it is by no means the case that all those accepting a Neo-Malthusian label are politically conservative. (See, the work on Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie later in this chapter.) This equation reoccurs frequently even amongst those theoreticians on the left most receptive to ‘green’ concerns. Thus Tim Haywood refers to the risk that a “utopian socialism will pass via catastrophism into a neo-Malthusian ecofascism”. Tim Haywood ‘Ecosocialism- Utopian and Scientific’. Whilst not underestimating the plausibility of the development of ecofascism one can certainly argue about the causal route most likely to lead to it. One scenario might be to see it arising as a reaction by disempowered people against a neoclassical conservatism in economics which continues to reduce all values to economic values, something the left has been just as guilty of as the right.

“... we term ecological a problem that arises as a consequence of societies dealings with nature....It does not mean that the very fact of dealing with nature (manipulation, domination, harnessing or inducing) is the crucial point, the cause, so to speak, of ecological problems. Ecological problems arise only from *specific ways* of dealing with nature. To repeat my earlier claim: both societies existence in nature and its attempt to dominate nature are compatible; human beings do indeed live in, and dominate nature.”<sup>27</sup>

Grundman seems to miss the whole point of an ecological critique which has never denied, and indeed has emphasised that we live in nature but denies that the form this life takes should be, or can be, in the long term, one of domination. If Grundman would step outside his humanist anthropocentrism for a moment and allow that nature can be active participant in the dialectic he might begin to understand the ‘green’ perspective is far more diverse and complex than his characterisation allows. Grundman simply cannot comprehend that people might value nature for itself rather than for its human utility. Thus his statement, that issues like the extinction of species and the destruction of wilderness can be subsumed under the depletion of natural *resources*.<sup>28</sup> In other places he dismisses, without justification, biocentric claims as simply “inconsistent”. Humans simply can’t see nature

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<sup>27</sup> Grundman *op. cit.*, n. 18 above, p. 113.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p.105.

from anything but a human perspective.<sup>29</sup> Of course, he is right to think that the concept of “nature” makes no sense without reference to humanity but that does not mean that the only interests humanity can have in nature are instrumental. Nor does it mean that nature does not have an active role in the dialectic. In this respect, one can point to an analogy between class domination and environmental domination. Capitalism’s attempt to dominate the lower classes inevitably breeds resistance from a section of the community which is not simply passive putty to be moulded any which way. Similarly, the attempt to dominate nature brings about active responses which do not conform to the intent of the dominators. The greenhouse effect is a prime example of this. Similarly, the environment is a complex and relatively autonomous feature of the world which cannot be entirely encompassed within the technocratic scheme for the very simple reason that the technocratic theories are only derived from a dialectic with nature and do not *represent* nature. We do not and cannot know the ‘truth’ about nature, we can only experience it through our practices. Grundman can then be read by his own criteria as an unreconstructed Marxist of the old school.

Tim Haywood tags Grundman’s argument “Promethean”.<sup>30</sup> This echoes a

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<sup>29</sup> The ecological position which Grundman attempts to attack is in any case a form of ecological fundamentalism which neither Benton nor the vast majority of environmental philosophers would recognise. Eco-centric approaches he says “define ecological problems purely from the standpoint of nature.” *ibid.*, p. 112. This is simply untrue, the vast majority of the literature upon environmental degradation points to the effects that our interference in natural processes will have upon human society in both the short and the long term. But, *in addition* some environmentalists also try to see ecological problems from a perspective which gives some non-instrumental account of the non-human.

<sup>30</sup> Tim Haywood ‘Ecology and Human Emancipation’. Haywood wishes to distinguish between the belief that one can transcend nature as a whole and the idea that one can transcend particular necessities imposed upon us in terms of survival etc. However his distinction is not clearly drawn.

comment made by Seyla Benhabib and directed at schools of (in my terms, “humanist”) thought found in both Liberalism and Marxism who, she says,

“...share the Promethean conception of humanity in that they view mankind as appropriating an essentially malleable nature, unfolding its talents and powers in the process, and coming to change itself through the process of changing external reality.”<sup>31</sup>

Grundman’s analysis of the relationship between human society and non-human ‘nature’ is shallow in the extreme. His technological optimism is intimately linked with his blindness towards a number of important aspects of this *dialectical* relationship.

1) He only mentions in passing the unintended consequences caused by the application of human technology. He seems to regard this as a contingent rather than a necessary feature of human / nature relations. That is, he fails to take into account the epistemological relationship which necessitates that we can *never* know nature in itself, *never* understand it fully, but only come to derive knowledge through social practices. These practices can never give a complete picture.<sup>32</sup> In other words we shall always have an incomplete and *unrepresentative* account of the world-in-itself. Stable societies which have come to have particular forms of practical relations with their local environments develop a *modus vivendi*, an understanding by which they know roughly what effects their actions will have, they come to know their place in that environment. (See chapters 8 & 9.) However, the more rapidly we change our world, and the greater the variety of practices we engage in, the more likely we are to be taken by surprise at their cumulative effects.

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<sup>31</sup> Seyla Benhabib *Situating the Self* p. 69.

<sup>32</sup> c.f. the account of Althusser and Spinoza given in chapter 3.

Only a naive humanist faith in progress and the ability of theory to represent nature allows this highly dangerous game of Russian Roulette to continue. Grundman's advocacy of the humanist faith does little to show any understanding of the environmentalist's fears.

2) Allied to this technological optimism is Grundman's rejection of any absolute natural constraints upon humanity. This is not to say that coal, gas etc, might not be exhausted but rather that Grundman thinks that technology and human ingenuity will find alternatives. That is, we will simply switch between resources. There are two faults here. First, this ignores the findings of environmental historians who have begun to emphasise the vast number of past human civilisations from Easter Island to the *altiplano* of the Andes which have been brought to their knees by nature's active involvement. That we now have a global culture is no reason to suppose that our intellectual resources are proportionately any greater than those of past civilisations. The Easter Islanders can hardly have been unaware that the destruction of their forests and soils would eventually leave them destitute and starving. Perhaps they too were tied in to powerful economic systems that made it impossible to do anything about the long term consequences of their actions. Perhaps they too suffered from a surfeit of so-called 'intellectuals' who could not see the most obvious signs of their inadequacy to theorise their predicament!

Second, it forgets that we too are biological components of nature. Thus there are certain resources which we cannot do without, air, water, food etc. and which too many of the world's population already have in short supply.

3) Grundman simply seems impervious to the fact that resource switching is not the same as resource conservation. In the former case one uses up and destroys, often forever, a part of our environment. For example the great British forests which were destroyed for shipbuilding, agriculture and charcoal are gone, taking many of their species with them. That we now have substitutes for these in the forms of fibre glass or nuclear fuel does not counter the deep ecologist's point that what is valuable is the forest, those same forests which can now no longer play any part in forging the kinds of society and people which would otherwise have been possibilities. Some of us would prefer a world of 'natural' values and community with nature to one which is centred upon the immediate pecuniary gratification of selfish individuals.

Rather than succumbing to a deep depression about the conceptual inabilities of conservative thinkers on left and right we need to forge new paradigms. The work of philosophers like Benton shows at least a willingness on the part of some Marxists to begin the radical shift in perspective necessary to encompass environmental issues. Other Marxists too are moving in this direction.

Chakraverti notes that Marxists have often been concerned to distance themselves from a naive materialism or objectivism about nature, they tend to deny Spinoza's thesis that nature exists "in itself" without human intervention or mediation".<sup>33</sup> He rightly asserts that this has led to the subsequent emphasis on human productive labour as the active component of the dialectic at the cost of nature becoming simply passive. But Marxism,

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<sup>33</sup> Satindranath Chakraverti 'Praxis and Nature' p. 92.

properly understood, should have no quarrel with the positing of a material nature existing in itself, but only with the view that this nature is *knowable* in itself. Alfred Schmidt makes this point as follows.

“The *dialectical* element of Marxist materialism does not consist in the denial that matter has its own laws and its own movement (or motion), but in the understanding that matter’s laws can only be recognised and appropriately applied by men through the agency of mediating practice.”<sup>34</sup>

Schmidt can account for technological advances whilst arguing that these in no way overcome physical reality. Matter exists independently of human consciousness and though matter can only be known through social practices it is not ruled by them. Schmidt re-injects the material of “dialectical materialism” back into theoretical discourse about the dialectic. Human aims are

“not just limited by history and society but equally by the structure of matter itself....men, [sic] whatever historical condition they live in, see themselves confronted with a world of things which cannot be transcended and which they must appropriate in order to survive.”<sup>35</sup>

Schmidt also quotes Marx’s letter to Kuglemann

“it is absolutely impossible to transcend the laws of nature. What *can* change in historically different circumstances is only the *form* in which

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<sup>34</sup> Alfred Schmidt *The Concept of Nature in Marx* p. 97.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 63.

these laws express themselves.”<sup>36</sup>

Chakraverti and Schmidt illuminate a major defect in Althusser's problematic, namely that his concerns are entirely with the human and social aspects of the dialectic as they are worked out *within* society. This view requires a radical distinction between society and the material of nature, insofar as he simply accepts nature as the unchanging background against which, and by utilising which, human history is played out. This background, to be sure, can be comprehended in a variety of ways and under a number of problematics, but it remains an entirely *passive* background nonetheless. However, nature effects changes in our society as well as itself being understood through changing social relations. The typhoon which destroys a village is socially experienced. That experience is *not primarily* one mediated by *human productive labour* but by *nature's destructive labour* upon the social formation. Whether this is understood through scientific meteorology or through the explanatory system of a local shaman makes no difference to the materiality of the destructive effects. Nature does *exist* in itself, it simply can't be *known* in itself. Indeed nature must exist in itself for any thesis to deserve the title of a materialism. This is no less the case for a dialectical materialism.

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<sup>36</sup> Marx quoted in Schmidt *ibid.*, p. 98. Schmidt also makes some relevant points about past misinterpretations of the Marxist epistemological project. “One such misinterpretation identifies Marx with the ‘reflection theory’... Another is the view that the critique of the philosophical attitude as such... implies that he had no interest in or understanding of epistemological questions. Finally, there is the view which ignores Marx's essentially epistemological utterances because they are not couched in the phraseology of traditional academic philosophy.” *Ibid.*, p. 108. Thus Schmidt supports Althusser's contentions about the importance of epistemology in Marx's project.

In debates between green thinkers and orthodox Marxists the treatment of nature as an active participant in the dialectic becomes all important. Environmentalists' emphasis upon natural processes reaches to the very heart of the Marxist enterprise, introducing doubts about the production paradigm and the mediation of the dialectic by *human* labour.<sup>37</sup> In humanist Marxism the dialectic is a process of *active* human consciousness; of intentional agency engaging with a passive material world. It is human productive activity which builds our world and our world-views at one and the same time. In transforming this world for their own social purposes humans come to understand it in particular ways and talk of it in particular discourses. It is the transforming agency of human productive social activities which builds the world we can know. In no sense is the world admitted to shape our society except through its role as the basic raw material of productive practices. This particular section seeks to redress the balance between the human and natural aspects of the dialectic such that nature is allowed to have an active rather than a passive role.

Althusser's work, whilst stressing the unimportance, or rather the derivative and secondary nature of human intentions (which are formed through the individual's interpellation into social formations via the very productive practices in which they engage), retains the basic outline of this anthropocentric problematic. Despite his numerous, important and innovative variations upon a Marxist theme, his anti-humanism, his use of Spinoza and structuralism, his emphasis upon theory and epistemology etc., Althusser remains firmly within the mainstream Marxist tradition in his

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<sup>37</sup> I use the term "environmentalists" here in the restricted sense of radical environmentalists. I am fully aware of the differences of opinions within 'green' circles.

insistence upon the primary importance of *productive* practices in structuring our world. His introduction of theory itself depends upon it being seen as a practice for the production of knowledge from certain raw materials via the action of human labour. Nature is still the passive participant in the dialectic, the material to be acted upon and transformed rather than an active participant which can itself influence the very nature of human practices through its own material structure. Like so many issues this focusing upon one or other aspect of the dialectic may seem to be merely a matter of emphasis, but once again emphasis is of crucial importance for the mainstream traditions of Marxism have, by largely ignoring this issue, warped the dialectic towards a social constructivism seen entirely from the human perspective. This deformation of the dialectic is symptomatic of an aporia which goes to the very roots of dialectical materialism. How if we are to pass over the agency of nature itself in silence and return again and again to the miraculous transformative powers of humanity in creating its universe are we to distinguish dialectical materialism from a dialectic idealism? By making society in general, and labour in particular, the sole originating locus of all material transformations orthodox Marxism is no longer in any position to explain our current catastrophic environmental situation without tortuous theoretical manoeuvring.

In one sense at least what I suggest in this chapter is nothing less than a radical shift in historical materialism, i.e. in the claims "about the *kinds* of structures which have primacy in explaining social systems, namely.... the

forces and relations of production.”<sup>38</sup> The motivation for this change is the present inadequacy of Marxist theory or practice to address the massive environmental problems which now beset our planet. It is important to see that this attempt to redress of the balance in nature’s favour is a necessary part of any thoroughgoing anti-humanism. It marks a rejection of the elements of anthropocentrism still present in Althusser’s work where human social activity still represents the sole creative force capable of transforming the world.

Philosophy is not the only subject showing signs of reconstruction. In the rest of this chapter some of the more hopeful developments are surveyed. Two areas in particular which have focused upon the mutual interactions of society and nature are mentioned. First, elements of the new history and second, the development of Human Ecology.

### New History: The *Annales* Historians

The group known as the ‘*Annales* school’, which includes such figures as Lucien Febvre, Marc Bloch, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Fernand Braudel, have become the central figures of the new French history. *Annales* is a shortening of the title of the journal with which all of these figures have been associated. Starting as the *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale* in 1929 the journal has had a further three titles up to

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<sup>38</sup> Alex Callinicos *Making History: Agency, Structure and Change in Social Theory* p. 41. Callinicos defends a much more orthodox economist Marxism but the need for a reconstruction of historical materialism is widely felt. See for example Jorge Larrain *A Reconstruction of Historical Materialism*.

the present *Annales; economies, sociétés, civilisations*.

In his study of the *Annales* school Burke refers to three distinct phases. The first begins with the inauguration of the journal and the influential figures are Bloch and Febvre. The second phase is dominated by the figure of Fernand Braudel and the third has seen the rise of a wider variety of interests and new names such as Jacques Le Goff and Georges Dury.<sup>39</sup> There are certainly differences in the approach of the major figures of this movement (indeed some would tend to deny that they represent a movement at all). However, one of the themes commonly running through their work is a concern for structural explanations, in which they include (especially in Braudel's case) the environment, amongst the causal factors behind historical events. This emphasis on the role of the environment is as Braudel puts it in his most famous work *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, to help "rediscover the slow unfolding of structural realities, to see things in the perspective of the very long term".<sup>40</sup>

Braudel's *Mediterranean* is divided into three sections each representing a different time-scale of history, from the almost "imperceptible" changes brought about by the underlying and continual presence of particular environmental factors, through the medium term histories of social movements, the *conjunctures* (which might be translated as 'trends'), to the micro-history of individual events. First and foremost comes the history of *la longue duree*, the passage of time on geographical and environmental

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<sup>39</sup> Georges Dury in particular is concerned with the issue of ideology in a very Althusserian framework. See Peter Burke *The French Historical Revolution* pp. 72-73.

<sup>40</sup> Fernand Braudel *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* p. 23.

scales. Here he examines the constraints imposed by the physical geography of the areas surrounding the Mediterranean, the great deserts to the south, the mountain ranges to the north and of course the landlocked sea itself which unifies the histories of those peoples who have lived on its shores. The sea has provided the element of transport, communication and trade but also introduces dangers of invasion and piracy. The mountains have provided refuge from these invasions, shelter for flocks, a home for the poorest and, due to their inaccessibility, a reservoir for old superstitions and cults. These geographical 'facts' rather than decisions of the individual human subjects are the major structuring forces of history.

“For centuries, man has been a prisoner of climate, of vegetation, of animal population, of a particular agriculture, of a whole slowly established balance from which he cannot escape without the risk of everything's being upset.”<sup>41</sup>

The inclusion of environmental factors also points to two other features of Braudel's work (and to a lesser degree that of the other *Annales* historians). Firstly, his rejection of the human subject in favour of structural explanations in a manner very reminiscent of (though preceding) Althusser, and secondly the breaking down of barriers between academic disciplines in an attempt to give a more holistic account (a *histoire totale*). The *Annales* school are not principally environmentally orientated so much as anti-humanist and holistic in their approaches. As Stoianovich puts it, they wish “to plead in favour of a community of the human sciences, despite the walls that separated them

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<sup>41</sup> Braudel quoted by Stuart Clark 'The *Annales* Historians' p. 185.

from one another.”<sup>42</sup> Braudel has stated that he is “by temperament a structuralist”<sup>43</sup> but rather than relying, as Lévi-Strauss does, for his explanatory paradigm on the structures of the human brain, or as Althusser does on the different productive practices found in all social formations, Braudel’s transcendent (though not unchanging) structures are those of climate, oceans, mountains and ecosystems. It is these natural structuring elements which are primarily influential in determining and limiting human human history.

The acceptance of natural limitations should not be mistaken for a geographical determinism, which is far indeed from the intentions of any of the *Annales* school. For example they would reject outright the reductive suggestions of environmental historians like John D. Post who argues that the world economic crisis following the defeat of Napoleon in the early 19th Century could be explained as “the product of agricultural shortages and these, in turn, of a world-wide climatic disturbance.”<sup>44</sup> As Clark notes, Febvre, who has specialised in the history of rural and semi-rural environments,

“...in particular set himself against any form of geographical determinism, following instead the ‘possibilism’ of de la Blache and stressing the idea that environments are as much vehicles of

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<sup>42</sup> Traian Stoianovich *French Historical Method: The Annales Program*. 12. Another general feature of the *Annales* historians is their rejection of positivism and their a general awareness of the philosophical implications of their works. Thus Braudel can say that “To draw a boundary is to define, analyse, and reconstruct it, in this case [The Mediterranean] select, indeed adopt, a philosophy of history.” Fernand Braudel *op. cit.*, n. 40 above, p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> Braudel quoted by Clark in Skinner *op. cit.*, n. 41 above, p. 189.

<sup>44</sup> Stoianovich *op. cit.*, n. 42 above, p. 83.

endowed meanings as brute facts about the external world.”<sup>45</sup>

Another *Annales* historian, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, who is less willing than Braudel to ascribe a primacy to climatic and geographical factors, has at least considered such information important enough to study the possible effects of ecology, botany, zoology etc. in relation to the Languedoc populations which have formed his major area of study.<sup>46</sup>

The *Annales* historians can then, to greater or lesser degrees, be seen as engaged in a project which aims to treat the environment as something more than a passive object which can be ignored, treated as simply raw material for human productive processes, or idealised by arbitrary significations. Rather they introduce the world as an active participant in a holistic dialectic between the people of historical times and their surroundings. The natural environment introduces structural contingencies narrowing historical possibilities for its human subjects. Unsurprisingly then all *Annales* historians without exception reject positivism and, as Stoianovich notes, Braudel openly supports a dialectical view of the relations between environment and humanity.<sup>47</sup> This dialectic cannot however be the limited version of the Marxist dialectic interested only in those human practices

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<sup>45</sup> Clark in Skinner *op. cit.*, n. 41 above, p. 182.

<sup>46</sup> See Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie *The Peasants of Languedoc*.

<sup>47</sup> Braudel refers to his work as having a “basic approach around which the whole is structured, the dialectic of space and time (geography and history)” Braudel *op. cit.*, n. 40 above, p. 16. but he adapts this somewhat in the later edition of his work to give greater weight to economic and political influences. It is as though in an Althusserian fashion he admits that he “bent the stick too far” in his earlier work to make plain its distinctiveness from some aspects of the tradition in which it arose.

which can be described as 'productive' in economic terms.<sup>48</sup>

*Annales* historians have had to learn to regard production as part of the overall communications system.....It is based on their long-standing interest in the interaction between people and environment and to their image of people as a function of their situation on a dynamic Earth, at once acting upon them and acted upon. It has its origins in the "possibilist" geography of Paul Vidal de La Blache, as reinterpreted by Febvre, Bloch and Braudel."<sup>49</sup>

Febvre might be thought to be the exception to this rule for he is generally skeptical about the extent to which environments *determine* history, as can be seen by his debates with Ratzel the German geographer (who emphasised the impact of the natural environment on society). But Febvre only argues against a naive determinism not against the importance of the environment *per se*.<sup>50</sup> Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie too refuses to be constrained by a narrow framework of economic production and emphasises

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<sup>48</sup> An economist Marxist response to the introduction of ecological factors in history can be found in R Brenner 'The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism' pp.16-113. In particular Brenner is concerned to counter the Neo-Malthusian aspects of Ladurie and Postan's work. See M.M. Postan 'Population and Class Relations in Feudal Society, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie 'A Reply to Professor Brenner'. Ladurie criticises Brenner for what amounts to economic determinism, for "adopting a simplistic assimilation between power (political) and surplus value (economic)" *ibid.*, p. 56. He also states "I believe that history must give more and more room to specifically epidemic and therefore, one could say, biological factors....Professor Brenner, on the other hand, greatly underestimates epidemic factors (plagues and the like) when he purports to explain the crisis of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries essentially in terms of seigneurial exploitation." *ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>49</sup> Stoianovich *op. cit.*, n. 42 above, pp. 76-77.

<sup>50</sup> As Burke puts it "In this debate between geographical determinism and human liberty Febvre warmly supported Vidal [de La Blache] and attacked Ratzel, stressing the variety of possible responses to the challenge of a given environment. For him there were no necessities, only possibilities." Burke *op. cit.*, n. 39 above, pp.14-15.

the importance of demographic patterns as affecting the economic and social sphere rather than the opposite. In his studies technological improvements, ecology, demography and the social organisation (into, for example, nuclear families) go hand in hand. Technological innovations like those of the wheeled plough were of little use in the thin soils and sloping lands of the *Massif Central*, and so this area acted as at least a temporary natural barrier to the dissemination of technology and the social changes which went with it. This exemplifies the *Annales* approach and has many potential parallels with those relational aspects of Althusser's metaphysics which he derived from Spinoza. Here too the outcome, a given historical situation, can be seen to be *overdetermined* by a number of relatively autonomous factors articulating in a certain unique way. Thus for example, Braudel makes clear this interaction between the economic and social and the natural spheres when he refers to the practice of transhumance.

“..all transhumance is the result of a demanding agricultural situation which is unable either to support the total weight of a pastoral economy or to forgo the advantages it brings, and which therefore offloads its burdens according to local possibilities and the seasons, to either the lowland or the mountain pastures. Any logical study should therefore start with this local agricultural situation.”<sup>51</sup>

This dialectic between the natural and the social is a constant feature of the first section of Braudel's 'Mediterranean', as for example in his discussion of the safeguarding of the natural Venetian lagoon with artificial canals necessary to stop its silting up.<sup>52</sup> Of course Braudel's picture of

<sup>51</sup> Braudel *op. cit.*, n. 40 above, p. 95.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 79.

environmental limitations seems to be somewhat outdated, at least insofar as he treats these changes as being necessarily slow moving. Burke points out that this long term view of nature's influences was open to criticism long before the realisation of the Greenhouse affect or ozone depletion.

“Despite his admiration for Maximilien Sorré, a French geographer who was already concerned in the early 1940's with what he called 'human ecology', Braudel fails to show us what might be called 'the making of the Mediterranean landscape', most obviously the damage done to the environment over the long term by cutting down the tree cover.”<sup>53</sup>

Pesez and Ladurie have taken just this sort of interaction between society and ecology into account, stressing the interconnections between human activity and the surrounding environment without reducing one to merely a product of the other. Thus in their studies of rural depopulation they give the following account.

“..the irrational clearing of forests that went hand in hand with the economic revival destroyed the soil and did irreparable damage to the higher regions. Beginning with the sixteenth century, the forests of Provence were robbed of all vitality, mercilessly destroyed by voracious goats, by timber merchants, by the harvesters of tanning bark, by chalk ovens and charcoal burners; and where solid masses of trees had once stood we now find, not good wheat land, but barren, burnt ground *la terre gaste*... By ruining the source of humus, the deforestation destroyed one capital asset without creating another in its place. There can be no doubt that in the very long run,

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<sup>53</sup> Burke *op. cit.*, n. 39 above, p. 41.

deforestation was a factor in the “inter-secular” demographic decline of the mountainous, rocky region of Provence.”<sup>54</sup>

Of course the *Annales* school are not the only historians to be interested in environmental factors. Indeed there is now a growing number of publications in the field of environmental history, a field which Donald Worster traces back to the seminal work of Roderick Nash.<sup>55</sup> Gustaf Utterstrom has argued that the relative political and economic decline of Scandinavia and those countries, like Iceland and Greenland, bordering the North Atlantic during the late Middle Ages was at least in part the result of a colder climate in these regions. During this period, Norway in particular suffered from this loss of political power, at the same time the population of Scandinavian settlers in Greenland became extinct and the growing of wheat in Iceland ceased. Utterstrom is not suggesting that climate *by itself* is capable of explaining such changes in social formations (for example he is fully aware of the impact on Norwegian trade caused by the growth of the Hanseatic merchants) but he thinks that environmental considerations have been seriously overlooked by past accounts of these phenomena. He argues that agriculture was of significant import in determining social systems and that agriculture in mediaeval society was particularly susceptible to climatic changes and other natural occurrences. Amongst these he mentions, the eruption of Hekkla in 1300 which “made farming difficult, or even for a time impossible, over extensive areas”<sup>56</sup> of Iceland; the extension southwards of

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<sup>54</sup> Jean-Marie Pesez and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie ‘The Deserted Villages of France: An Overview’ p. 90.

<sup>55</sup> See the appendix to Donald Worster ed., *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*.

<sup>56</sup> Gustaf Utterstrom ‘Climatic Fluctuations and Population Problems in Early Modern History’ in Worster *ibid.*, p. 43.

the glaciers, which might account for the increased conflict with Eskimos recorded at this time as they followed the seals upon which they depended; and plagues of insects destroying the grass upon which cattle depended. To show how these major environmental changes affect society he relies upon contemporary accounts, for example those recorded in the parish registries of Orslosa in Sweden giving horrifying accounts of the famine of 1596.<sup>57</sup> This famine followed widespread floods which caused similar situations in other parts of Scandinavia. Utterstrom has compiled information from a number of such sources which suggest that the years that followed 1596 included a whole series of natural disasters, from freezing temperatures to exceptionally deep snow falls and even droughts. These changes serious though they indubitably were to the local economies were also, he argues, representative of a longer term change which combined with other factors to alter the balance of power to the Northern Atlantic countries' disadvantage.<sup>58</sup>

Climate is not the only environmental factor active in shaping human societies. Other relevant environmental factors might include, soils, water resources, fauna and flora, and disease. The latter has been a component cause of many social changes. Few now doubt that the Black Death was

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<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 61-62

<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, similar studies have tried to account for the rise of Viking power and the extent and success of their settlement of the North Atlantic in the preceding centuries. One account which also brings out the dialectical nature of these human / environmental encounters is that of Thomas H McGovern, Gerald Bigelow, Thomas Amarosi and Daniel Russell 'Northern Islands, Human Error, and Environmental Degradation: A View of Social and Ecological Change in the Mediaeval North Atlantic'. They describe how the farming practices which the Scandinavian settlers brought with them led to degradation of pasture land and the removal of any remaining tree cover. This change in turn made the communities more susceptible to the later climatic downturn.

one of the factors which hastened the end of the feudal social system in Britain and Europe. This series of plagues swept across Europe between 1347 and 1350 with other lesser, but still considerable outbreaks over the following decades.

“One third of the country’s [England’s] population cannot be eliminated over a period of some two and a half years without a considerable dislocation to its economy and social structure.”<sup>59</sup>

Although Philip Ziegler notes that its effects were certainly not uniform, and somewhat ameliorated due to the relative over-population which preceded it, the plague resulted in the freeing up of land as people died without successors and a consequent reduction in the amount of strip cultivation in favour of larger patches of land. This in turn would make the later enclosure of lands, so important in the agricultural revolution, that much easier. Braudel equally claims that “[p]lague would appear as what it was; a *structure* of the [sixteenth] century.”<sup>60</sup> In the plague which struck Venice following 1575 fifty thousand people died, between a quarter and a third of the population. “When the plague finally left Venice in 1577, quite a different city with a new set of rulers emerged, There had been a complete changeover.”<sup>61</sup> The effects went deeper than the mere replacement of one elite class by another for, whenever plague threatened the wealthy evacuated the Mediterranean cities for their country homes leaving the poor to suffer the brunt of the onslaught. This was a “source of lasting class hatred”.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Philip Ziegler *The Black Death* p. 240.

<sup>60</sup> Braudel *op. cit.*, n. 40 above, p. 332. [my emphasis]

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, p. 333.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p. 333.

The importance of infectious diseases is not of course limited to Europe. Thus, for example, the Spanish invasion of South America was not a purely economic and political phenomenon, the role of diseases in these conquests cannot be underestimated. Over three and a half million Indians died of smallpox alone in the wake of Cortez's invasion of Mexico. Amongst the victims was Cuitlaha the successor to Montezuma. Two hundred thousand Incas died from the same source before Pizzaro's invasion of Peru.<sup>63</sup> The last few surviving native tribes in the Amazon are still suffering from imported diseases like measles reducing their population and subsequently their ability to withstand accompanying cultural and economic invasions of their territory. This pattern is repeated over the whole of the Pacific, including the island populations.

“...Pacific islanders were in general, free from smallpox, measles, typhus, typhoid, hookworm, leprosy, syphilis, and certain other ills before the white invasion...”<sup>64</sup>

Diseases were not the only novel species which were introduced with colonisation. Many other larger species like rats jumped ship and played havoc with the native ecosystems, forcing many species to extinction. This replacement of indigenous plants and animals with exotic species altered both the landscape and the way of life of the colonised countries. Some introduced species became serious pests; well known examples include rabbits in Australia and the opossum in New Zealand. The introduction of these species was in many cases intentional but the effects thereafter were far removed from their original purpose. Prickly Pear cacti *Opuntia sp.* were

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<sup>63</sup> A. Grenfell Price *The Western Invasion of the Pacific and its Continents. A study of Moving Frontiers and Changing Landscapes.*

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p.176.

introduced from America to Australia in 1787 to provide food for beetles. These were needed in the cochineal industry which produced red dyes for soldiers uniforms. However by 1925 60,000,000 acres of land were overrun and made unusable following the cacti's uncontrolled expansion due to the lack of any suitable phytophagus predators.

It cannot be overemphasised that few people actually suggest that social change can be accounted for solely in terms of these non-human influences. (Some have perhaps pushed this line of explanation a little too far. Grenfell Price gives one example of an academic who held that the success of the Protestant reformation could be accounted for by the fact that Henry VIII contracted syphilis thus leaving a sterile daughter who could have no children by Philip II of Spain!) I only suggest that the social experiences gained of the environment in these active roles (rather than as a passive material input into economic processes) has to be given due weight. Our understanding of the environment comes through a *dialectic* which is not wholly intentional and mediated through active human practices. Rather, the environment plays an active as well as a passive role, imposing its own limits and possibilities upon social structures and knowledge, upon values and forms of life. In this sense we can talk of an *environmental components of practice* instead of just human labour.

In one sense the *Annales* use of the 'natural' environment might be thought to be opportunistic. That is, they make little attempt to specify to what degree we should think of practices as being constituted by active environmental involvement rather than simply Promethean human activity. This is because of the contextual way in which they approach their subject matter. It would be

wrong to make general claims about the extent of the environment's effects on history for the very reason that this would oppose a theoretical contextuality and risk being misread as an environmental *foundationalism*. What is required is a theoretical space in which the environment can operate and be introduced in the specificity of its actions in particular circumstances. This the *Annales* school provide admirably. The *Annales* school are aligned with a critical anti-humanism insofar as they do not regard human conscious activity as the basis for historical explanation and they give due regard to the environmental structuration of events.

### Human Ecology

The New History is not the only academic discipline to acknowledge the part played by the environment in the development of social formations. There are now several emerging disciplines which make the process of mediation between society and the environment their central theme. One such area is that of "human ecology" which draws together relevant aspects of geography, environmental science, theoretical ecology, anthropology etc.

At present human ecology is still a fragmented discipline, regarded by most as a sub-discipline of other more traditional subjects, rather than a radically new perspective. As with other developing disciplines, environmental concerns tend to be subsumed under the aegis of the currently favoured paradigms of older disciplines. Thus, for example, philosophy tries to simply *apply* current theories of ethics, either utilitarianism or deontological to environmental concerns (see Introduction). Treating environmental issues in

this way enables the practitioners of traditional subjects to argue their continued relevance in a changing world and maintains an intellectual hegemony over developments which threaten to disturb the academic *status quo*. But these new environmental problematics which necessitate the restructuring of traditional subject boundaries are distorted by being squeezed into intellectual frameworks in which they previously played no part. As Althusser makes clear, the introduction of new concepts will of necessity lead to the restructuring of the problematic they enter.

Environmental concerns cannot just be treated as novel examples to shake the dust off bewhiskered theorems. The challenge they pose goes much deeper than this, indeed so deep as not just to threaten a cherished theory here and there but to challenge the very boundaries of subjects like philosophy.

Human ecology exemplifies the mutually interactive and co-constitutive form of the dialectic between 'nature' and human society. In a review article of extraordinary breadth Gerald L. Young has attempted to pull together those aspects of traditional disciplines which converge in the mediation of nature and culture. He considers sociology, geography, politics, philosophy, anthropology, engineering, architecture, planning and scientific ecology. He stresses that "the most obvious need is for a unified body of theory, one acceptable to each and transcending all."<sup>65</sup> This he believes can only come about through "interdisciplinary effort".

There are many examples that could be quoted of environmental awareness amongst anthropological writings (to pick just one of Young's areas). This

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<sup>65</sup> Gerald L. Young 'Human Ecology as an Interdisciplinary Concept: A Critical Inquiry' p. 85.

awareness is especially noticeable in those studies of cultures which as Young notes are “least buffered from the environment by technological and material artifacts.”<sup>66</sup> This explains why the term “cultural ecology” was coined by Stewart in 1955 to emphasise the importance of including environmental factors in anthropological explanation. Young gives a short summary of the development of this field, but notes that in many cases the environment is still seen as simply a passive feature in social arrangements; as the material requirement of production rather than a component of production. Marshal Sahlins and perhaps the majority of cultural ecologists tended to be engaged in an “ecological version of cultural materialism” which seeks to “identify the material condition of socio-cultural life in terms of the articulation between productive processes and habitat.”<sup>67</sup>

In many respects this particular Marxist derived approach to cultural ecology stressing economic aspects still falls within the economist paradigm. Human societies are seen as simply appropriating those natural objects which *happen* to be around. However, some attempts have been made to give nature an active role in social determination and hence provide a more holistic approach. These holistic forms of Human ecology emphasise a mutually interactive dialectical approach to the nature / society interface. This differs from the more traditional concerns of anthropology which have tended to focus upon social institutions and relations in their own right whilst nature provides an important but largely passive backdrop for social phenomena. Human ecologists attempt to recognise and express the relationships between societies, practices and the environments in which

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<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>67</sup> Marshal Sahlins quoted in Young *ibid.*, p. 21.

they find themselves.<sup>68</sup> Thus for example Katherine Milton correlates the ecological factors important for determining the different foraging strategies amongst groups of the Mbuti pygmies.<sup>69</sup> In the Northern part of the Ituri forest where flora and fauna as diverse and plentiful they retain their traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle. However, in the more variable and less biologically diverse southern sections of the forest they rely upon trade in meat with neighbouring Bantu tribesmen for sustenance.

One of the best known attempts to study the mutual interactions of the 'natural' environment and human society is the cultural anthropology of Roy A. Rappaport.<sup>70</sup> Rappaport worked amongst the Maring tribal highlanders of the New Guinea highlands. He focuses upon the functional roles rituals play within these societies in maintaining sustainable relations with the environment and surrounding tribes. He criticises past attempts to reduce ritual to a psychological functionalism which merely accounts for them as palliatives, i.e. giving an aura of control over aspects of the environment which are in fact outside practical influences. e.g. the weather. Rappaport

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<sup>68</sup> These environments are not necessarily "natural" in the commonly accepted sense. Young is careful to point out that one should not now confuse the term "nature" with something that is untouched by human hands: "man [sic] lives with the realities of smog as much as sky, in cement not stone, in contemplation of a windowbox more than a biome." Young *ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>69</sup> Katherine Milton 'Ecological Foundations for Subsistence Strategies among the Mbuti Pygmies'.

<sup>70</sup> There are, of course, many other works in this area. Two deserving mention are Robert McC. Netting *Cultural Ecology*. and Tim Ingold *The Appropriation of Nature: Essays on Human Ecology and Social Relations*. Ingold, following Gibson, refers to the environment as offering a set of possibilities, or 'affordencies' to the individuals they surround. An interesting selection of essays from a specifically materialist perspective and containing varying degrees of ecological emphasis can be found in Eric B. Ross ed., *Beyond the Myths of Culture: Essays in Cultural Materialism*.

claims that in “some instances ritual actions *do* produce a practical effects on the external world.”<sup>71</sup> The rituals of the Tsembaga and other Maring tribes centre around a cycle of variable length, usually between twelve to fifteen years long. The end of each cycle which “is largely regulated by the demographic fortunes of the pig population”<sup>72</sup> is marked by the slaughter of pigs on a grand scale, termed a *kaiko*. The pigs are a major resource and benefit for the Tsembaga in terms of protein and because of their consumption of otherwise disease spreading faeces and rubbish. However, they can be very destructive, damaging the Tsembaga’s gardens and, when their numbers increase, become very time consuming to care for. Additionally, they are also a potential cause of friction between neighbouring tribes. The time taken for pigs to reach a “sufficient” number i.e. for the losses to outweigh the benefits, depends upon many ecological variables including the quality of the land.

The practical effects of rituals are mediated in very complex ways through the rituals, not just in terms of their obvious direct effects for example the environmental impact of growing extra food for a feast. The Tsembaga ritual cycle can be regarded as a complex homeostatic mechanism dictating “when attacks may be launched, land annexed, affiliations of personnel changed, and truce or peace established...”<sup>73</sup> The *kaiko* is also associated with a variety of territorial disputations and with the lifting and imposition of a variety of other taboos, for example the eating of marsupials. Rappaport maintains that the rituals function to provide a kind of negative feedback between society and environment helping to keep a form of balance

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<sup>71</sup> Roy A. Rappaport *Pigs For The Ancestors* p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, p. 221.

between them.

“Tsembaga ritual, particularly in the context of a ritual cycle, operates as a regulating mechanism in a system or set of interlocking systems, in which such variables as the area of available land, necessary lengths of fallow periods, size and composition of both human and pig populations, trophic requirements of pigs and people, energy expended in various activities and the frequency of misfortunes are included.”<sup>74</sup>

Of course the Tsembaga themselves do not view their ritual in this fashion and as such Rappaport is imposing a Western conceptual scheme on their practices in an attempt to ‘explain’ them.<sup>75</sup> The Tsembaga see their rituals as concerned with interactions with (mainly) ancestral spirits.

Rappaport’s study, although bordering in places upon an environmental functionalism in its account of ritual, exemplifies in its other respects the value of an integrated approach to the society / nature horizon. He is not alone in this. The work of environmental historians and human ecologists amongst others have begun the work of reconstructing academic disciplines

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<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>75</sup> It might be argued that such explanations involve a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of ritual practices as experienced from within the Tsembaga form of life itself. See for example Wittgenstein’s comments upon Sir James Frazer’s anthropology. ‘Remarks upon Frazer’s Golden Bough’ in G. Luckhardt ed., *Wittgenstein; Sources and Perspectives*. Johnson holds that Wittgenstein believes that this form of interpretation misunderstands social activities because some human actions are simply not amenable to the forms of explanation prevalent in the natural sciences. This is not however Wittgenstein’s point, which is rather that abstract scientific explanation is not an objectively better explanation or a true causal explanation of the motivation and feelings and beliefs of those involved in rituals but simply different, reliant upon making connections with a modern scientifically orientated form of life rather than trusting to the phenomenological expressions of the participants. (See chapter 9.)

around the nature / human interface frequently operating with what can justifiably be termed a dialectical approach. The consequences of this shift are potentially wide-ranging. It both *reflects and amplifies* a progressive tendency towards a re-evaluation of Western humanity's orientation towards the non-human environment. It represents a (partial) break with and critique of past ideological assumptions which have influenced the way we have regarded and valued nature and a movement away from economist and humanist suppositions.

## CHAPTER 7: THE HUMAN SUBJECT

### Reprise

The last chapter argued the case for a wider conception of 'production' than that accepted by economically reductive models. This more expansive conception of production included all 'objectifying' activities which either reproduce current social structures or introduce novel components into the social formation. These activities, it was claimed, need not, as the humanist holds, necessarily be the result of purposive actions on the part of human individuals. It was also argued that 'nature' is to be seen not as separate from the social formation, but as an active component in a genuinely dialectical relationship with society. This dialectic takes place at all levels of the social formation. Hence, nature is not (as it is in traditional Marxism) simply passive raw material waiting to be transformed via economic processes - those processes which, according to traditional Marxism, then determine the form taken by super-structural elements. This hierarchical model was replaced by one *derived from* the Althusserian conception of levels within the social formation, political, ideological etc., each with a relative autonomy from the other and each dialectically engaged with each other *and the surrounding environment*.

This attempt to build a holistic model of society, whilst retaining something of the standpoint of traditional Marxism and the language of its analysis, does not impose a single rigid, universal, and teleological theory of societal development. Instead it recognises the complexity of real situations and deconstructs many of the anthropocentric preconceptions which lie at

traditional Marxism's heart. Dogmatic Marxists may well reject such a historical compromise, for it can only be reached at the cost of recognising and rejecting humanist and economist aspects of their own traditions. However, this recognition does not compromise the radicalness of Marxist social theory, for it is precisely these aspects which Marxism shares with the "liberal" and capitalist philosophies which it long regarded as its ideological enemies.

*If* the ethical concerns of Western and non-Western environmentalists are to be addressed by Marxists this *must* occur at a deep theoretical level. One cannot simply tack green issues onto an agenda based on a very different analysis of history and society.<sup>1</sup> In this sense the environment may be that issue which finally forces many Marxists to come to terms with the historical and geographical specificity of their own ideological presumptions, forcing them to abandon their restrictive and linear view of history and their universalising cultural assumptions. Insofar as the critical adaptation of Althusser's model presented here is successful, it may help create a theoretical space where constructive discourse between 'left' and 'green' agendas can take place.

Of course, this suggests that some of the economic specificity of the Marxist analysis of society will be lost. *Economic* production will no longer provide *the* key to a comprehensive understanding of social formations or *the* guide for revolutionary action. Many Western Marxists have in any case long since abandoned such economic reductionism and the preceding analysis has

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<sup>1</sup> To ignore this point is to risk repeating the divisive arguments which occurred when Marxists attempted to subsume radical feminism into a "productivist" framework (in the narrow economic sense).

questioned whether Marxism ever did, or could, provide a 'scientific' theory of society which would lay bare its essential structures. Science, it was argued, is in any case neither transcendental nor objective. Whatever understanding such theories provide is always intimately tied to specific ideological backgrounds, which are in turn embedded in and part of particular cultural and historical forms of life.<sup>2</sup> This being so, there must come a point where particular forms of life become, as time passes, so different from those present at the inception of a theory that the theory needs to be either changed or overthrown. This argument is, I believe, entirely consistent with Marxist social theory, but there is little real point in arguing over whether or not such theoretical developments are actually Marxist or not.

Marxism must learn to apply the historicist aspects of its theory of ideology to itself, and recognise the need to evolve to suit new circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

Scientific conceptions of Marxist philosophy born in Nineteenth Century Western Europe need to be replaced by a theoretical standpoint which understands itself as providing a possible geography of the terrain of late twentieth century life. Perhaps philosophy, so understood, can provide as Wittgenstein suggests a way of finding one's way around a world imbued with meanings and values, a way of relating these different *places* to each

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<sup>2</sup> Chapters 3 and 4 showed how Althusser's own attempt to radically divorce science from ideology and make them epistemologically autonomous fails.

<sup>3</sup> This does not mean abandoning its principled stance on human emancipation in the face of the expansion of consumer capitalism, but rather realigning itself with other radical movements who now face a common enemy. Foremost amongst these are the greens and environmentalists.

other.<sup>4</sup> This geography is not a representational map of the ideological terrain, it does not mirror timeless or universal truths (indeed it does not *mirror anything* at all), but is itself an intimate part of that terrain and the dynamic processes which help form it. Theory provides a communicable account of our perceptions of the current relations between ‘things’, i.e. ‘things’ as they are constituted in what is always and already a dialectical process, a process which is organically part of our forms of life.<sup>5</sup>

Our theoretical “maps” of the world chart the assumed manner and form of our relations within the world; language is not simply a supervenient property of ‘forms of life’ but actively participates in the creation and evolution of those forms of life. Just as a map of the Venezuelan rain-forest might enable it to be exploited by oil companies or to be set aside as tribal lands,<sup>6</sup> the knowledge which a theoretical map encapsulates will almost certainly be instrumental in altering the very relations it attempts to portray. Producing a philosophical or theoretical map opens and closes certain avenues, and constrains and facilitates the formation of particular relations between those reading the map and the ‘objects’ on that map. Often the results of such

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<sup>4</sup> As Wittgenstein states “A philosophical problem has the form: “I don’t know my way about” Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* §123. There remains an important difference between post-Althusserian theory and Wittgensteinian philosophy. Wittgenstein apparently retains an almost positivistic belief in the need for philosophy to leave everything as it is i.e. that ideally it can describe the world and its language without itself intruding upon or altering them. Although Althusser shares in this separation of (Marxist) philosophy from ordinary language, the point of his theorising is to alter the world.

<sup>5</sup> See chapter 5.

<sup>6</sup> The ‘map’ that a tribal culture would produce would be significantly different once again. Like the songlines of the Australian aborigines it may be so different that it is difficult to conceive of in terms of a theoretical map at all. For example, it might not recognise a division between the landscape and the people who live in it in anything approaching the way in which we understand it.

cartographical exercises are unforeseen. What was developed with one purpose in mind may have very different practical results. We have already seen how theory, in its articulation of similarities and differences, creates taxonomies which are never neutral but always value laden. Theoretical assumptions are not always transparent to the theoretician, but function ideologically - creating spaces in relation to which human individuals and groups come to align themselves, e.g. as rich or poor, black or white etc.<sup>7</sup> Certain aspects of the humanist theoretical map have not been without benefits for those who can afford them, e.g. due to medical science many diseases are no longer life threatening. However, if, as many environmentalists now agree, humanism "got it wrong" in placing humanity (and in particular a very narrow concept of humanity based upon Western patriarchal society) at the centre of its universe then there comes a need to re-draw our theoretical contours, to use a different *projection* which will alter our perceptions of the size and importance of the European continent, the rational male subject and all of the other ideological baggage which comes with a humanist world-view. This does not involve throwing out all that has been achieved by the last centuries of European culture, or, as some post-modern philosophers seem to suggest, doing without a map altogether, but does require putting things into a different perspective. Most importantly it involves the realisation that we are situated on the map, not above it - and that our theoretical horizons are limited by the ideological terrain which surrounds and in part produces us.

Human and environmental influences have continued to change the world

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<sup>7</sup> For a full description of this presumed relation between ideology and theory see chapter

and our relations to it, but the geography of traditional Marxism has, up until now, explained change entirely in terms of the Promethean processes of human economics divorced from environmental constraints. It has ignored the physical processes which are constantly and actively at work altering the forms of life we are able to live. Marxism has been one of the powerful forces at work upon our theoretical and practical heritage, creating, in part, the landscape in which we now live. Despite this, it now faces the fate of all maps which, once set down, become ossified and anachronistic and entirely inadequate for expressing novel relations between features of the landscape.

However, anti-humanist Marxism does, I claim, contain certain intellectual resources which can help us produce a dynamic 'geographical' critique amenable to our present conditions. Earlier chapters of this thesis attempted to re-draw the humanist representational account of 'cartography', to provide a theory of how theoretical language relates to the non-theoretical world. They utilised a concept of "social practice" found (in differing forms) in both Wittgenstein's and Althusser's philosophies. Taking this with the more holistic and less reductive account of "production" presented in the last chapter, we are now in a position to reconstruct that other central tenet of humanism - the autonomous individual "subject".

To this end we will need to examine the character of the subject / object divide and the relations between the individual and society. Chapter 2 illustrated the pervasive use of the subject / object dichotomy in ethical theories. From the perspective of social theory (within which category we can include Wittgenstein's later philosophy following his "anthropological

turn”), the debate within the objective / subjective framework typical of post-Cartesian philosophy changes and becomes focused on the relative import and primacy of *individual praxis* or *social practices* and *human agency* or *social structures*.<sup>8</sup> This debate hinges upon whether one takes human subjects to be autonomous from, and foundational to, society: i.e. do human subjects, as subjects existentially prior to social formations, consciously determine the forms that social practices take; or are those subjects’ practical actions and very forms of existence constrained (and facilitated) by forces and relations released through social and environmental interactions but largely outside of those individuals’ control.<sup>9</sup>

In the former (humanist) camp, which exclusively emphasises human agency, are included the various sociological traditions such as Methodological Individualism, Ethnomethodology, and Phenomenological Sociology. In the opposing, and in these terms at least anti-humanist, camp lie functionalist approaches derived from the work of Durkheim and structuralist explanations such as that of Althusser. It is necessary to keep in mind that this “structure / agency” debate is *not* simply that between an individualism which sees society as reducible to the collective actions of the individuals who compose it, and opposing views which hold that societies have emergent properties of their own. Both sides of this older sociological

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<sup>8</sup> Anthony Giddens *Central Problems in Social Theory*. A debate which I have claimed must be widened to include environmental structures. I use *Praxis* here in a narrow sense to identify those positions, like Sartre’s, which treat consciously directed human individual activity as of primary importance, but who also hold a non-representational and dialectical epistemology.

<sup>9</sup> Despite his anti-positivist epistemology, the scientific leanings of his account of theory means that Louis Althusser comes perilously close to replacing such a simple economic reductionism with an equally deterministic and objectivist (though multi-level) structural determinism. See chapter 3.

debate share a common agenda insofar as they see human subjects as objective 'givens' - they just differ on whether society ranks as an objective entity in its own right. The structuralist, on the other hand, denies this foundational premise, rejecting any concept of an eternal and universal human subject.<sup>10</sup> The structure / agency debate, as formulated by Althusser, goes beyond the humanist categories of the subjective and objective. It would therefore be a mistake to view structures as objective entities which cause the subject to act in particular ways. In economist and reductionist accounts these structural relations are seen as objective qualities of society and exert their influence through a strict social determinism. These positions can be discounted for the purposes of the present argument as they simply recapitulate humanist objectivism in a new guise.

In terms of morality, the structure / agency debate hinges on the type of account which can be given of ethical values. Should we consider the human individual to be the locus and origin of ethical values - the basic unit to which all analysis of moral thought must return? Certainly it seems over-ambitious for Althusser to deny this individual any explanatory role whatsoever in a theory of cultural values. Simply defining the "subject" as a product of bourgeois philosophy and constructing an alternative 'scientific' discourse will not make her disappear. In its favour, an extreme anti-humanist theory provides a welcome critique of the anthropocentric metaphysics of humanism and subjective rationality. The subject is no longer the autonomous producer of all "meaning", "truth" and "value", but

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<sup>10</sup>The anti-humanist metaphysics of Althusser's problematic challenges the very possibility of positing "foundations". In this sense Althusser takes the structure /agency debate beyond the naive objectivism of Lévi-Strauss who envisages structures as the underlying grammar or logic of society. See also the comments in chapter 9 on Pierre Bourdieu.

becomes historicised - a figure created by the interpellation of the concrete biological individual into the contingencies of modern Western society. (Meaning, truth and values also become relational.) On the negative side, this seems to relegate the individual human to a functional role within society, leaving no scope for individual productivity; it also seems to fail to provide an adequate account of the phenomenology of consciousness.

However, Althusser's anti-essentialist and anti-reductionist structuralism can provide a solution to these apparent difficulties. The humanist account of moral agency has two alternative explanations for values. They are either subjective choices made by the agent and equivalent to personal preferences, or alternatively they are objective and grounded in the ontology of the world.<sup>11</sup> The anti-humanist structuralist can avoid this problematic with its interminable questions about the subjectivity or objectivity of values. I shall argue that values should be seen as dispositions created in the on-going process of the co-constitution of the subject and the world. The concrete subject comes to assume her individuality and the values which form a part of this individuality only through her practical relations with society and the surrounding environment. Values are thus irreducibly relational in their origins and intent. Once the humanist problematic is overcome, the question of the subjectivity or objectivity of values becomes so much metaphysical baggage to be discarded.

This chapter will address the question of how far the humanist subject retains a metaphysical 'presence' in current theories of value formation and how far,

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<sup>11</sup> Obviously this does not entail that all systems of morality which are termed "relativisms" are anti-foundational. Some forms of anthropological relativism which ground values in "society" come to reify this aspect of the world as the ultimate analytic foundation of all values.

if at all, this role can be justified in the light of the anti-humanist critique. The question will be posed by first considering the concept of the subject as he [sic] typically features in humanist philosophies, and then developing an anti-humanist conception of the production of ethical values. Contrary to humanist conceptions of ethical values we can, I claim, account for the subject's values in terms of her place and engagement in particular practices. This obviates the necessity to appeal either to "human nature", or to natural objective qualities, and reduces the tendency to reduce values to questions of "rational" choice and individual "free-will".

I shall give accounts of two different attempts to overcome humanist moral theory. The first, that of the Existential ethics of Jean Paul Sartre. Sartre develops a phenomenological conception of the subject which avoids a naive humanist dichotomy between subject and object. However, his early philosophy retains many of the features of a humanist problematic insofar as it operates with a Promethean conception of the individual as creator of herself and the world. I show how, to some extent at least, he overcomes this drawback in his later philosophy which almost comes to take on the air of an anti-humanism. I then turn to Charles Taylor's communitarian ethics which argues that ethical values are necessarily inter-subjective in their appeal to social norms. However, I claim that Taylor is too wedded to a humanist perspective. First, in restricting his account to the agent's utilisation of moral *concepts* rather than the deeper operations of ideology which remain unrecognised by but are nonetheless constitutive of the conscious subject. Second, in arguing for a distinction between ethics and personal preferences, he actually maintains in the latter a sphere where the subject remains completely autonomous and unconstrained.

## Humanism and Moral Autonomy

“The highest point attained by perceptual materialism, that is materialism that does not comprehend sensuousness as practical activity, is the view of separate individuals and civic society.”<sup>12</sup>

This conception which Marx criticises is one which portrays society as composed of atomistic individuals each consciously acting in their own independent interests. Such individualism has been one of the central features of the humanist philosophical paradigm, and today exerts its foremost influence through its unquestioned acceptance in the field of neoclassical economics. However (as chapter 2 has illustrated), its influence is not confined to economics, but pervades every aspect of Western society from our concepts of rationality to our ethical intuitions. In the sociological terminology of Ferdinand Tonnies, this individualistic *society* (*Gesellschaft*) is an artificial conglomeration of egoists linked only by an instrumental rationality. This is contrasted with *community* (*Gemeinschaft*) whose members are linked organically by a shared moral framework which has a cohesive function.<sup>13</sup>

The humanist perceives the morally autonomous subject as the analytical bedrock of society, ultimately responsible for both producing and choosing her own values. Analytic philosophers have spilt a great deal of ink upon the topics of “consciousness” and “identity”, but this has tended to focus upon delineating *conceptual conditions necessary for their realisation* rather than

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx ‘Thesis on Feuerbach § 9’

<sup>13</sup> Ferdinand Tonnies *Community and Society*. The demise of shared moral frameworks in modern society is the central concern of the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. See *After Virtue*.

questioning the relation of these concepts to historical, environmental and social conditions. Thus, so far as Peter Strawson is concerned, the concept of a person as an autonomous and unified consciousness and body is part of that

“...massive central core of human thinking which has no history - or none recorded in the history of thought; there are categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental character change not at all.”<sup>14</sup>

Not all analytic philosophers would agree with Strawson that it is the concept of a “person” is “logically primitive”.<sup>15</sup> One has to guard against a tendency to oversimplify and conflate accounts which even within mainstream humanism have differed markedly in their emphases. But even more detailed analyses frequently seem to suffer from a synchronistic and a-contextual one-dimensionality. For example, Steven Lukes has recognised no less than eleven “basic ideas of individualism”, each emphasising different aspects of person-hood. They comprise, “the dignity of man” [sic], “autonomy”, “privacy”, “self-development”, the “abstract individual”, and “political”, “economic”, “religious”, “ethical”, “epistemological”, and “methodological individualism”. According to Lukes there is no unitary concept which can be labelled individualism - but rather a series of “distinct unit-ideas (and intellectual traditions) which the use of the word has come to conflate.”<sup>16</sup> These “unit-ideas” all have their own sets of general conceptual conditions associated with them.

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Strawson *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* p. 10. This is the antithesis of a project like Foucault's who seeks to provide just such an history of changing conceptions of the subject. See for example his three volume work on the history of sexuality.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Strawson 'Persons' p. 402.

<sup>16</sup> Steven Lukes *Individualism* p. x

Whilst Lukes' distinctions are informative, his approach has serious drawbacks. Despite their differences, the conceptions of individuality he recognises have all emerged in the context of European culture over the last few hundred years. Their 'conflation' may not be a case of the analytical oversights of past philosophers who have failed in their writings to distinguish "unit-ideas" one from the other. Rather, it is more likely that these conceptions are genuinely intertwined and even to a degree historically indissociable because of their common genetic heritage and their mutual interactions over centuries. Contrary to Lukes' assertions it may be that they can only be understood by an examination of their relations to each other and to the social formations of which they form a part. Whilst it is true that individuality is not a single concept, the same might equally be said of Lukes' own "unit-ideas". These categories do not, as Lukes seems to believe, provide fundamental grounds for an understanding of all uses of the term "individualism". For example, Luther's conception of the unit idea of autonomy is not the same as that of Eric Fromm, nor Marx's the same as Kant's. Each concept achieves its meaning through its relations to other terms in a theoretical problematic which is, in turn, only at home in particular historical and social conditions. Their similarities to each other arise from the communality of their evolutionary environment, i.e. the forms of life which developed in modern Europe, and from the constant inter-breeding and mixing of theoretical bloodlines, i.e. the constant restructuring of one problematic into another drawing upon the material available in related traditions.

Lukes' one-dimensional approach is also evident in his treatment of the 'unit-ideas' of individualism in philosophical isolation from how each concept of

the self is supposed to articulate with the wider community. Insofar as he does this one can only agree with him that his own analysis is a “map that is radically incomplete.”<sup>17</sup> If Althusser is even partially correct in his contention that the autonomous human subject is inherently ideological, a conception which only arises in particular historical conditions, then it cannot possibly be understood in isolation from social and environmental factors.

Lukes is certainly not alone in wanting to distinguish types of autonomy. Gerald Dworkin has pointed out great differences between analytic theorists about exactly what constitutes autonomy. Indeed Dworkin stresses that “About the only features held constant from one author to another are that autonomy is a feature of persons and that it is a desirable quality to have.”<sup>18</sup> These features may be identified as the core of the humanist position and this chapter will throw doubt upon even such common-sense assumptions to the extent that these are supposed to be universally true.

Central to the question of autonomy are the degrees and types of influences upon the formation and expression of our moral values. How far are such values the products of ‘individual choice’ and how far are they dependent upon and determined by variables beyond the individual’s control? Maria Ossowska has compiled an impressive list of ways in which moral phenomena have been counted as dependent variables.<sup>19</sup> Although her primary interest is in the influence of *social* determinants of moral values she points out that there are a wide range of features which have been thought to play at least a part in value formation. These factors include: the role of the

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>18</sup> Gerald Dworkin *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Maria Ossowska *Social Determinants of Moral Ideas* chapter 2.

physical environment, demographic factors like the the sex ratio of the society, the state of population growth or decline, age ratios, the community's spatial mobility etc., the state of industrialisation, whether the society is urban or rural based, the type of government, the family structure, the society's traditions and history, the division of labour, the role of that person within society e.g. as bureaucrat or blue collar worker, religion, art, law, state of knowledge, education etc. etc. All of these she claims have been held to determine ethical values in at least some circumstances. Ossowska also points out that any empirical or comparative study of these factors is extremely difficult due to the way in which they interact with each other. Perhaps the only safe thing to say is that it is impossible to make cross-cultural universal generalisations about the degree of influence of such factors.

However, according to the typical humanist account, the self comprises that essential core which, despite all these possible 'external' influences, remains untouched. These core features are, it is claimed, common to all humans and have come to provide the largely unquestioned foundations of humanist epistemology, sociology, ethics etc. These essential features are also the very same ones used to delineate the human from the non-human, acting as the necessary criteria that qualify one to enter the privileged category of the human.<sup>20</sup> Thus, for example, Daniel C. Dennett considers six features, each of which he claims to be a *necessary* condition of personhood. Unsurprisingly amongst these we find the oft repeated qualities of rationality, of consciousness and of verbal communication.<sup>21</sup> In the

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<sup>20</sup> See the discussion of this relation in the introduction.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel C. Dennett *Brainstorms*pp. 269-270.

development of European humanist traditions these themes have become inextricably linked with definitions (such as John Locke's) of humans as "free, equal and independent". This gives us three interlocking themes which occur throughout humanist accounts of the "subject".

- 1) Autonomy - the self as autonomous; a unitary bounded being usually possessing "free will" and a commensurate degree of responsibility for her actions.<sup>22</sup>
- 2) Rationality - the self as rational; capable of making independent logical decisions using a rational faculty.
- 3) Transparency - the self as a conscious being where reasoning is seen as a process which is directed by and transparent to the reasoner.

Given the privileged position this autonomous subject is accorded, it is perhaps unsurprising that, so far as ethics is concerned, some humanists come to believe that the subject's only possible motivation for action must be

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<sup>22</sup> I shall avoid, insofar as is possible, straying into the free-will / determinism debate in philosophy. Obviously philosophical determinists might deny the existence of free-will i.e. the possibility of the subject making decisions that are not preordained by what has gone before. However, by and large determinists still maintain a distinction between *internal* and *external* causation, thus maintaining the boundaries of the subject even if the subject is now seen only as the *most proximate* cause of any action. This is also true of those philosophers like Hume (perhaps the majority) who promote a form of compatibilism. The structure / agency debate is fought over a different theoretical territory - namely whether the key to sociological understanding e.g. of moral values, lies in a theory of social organisation and social practices or in an exhumation of the qualities inherent in individuals.

Perhaps a thoroughgoing determinism might be counted as anti-humanist insofar as it does try to remove one of the humanist barriers between humanity and nature - that which decrees the natural world a sphere of determinate action and the human indeterminate. However, one should note that a thoroughgoing indeterminacy has exactly the same effect.

A second closely related field of philosophical debate revolves around the concept of *Akrasia* - or weakness of the will. Again I shall not touch directly upon this debate, but see Justin Gosling *Weakness of Will* for an overview.

the furtherance of her own goals. Certain humanist ethical theories encapsulate the three themes above and add only the unsavoury Hobbesian proviso that people only use their rational faculties in what they see as their own self-interest. Thus, for example, modern “game theory”, taking its lead from utilitarian and classical economics, sees ‘rational self-interest’ as the undisputable and central feature of human nature. The individual calculates the costs and benefits of her every action so as to maximise benefit to herself.<sup>23</sup> That the general qualities of person-hood which analytic philosophy has ‘uncovered’ should be identical to those posited by neoclassical economists comes as no surprise to those who see both of these approaches as the inevitable end result of the progressive working out of that “subjective rationality” which Horkheimer and Adorno so vividly describe.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, this individualistic philosophy both depends upon and promotes a view of human subjects as essentially identical to each other. As Max Horkheimer put it

“The Monad, a seventeenth-century symbol of the atomistic economic individual of bourgeois society, became a social type. All the monads, isolated though they were by moats of self-interest, nevertheless tended to become more and more alike through the pursuit of this very self-interest.”<sup>25</sup>

Horkheimer rejects this reductionist and impoverished conception, arguing that we are imbued with values which are not expressions of an underlying human nature but are socially constituted. This is true even of those values

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<sup>23</sup> In this context, the presence of the absolutely autonomous and self-interested subject undermines “altruism” which has been thought by many to be central to ethics.

<sup>24</sup> See chapter 2.

<sup>25</sup> Max Horkheimer *Eclipse of Reason* p. 139.

normally associated with the concept of individuality itself.

“The absolutely isolated individual has always been an illusion. The most esteemed personal qualities, such as independence, will to freedom, sympathy and the sense of justice, are social as well as individual virtues.”<sup>26</sup>

That Horkheimer’s critique of subjective rationality and his analysis of moral valuation are pertinent can, I believe, be illustrated by the way that even philosophers in the humanist traditions have found the need to give social features due weight in constituting individuals’ values. In a very real sense this anthropological and linguistic turn in philosophy has been motivated by analytic philosophy’s need to defend the territory of ethics as its own subject matter. Since the conception of “economic man” is identical with that of post-enlightenment humanist philosophy, and since economic theory provides a simple calculus ideally suited to present bureaucratic structures, there seems no *a priori* case for maintaining ethics as an independent area of *philosophical* study. Moral decisions could be left for economists and game theoreticians to decide. Thus, those within analytic philosophy who are unhappy with this narrow conception of the human subject and the consequent loss of philosophical prestige can find themselves, to a degree at least, making common cause with proponents of an Althusserian conception of ideology in rejecting the absolutely autonomous subject. This necessitates a movement away from describing autonomy in terms of general qualities common to all individual subjects and towards explanations of values in terms of the individual’s place in relation to already given structures of language, meaning and forms of life. I now turn to an examination of the development of this anti-humanist shift as it relates to

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 135.

moral autonomy, and its consequences for a theory of value production. I shall first examine the early humanist philosophy of Sartre and then return to his later almost anti-humanist position via Taylor's communitarian critique of his work.

### Sartre and the Promethean Conception of Moral Autonomy

Chapter six discussed and criticised what was termed the Promethean conception of human society. This social Prometheanism also finds its expression at the level of the individual "subject". The early work of Jean-Paul Sartre provides the most obvious target for such criticism. Sartre explicitly defines himself as a humanist, yet I shall argue that this by no means associates him with all of the characteristics listed in chapter 2.<sup>27</sup> For example, Sartre certainly does not hold a Cartesian picture of the subject / object distinction. Nonetheless he does operate in his early work with a parallel dichotomy which, although based in a phenomenological epistemology, still retains an anthropocentric and individualistic bias. Sartre deconstructs the abstract humanist subject but retains a concept of the individual as the active centre and creator of values and the world. In his early philosophy at least Sartre invokes an individual Prometheanism which parallels the traditional Marxist and productivist Prometheanism. I shall, however, argue that *to some extent* the later philosophy of his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* overcomes this anthropocentrism.

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<sup>27</sup> Which in turn exemplifies the importance of not running together all the aspects of humanism as if they formed part of a unified and essentially identical platform.

Sartre's humanist and existentialist philosophy is exemplified in the following quotation from his *Existentialism and Humanism*.

“Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. And this is what people call its “subjectivity,” using the word as a reproach against us. But what do we mean to say by this, but that man primarily exists - that man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so. Man is indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life, instead of being a kind of moss, or a fungus or a cauliflower. Before that projection of the self nothing exists; not even in the heaven of intelligence;....”<sup>28</sup>

This statement emphasises the notion of the autonomous self-reflective individual, that ‘subjective life’ which Sartre regards as so radically distinct from the other ‘objects’ of living nature, from fungi or mosses; a subject who through her phenomenological experience may construct an ontology of the world but who always retains an ability to distance herself from current phenomenal experience, to reflexively bring her own subjectivity to bear on that world and determine her own future.

Following Husserl, Sartre's subject is a phenomenological consciousness - a consciousness which is always intentional i.e. consciousness of something. Phenomena are the foundations of Sartre's epistemology, they are the irreducible basis of thought comprising a dialectical unity of object and subject, a composite achieved through an active involvement in the

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<sup>28</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre *Existentialism and Humanism* p. 28. It's French title is even more explicit in revealing Sartre's allegiances - “Existentialism is a Humanism”.

world, i.e. individual *praxis*. This consciousness is transparent to itself, i.e. capable of self-reflection, just as the Cartesian thinker is able to establish her presence by reflecting upon her own thoughts. Sartre, however, wishes to avoid the subjective idealism of Descartes and claims that there is no special immaterial ingredient, or soul, which can be identified with the subject; no lingering presence behind the individual's phenomenological experiences. Whilst utilising Husserl's phenomenological epistemology which sees the world and the self as co-constituted through practical activity, Sartre rejects entirely Husserl's concept of the pure self as a phenomenological equivalent of Descartes homunculus-like subject.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless Sartre's wish to defend an absolute freedom for the human individual necessitates that he posit a special role for the subject - a particular form of being not found in the rest of the natural world. He develops a distinction between "Being-for-Itself" and "Being-in-Itself". The former is the kind of conscious awareness attainable by humans, the latter is the unconscious and deterministic existence of non-human nature. Thus despite his critique of the Cartesian problematic he retains one of the primary humanist distinctions, that of an absolute gulf between humanity and nature. He simply redefines this distinction at a different level, that of consciousness rather than substance.<sup>30</sup> In this sense at least Sartre is guilty of recapitulating

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<sup>29</sup> See Jean-Paul Sartre *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*.

<sup>30</sup> David E. Cooper holds that "The Existentialist' dissolves [humanist] dichotomies between subject and object. He argues that Sartre's own distinctions are not dualistic as "...the term dualism is generally, and reasonably restricted to distinctions between kinds of entities that are alleged to exist in logical independence from each other." *Existentialism* p. 79. Even if we grant, on these terms, that Sartre's distinction between the *pour-soi* and the *en-soi* is not *strictly speaking* a substance dualism it nonetheless represents an absolute and a-historical dichotomy which in the terms outlined in chapter 2 is also indubitably humanist.

this fundamental humanist dichotomy.

“For Sartre and Weber the world is constituted by two dimensions of being: matter and consciousness, or things and human values. The world of things is externally determined by causal laws. The world of consciousness, on the other hand, resists such determination.”<sup>31</sup>

In Sartre's early philosophy this conscious subject maintains an *absolute* freedom of choice entirely unconstrained by external circumstance. The ability to choose freely is rooted in the ability of consciousness to experience absence - to desire what is not present. This ability to generate its own alternatives is necessary if it is to consider future goals, actions or values which are at all different from those determined by the current situation. The special feature of consciousness is its inherent quality of producing its own desires, in its ability to exist for-itself (*pour-soi*). According to Sartre the non-human world has no such ability - it exists entirely in-itself (*en-soi*).

“One must be conscious in order to choose, and one must choose in order to be conscious. Choice and consciousness are one and the same thing.”<sup>32</sup>

Sartre thinks that those who deny this essential human attribute - who pretend that their actions are predetermined by circumstances outside of

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<sup>31</sup> Gila J. Hayim *The Existential Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre *Being and Nothingness* p. 462. However Sartre's concept of consciousness includes what might be termed preconscious decisions, ones which are not brought before the tribunal of the reflective mind but which are conscious in a more tenuous sense of belonging to us, i.e. it is we and no one else who acts in a particular case. This emphasis on consciousness is thus different from distinctions made by philosophers in the analytic tradition, like Harry Frankfurt, who discuss human autonomy in terms of first and second order desires. (See below) See Richard Bernstein's discussion of Being-for-Itself in *Praxis and Action* pp. 134- 148 especially p. 141.

their own control - are guilty of "bad faith" in trying to exist as "things" rather than humans.<sup>33</sup> We cannot escape the necessity to choose. Although the options open to us are in some sense limited by nature or historical and social circumstance, which are a part of the 'facticity' of our situation, our *choice itself* is undetermined by externalities, it is always our own.<sup>34</sup> Not only is our ability to choose unaffected by external nature, but Sartre also categorically denies the existence of any fixed human nature, the individual's existence always precedes her essence. There is thus no sense in which the individual's autonomy is compromised by either an external or an internal nature.

"...man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world - and defines himself afterwards...he will be what he makes of

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<sup>33</sup> Sartre is also critical of what he refers to as the "spirit of seriousness". One aspect of this is that those concerned refuse to take responsibility for their values - a pertinent example of this might be those philosophers who see values as absolute properties of certain types of objects e.g. the kind of essentialist humanist arguments for intrinsic values in nature criticised in chapter 2. Another example is the positivist attitude still so current in the natural sciences which regards its theories as value-free.

<sup>34</sup> Although I cannot hope to do justice here to the complexities of existentialist thought in general or give a detailed exposition of Sartre's philosophy, I support the widely held view that there is a radical change of emphasis between the earlier *Being and Nothingness* and the later *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. The later work is much more influenced by Marxism and takes greater account of the material circumstances in which the individual finds herself. (See below.) Hayim has expressed this difference as follows. "In *Being and Nothingness* freedom is a radical condition resting on the ontological status of man *qua* man. In the *Critique*, the concept of freedom appears as an historical condition, qualified by the constrictions of human affiliation, social obligation, material scarcity and so forth. But, common to both usages is the human prerogative for transcendence, that is, for the surpassing of the given." Hayim *op. cit.*, n. 31 above, p. 16. I would argue that the difference is even more pronounced than Hayim suggests and that, in some respects at least, Sartre's later philosophy actually comes close to renouncing this claim to transcendence.

Leo Fretz argues that there is also a change within Sartre's early works between the impersonal *cogito* of the *Transcendence of the Ego* and the personal consciousness of *Being and Nothingness*. See "Individuality in Sartre's Philosophy".

himself."<sup>35</sup>

For Sartre, the human individual is, in all cases, free either to transcend or to passively accept the constraints imposed upon her by the ideology of her own culture and history; that ideology formed as a result of past decisions by other individuals. Her "form of life" is necessarily relative to that culture, but whatever she might do she cannot escape the fact that it was her and her alone who made those decisions which circumscribe her relations to that culture. The force of circumstances does not absolve one of the need to choose, for one can always transcend those circumstances. All action, even that of conforming to societal norms, is viewed as the result of a choice. For this reason, conformity itself cannot be decried on moral grounds, only the pretence to have no choice but conformity. The grounds for claiming humanity's difference from a cauliflower do not lie, as the Enlightenment philosophers would have it, in a universal human nature or a transcendent rationality, but only in the very fact that the human has an inborn ability to make self-reflective choices, an ability that is part and parcel of what it is to exist humanly. Of course, put like this it seems that Sartre is actually engaged in an intellectual sleight of hand for, in reality, he claims that in all places and at all times human subjects can be defined by this very ability to choose. If this is the case then, despite his protestations to the contrary, Sartre simply introduces a new and different conception of human nature rather than rejecting all such claims. To be sure, this new conception is of little use in providing that set of normative and objective moral values which many Enlightenment philosophers had hoped to find. Indeed it gives no

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<sup>35</sup> Sartre *op. cit.*, n. 28 above, p. 28. This work is widely regarded as a rather oversimplified account of Sartre's early position and so despite its explicitly humanist thesis is used here only in conjunction with other material.

specific moral guidance at all except insofar as it proclaims the ultimate inescapability of individual choice. But this moral subjectivism is precisely where its humanism lies, for in Sartre's early philosophy the structures of language are held to make no difference to the subject's ability to choose. One cannot make a rational choice or a good choice: the only virtue lies in exercising one's ability to choose and here we have no freedom at all - since to decide not to choose is itself a form of choice.

There are obviously several aspects of Sartre's arguments which are of direct relevance to the debate over humanism and anti-humanism. First, as we have seen, Sartre's theoretical position is emphatic about the existence of an essential dividing line between humanity and nature, despite the fact that he explicitly criticises the view that there is an essential human nature and the subject / object divide of classical humanism. The second aspect is Sartre's conception of the autonomous subject, his Promethean view of human *praxis*. Sartre continually refers to the human individual as the "author" of his situation, who "defines himself" and "propels himself" forwards.

The Sartrean subject is a series of intentional phenomena which synthesise a unified but mythical identity through directing her intentions inwards, i.e. through developing a second order intentionality. But it is surely wrong to move from this conception to the claim that this bundle of phenomena, united by acts of reflexivity, can simply *create* itself and the phenomenal world. Self-reflexivity is not the same as self-creation, and it is precisely this self-creation that Sartre's radical autonomy requires. Even if we agree that reflexivity is an active process through which we can change our

understanding of ourselves and the world, a process which would include changing our values, this does not mean that it is the *only* source of such change.

We might agree that the practical activity which the human individual engages in influences her experience of the world and modifies her own relations to that world. But Sartre, having made the *epistemological* decision to bracket the existence of the world and subject and concentrate upon their phenomenology, seems to make the mistake of making phenomena in general and human consciousness in particular the only *ontological* source of meaningful activity. That is, he is guilty of eliding the view that we can *know* nothing of the self and the world in isolation from each other into the claim that this co-constituted knowledge is a (the) self-contained source of dialectical activity. This is both anthropocentric and mistaken, in precisely the same way that Promethean Marxism was mistaken.<sup>36</sup> Sartre's anthropocentric humanism means that the "For-itself" is seen as the mysterious origin of everything that appears significant to consciousness.

From the point of view of the humanism / anti-humanism debate (which in this case is also the structure / agency debate) the most important question is how far the existential subject can make choices that are undetermined by its environment and past history. In Sartre's terms this revolves around the 'facticity' of the person: "...the For-itself's necessary connection with the In-

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<sup>36</sup> The similarity between the Promethean Marxism identified in the last chapter and Existentialist claims is exemplified in the following quotation from Jose Ortega y Gasset.

"What we call nature ...or the world is *essentially nothing but* a conjunction of favourable and adverse conditions encountered by man ...[it] *has no being ... independent of us* ; it *consists exclusively* in presenting facilities and difficulties... in respect of our aspirations." Quoted in Cooper *op. cit.*, n. 32 above, p. 66.

Itself, hence with the world and its own past.”<sup>37</sup> How far is the person able to produce her own desires, rather than simply consuming and then reproducing those of her surrounding social environment?

Sartre holds that people are necessarily completely autonomous. This seems to suggest that each individual starts the human project anew, choosing from unlimited options. Given the many factors which might seem to affect our potential actions, the biological, the social, and our own past decisions, this seems a very incautious statement indeed. But one should always hold in mind that this does not refer to an ability to do as we wish but rather to an ability to make choices. So, for example, we are not free to change past events in our lives, but we are never (until death) simply the in-itself of this past - we can decide to give this past whatever meanings we wish and to completely change our direction in life. According to Sartre our situation never compromises our inherent freedom to choose.

However, when Sartre makes claims such as that the French people “...were never more free than under the Nazi occupation”<sup>38</sup> one begins to doubt the applicability of his theories to real life. As Soper points out “..Sartre’s theory of the absoluteness of human freedom obliterates ordinary distinctions between “voluntary” and “involuntary” action and therefore belittles the status of those limited but concrete freedoms which we aspire to protect and enlarge.”<sup>39</sup>

Sartre is also ultimately unsuccessful in his attempt to move the debate

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<sup>37</sup> Sartre *op. cit.*, n. 32 above, p. 631.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Rene Lafarge *Jean-Paul Satre: His Philosophy* p. 79.

<sup>39</sup> Kate Soper *Humanism and Anti-humanism* p. 67.

about human consciousness to a different plane from that of Descartes; that is, he retains a humanist conception of a Promethean consciousness occupying a privileged position outside of material constraints. Obviously, Sartre does not accept Descartes radical divide between subject and object; he holds that “[a]ll consciousness is consciousness of something and at the same time self-consciousness.”<sup>40</sup> However, insofar as he wants to allow self-consciousness the freedom to create whatever meaning it wishes from the phenomenology of consciousness (which to avoid idealism has to be a dialectical relation between the human and non-human aspects of the world, not simply the For-itself imposing taxonomies and values willy-nilly) self-conscious choice exists in a radical void. That is insofar as he is successful in arguing for radical free choice, the Sartrean self is no longer a unity but becomes divided into one aspect which reflects upon its own phenomenology and possibilities - the For-itself - and one which is an indivisible amalgam of the material world as apprehended through material individual *praxis*. The only uniting factor to these aspects of consciousness is the act of reflection itself and this relies upon the transparency of thought and feeling to the reflecting subject. In other words Sartre can only be successful in retaining the subject’s moral autonomy to the degree that he rejects the implications of his phenomenological epistemology and leaves his self-conscious self, the process of free choice, floating, unconnected to the world, in much the same manner as the Cartesian soul.

Charles Taylor points to a further, but related, problem which he believes Sartre faces: that “....moral dilemmas become inconceivable on the theory of

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<sup>40</sup> Hazel E. Barnes ‘Sartre’s Ontology’ p. 19.

radical choice.”<sup>41</sup>

“Either we take seriously the kinds of consideration that weigh in our decisions, and then we are forced to recognise that these are for the most part evaluations which do not issue from radical choice; or else we try at all costs to keep our radical choice independent of any such considerations ....but then it becomes a simple expression of preference, and if we go further and try to make it independent even of our *de facto* preferences, then we fall into a criteria-less trap which cannot properly be described as a choice at all.”<sup>42</sup>

Insofar as Taylor sees ethical values as tied to linguistic concepts which are always communally inspired, he rejects those accounts which see values as the products of an entirely personal quest. The individual is orientated within a framework of conceptual dichotomies which exist prior to, facilitate and place constraints upon her evaluations. She cannot simply create her ethical values. Taylor thus places himself in opposition to those Existential conceptions of ethics which emphasise the radical freedom of individual choice. Taylor holds that we must, as humans, engage in strong evaluations and that these form the background against which we posit our own identities. As human individuals we orientate our conception of our selves by appealing to a preexisting communally formulated language of evaluation. A morally autonomous being, such as Sartre posits, would be a contradiction in terms since to have a moral identity is necessary to conceive of oneself as already in the moral environment of a particular society. In this respect Taylor’s criticism can be seen as a more limited version of the

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<sup>41</sup> Charles Taylor ‘What is Human Agency’ p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, p. 33.

critique of individual Prometheanism - a version limited to the content of a moral *vocabulary* rather than one which includes other aspects of ideological influences. It is to Taylor and his fellow communitarian thinkers that we now turn.

### The Communitarian Critique of the Impoverished Self

The current debate between communitarian and liberal conceptions of morality centres around the autonomy of the human subject.<sup>43</sup> I shall first outline the differences between liberal and communitarian perspectives with regard to their different conception of the subject and ethical values. Communitarian critics of ethical liberalism and its attendant conception of moral autonomy include such figures as Michael Walzer, Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. There are distinct differences between the approaches of these thinkers, but I shall not enter into these differences here.<sup>44</sup> I shall focus for current purposes upon the work of Charles Taylor, who has made the possibility of autonomy central to his thesis, and make only passing reference to others. Using Taylor as an example, I attempt to show how his communitarian thought frequently relies upon the very same subject / object and fact / value distinctions found in humanist liberalism. That is, I claim that Taylor is actually tied very closely to a humanist problematic which in many respects he successfully rejects. In the subsequent section I return to Sartre's later attempts to avoid his earlier

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<sup>43</sup> The themes of rationality and the transparency of thought identified above as central to the humanist conception of the subject also have important roles to play, but see below.

<sup>44</sup> But see Stephen Mulhall & Adam Swift *Liberals and Communitarians*. See also Michael Sandel *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* and MacIntyre *op. cit.*, n. 13 above.

Promethean humanism.<sup>45</sup>

The main target of all of these communitarian thinkers has been the liberal (and humanist) conception of the self relied upon by John Rawls in his influential *A Theory of Justice*.<sup>46</sup> In Seyla Benhabib's words,

“The Communitarians criticise the epistemic standpoint of the Enlightenment on the grounds that this standpoint and liberal political philosophies which proceed from it presuppose an incoherent and impoverished conception of the human self.”<sup>47</sup>

Based upon the features which Mulhall and Swift identify in Sandel's critique of the liberal individual we can extract three aspects of the communitarian critique; 'liberalism's' impoverished conception of the self, its atomism and its reduction of moral values to personal preferences.<sup>48</sup>

First, Sandel argues that Rawls' account of the individual excludes many of the features which we view as constitutive of individuality and is thus both impoverished and unrealistic. Most importantly, it does not recognise the constitutive role values play as inherent characteristics of a person's individuality. In providing an account of the just society Rawls imagines a scenario where humans meet behind a “veil of ignorance” to decide the form

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<sup>45</sup> That Sartre's rejection of Cartesian dualism in favour of a phenomenological epistemology is not, by itself, enough to overcome his humanist tendencies emphasises the importance of not having a naive and essentialist definition of “humanism” as a set of features which are always present together.

<sup>46</sup> John Rawls *A Theory of Justice*.

<sup>47</sup> Seyla Benhabib *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* p. 71.

<sup>48</sup> Mulhall & Swift *op. cit.* , n. 44 above, p. 4.

of a future society of which they will be part. The parties concerned know almost nothing about themselves, their future stations in that society or their abilities, thus they can have no personal bias about what form the society should take. The individuals concerned are all presumed to be self-interested and rational. "In choosing between principles each tries as best he can to advance his interests."<sup>49</sup> But the very fact that all factors which might introduce bias have been removed in effect makes them all identical. Given this identity it is hardly surprising that they are able to come to an agreement about the just society. As Rawls states "...it is clear that since the differences amongst parties are unknown to them, and everyone is equally rational and similarly situated, each is convinced by the same arguments."<sup>50</sup> In other words what started as a theory for expressing intuitions about social justice between individuals, ends by appealing to a subjective rationality which can only operate insofar as it suppresses the very factors which make people different subjects.

The Rawlsian individual in its impersonal absoluteness has been stripped of the very features which allow us to recognise humans as individuals, for example, their disparate conceptions of "the good". Rawls assumes that any system of morals in a pluralistic society must be organised so that it remains neutral towards such competing conceptions. In contrast communitarians argue that to assume that people can simply put to one side these differences is to ignore the subject matter of morality.

The debate between communitarians and deontological liberals like Rawls is

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<sup>49</sup> Rawls *op. cit.*, n. 45 above, p. 142.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p. 139.

frequently characterised as one about the priority of “the right” or “the good”. Rawls’ claim that a system of justice needs to abstain from sanctioning any particular conception of the good leads him to ground his system of justice in terms of the rights which would be allocated *by and to* people independently of such conceptions. This supposedly neutral stance thus depends upon a very thin concept of the human self, one which is precisely that of humanism, i.e. an autonomous, rational, self-interested subject. Communitarians thus claim that, far from being neutral, such a conception denies the constitutive role of society in producing a “subject” which we would actually recognise as a human being. Amongst the vital ingredients missing is the community’s role in the production of ethical values. These socially derived values are, the communitarian claims, necessary for the person to engage in any form of debate about justice. Hence the good is seen as prior to the right. So far as is possible I shall avoid couching the debate in terms of the right and the good because, as Benhabib points out, there is no *necessary* link between holding a deontological position and one’s conception of the self. For example Jurgen Habermas could be classified as a deontologist, but he certainly does not share the liberal’s concept of moral autonomy.<sup>51</sup> I shall therefore restrict my analysis to the implications of the debate for the production and reproduction of values in the wider terms of humanism and anti-humanism.

This leads us to the second communitarian claim, namely, as the above account might suggest, that Rawls is tied to an “asocial individualism”, i.e. the subject is treated as a fundamental given logically prior to her immersion in society rather than a product of that immersion. Third, and closely tied to

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<sup>51</sup> Seyla Benhabib *op. cit.*, n. 47 above, pp. 72 -73.

these two previous points, communitarians like Taylor claim that liberal individualism provides no adequate grounds for distinguishing between moral values and personal preferences. That is, the liberal comes to see all values as subjective in the sense that they are regarded as the expression of subjective desires.

These three features are obviously very closely aligned with what critical theorists have termed subjective or instrumental rationality. (See chapter 1.) There are strong similarities between the critical theorists' account of modern society and communitarians' critique of liberalism in morals. Both reject the liberal humanist subject and her absolute moral autonomy and both see society and the individual as co-constitutive.

“Communitarianism and contemporary critical social theory share some fundamental epistemological principles and political views. The rejection of a-historical and atomistic conceptions of self and society is common to both, as is the critique of the loss of public spiritedness and participatory politics in contemporary society.”<sup>52</sup>

There are also links between communitarians and certain environmentalist theses. Alasdair MacIntyre, in particular, shares a nostalgia for the valuational certainties of pre-modern societies, based in relatively stable and

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 70. As we saw in chapter 1 the concept of the autonomous subject was seen by Weber and the Frankfurt School as one product of the impact of the process of “rationalisation”, the development in modern times of a “subjective rationality” which separated fact from value and consequently resulted in the disenchantment of the ‘objective’ world. The communitarian critique of this humanist notion of the morally autonomous individual goes some way towards deconstructing the subject / object dichotomy. Benhabib states, “[i]n their critique of modernity and liberalism communitarians and postmodernists unwittingly echo many of the themes of the first generation of Frankfurt School thinkers and especially the works of Adorno and Horkheimer...” *ibid.*, p. 69.

unchanging forms of life, with those environmentalists like Jim Cheney who see the much vaunted concept of “progress” as illusory. These parallels will be made explicit in the next chapter, but for the present one should note that both claim that the fragmentation which marks modern society has destroyed our sense of community and shared values.<sup>53</sup> Insofar as communitarians, critical theorists and deep ecologists criticise the humanist conception of the autonomous self and the reduction of all values to subjective values, they are all aligned with a theoretical anti-humanism.

Taylor and MacIntyre conceive of communities as unified by a shared ethical ethos or by a shared *telos*. This conception is, as I argue in the next chapter, too restrictive and potentially destructive of many of our currently held values. It belittles the many positive features of modern societies including their *relatively* tolerant attitudes toward those with different moral values.<sup>54</sup> We should recognise that communities need not be monolithic and need not require that their members share essential features or hold identical values, but need to recognise differences as well as similarities. A multiplicity of communities might co-exist nested one within another, each sharing a variety of aspects of their respective forms of life however these are constituted. Communities are not only found but might be built. They need not be restricted to the human but could include the non-human.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See chapter 7.

<sup>54</sup> Of course this tolerance is often only rhetorical rather than practical. However it is nonetheless important to recognise that different conceptions of the good do need to coexist.

<sup>55</sup> See chapter 9.

### Taylor, Ethics and Personal Preferences

In emphasising the importance of social and environmental structures in determining the subject and her values the anti-humanist should not be read as denying human effectivity or underestimating the importance of individuals' reflective choices upon their values. Rather, a sophisticated anti-humanism attempts to show the contingent nature of the debate between individualism and communitarianism. (The implications of this contingency are further explored in chapter 9.) The debate is not to be understood in terms of the triumph or defeat of individualism at the hands of anti-humanism. Rather, anti-humanism, properly understood, actively implies that such solutions are not possible in any *absolute* terms. I argue that the social (and environmental) formation must be understood as including the ability of humans to engage in critical thought, and to not simply reproduce prevalent ideology.

Thus one cannot simply ignore the existence of conscious self-reflection, of each individual's potentially unique role as a locus and proximate origin of discourse and action. But, this recognition must not lead either to the reification of these factors as essential features of human nature or to Promethean theories which come to see consciousness as a self-contained and autonomous process, a process which occurs entirely within a world of transparent thought.

Charles Taylor's import lies in his attempt to theoretically accommodate human agency within the wider structure of communally shared language and to determine the import of this structure for morality. However, as will

become obvious, I believe that he utilises philosophical distinctions which reinstate in a different way the categories of the autonomous *subject* and of *objective* values. These categories, despite their anthropological bent, retain the structure of the humanist problematic. Indeed, as we shall see, Taylor comes to delineate the moral sphere entirely in relation to these categories. In Taylor's case the moral sphere comes to attain 'objectivity' in its grounding in social taxonomies of value made explicit in shared linguistic concepts whilst the subject retains absolute autonomy in her personal preferences; those largely unconscious and unspoken dispositions which appeal to criteria no broader than her own feelings.

The following critique of Taylor's attempt to make an a-historical distinction between personal preferences and ethical values should be taken in the light of my broad agreement with the anti-humanist ethos of the communitarian project. My objection to such a distinction is two-fold. First, that it is arbitrary to the extent that the features which he recognises as characteristics of ethical valuation are frequently associated with personal preferences and vice-versa. There are, I claim, *no* features which will allow one to make such an *absolute* distinction. Second, that Taylor seems to be working with two distinct conceptions of the human subject. To the extent that he allows the individual a complete autonomy where personal preferences are concerned he pictures the subject in terms of a humanist liberal individualism.<sup>56</sup> To the extent that, where ethics are concerned, the individual must be engaged with the language and values of a wider community he seems to hold a dialectical and anti-essentialist conception of

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<sup>56</sup>Will Kymlica 'Communitive Critics of Liberalism' has argued in a similar vein that, despite their claims, communitarians frequently do assume that the subject exists prior to her ends. She is not just constituted by her position in respect of the wider community.

the subject.

In a seminal paper Harry Frankfurt claimed that the distinguishing feature of human subjects was their possession of second order desires i.e. desires whose objects are themselves desires.

“In my view that one essential difference between persons and other creatures is to be found in the structure of a person’s will ... It seems to be particularly characteristic of humans, that they are able to form what I shall call “second order desires” ...”<sup>57</sup>

Frankfurt envisages humans as beings capable of self-reflection, possessing an inherent ability to evaluate their own desires. But can Frankfurt’s concept of the moral subject *as a self-reflexive autonomous agent* support a distinction between humanity and nature which it is intended to foster? What exactly is supposed to be so special about second order desires?

According to Frankfurt, desires of the first order are “...simply desires to do or not to do one thing or another.”<sup>58</sup> Having a second order desire is not equivalent to making decisions between competing desires. Frankfurt admits that animals other than humans frequently choose which of two competing desires to act upon, for example when deciding between different sources of nutrition. According to Frankfurt, when an animal chooses to do something it does so only as a result of an unreflective ordinal ranking of first order desires. The animal does not have the capability “...to want to have (or not to have) certain desires.”<sup>59</sup> This ability to evaluate our desires is supposedly part of the structure of the human mind and is what makes us

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<sup>57</sup> Harry Frankfurt 'Freedom of Will and the Concept of a Person' p. 6.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

free and other animals deterministic.<sup>60</sup> This general humanist position is integral to the work of a number of analytic philosophers such as Gerald Dworkin and including Charles Taylor, all of whom share the belief that only humans can be properly regarded as agents capable of moral evaluation.<sup>61</sup>

A question arise as to how could one fill out the concept of “second order desires” without assuming the very distinction between humans and animals that it is supposed to prove. This seems possible only if we count a choice as “second order” if, and only if, the subject makes a *conscious and reflective* decision. That is, the subject is expected, in the ‘transparency’ of her own thought, to bring to mind various alternative actions and desires, and reflect upon their relative merits and demerits before taking any particular course. Only when she does this is she acting as an autonomous human being. But then why is it that we believe that animals are incapable of this reflective autonomy? Frankfurt does not consider this question directly but it seems that he would provide an explanation in terms of animals lack of *conceptual* ability. Animals cannot conceptualise their desires *as desires* and hence cannot choose between them on ‘rational’ grounds. This in turn shows how Frankfurt’s position can be linked to other features commonly held to discriminate the human from the natural - namely the distinction between reason and feelings and the supposedly unique ability of humans to use language.

According to Donald Davidson “propositional attitudes”, amongst which one would include even first order *desires*, necessarily utilise language.

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<sup>60</sup> “It is only because a person has volitions of the second order that he is capable of both enjoying and of lacking freedom of the will.” *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>61</sup> Gerald Dworkin ‘The Concept of Autonomy’.

Davidson concludes that only creatures with language can be genuinely said to possess thoughts.<sup>62</sup> There is an implicit humanist communality between Davidson's and Frankfurt's positions. Even if they differ about where to draw the line between human and animal (i.e. whether genuine first order desires require language) they both agree that some form of conceptualisation is a distinguishing feature of human thought and, if Davidson is right, this requires a language. We shall return to the importance of the linguistic medium later, but for now we should note that, like Frankfurt, Taylor believes that the "...capacity to evaluate desires is bound up with our power of self-evaluation, which in turn is an *essential* feature of the mode of agency we recognise as human."<sup>63</sup> The possession of second-order desires is a necessary criterion of being human. However Taylor wishes to make a further distinction amongst second order desires, namely between those which are simply personal preferences and those which involve decisions on the grounds of the comparative worth of first order desires.

Taylor believes that the the ability to evaluate "the *worth* of different desires" is the important distinguishing feature of moral choice<sup>64</sup> and that this evaluation proceeds by relating desires to contrastive distinctions like "good" and "evil". Taylor points out that these contrastive dichotomies can only be utilised with reference to each other. One cannot have a concept of good without the corresponding concept of evil.<sup>65</sup> He refers to thoughts which

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<sup>62</sup>Donald Davidson *Truth and Interpretation* chapter 11.

<sup>63</sup>Charles Taylor 'What is Human Agency' p. 16. [My emphasis]

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>65</sup> The addition of new terms into a moral vocabulary effects on the meanings of the other terms with which it articulates, in Althusserian terms it alters the moral "problematic" as a whole.

involve these distinctions as “strong evaluations”. These are contrasted with “weak evaluations”, or personal preferences. I decide between first order desires on the grounds of personal preference when my decision depends simply on what I feel like doing. To use Taylor’s examples, I feel like taking a holiday either in the North or the South or choosing one kind of pastry over another. Thus although personal preferences can be second order desires they do not appeal to qualitative distinctions about the ‘worth’ of my motivations.

So, Taylor’s position requires that moral judgments refer to ‘concepts’ which are inevitably constructed through their membership of a common linguistic community. Moral judgments necessarily require an appeal to a supra-individual moral framework which brings with it its own presuppositions.<sup>66</sup> The use of such frameworks might serve to provide options for, and constraints on, the individual via an accepted and unquestioned ethical taxonomy. Taylor insists that “... doing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us; otherwise put, that the horizons within which we live our lives and which make sense of them have to include strong qualitative discriminations. Moreover, this is not just a contingently true psychological fact about human beings... Rather the claim is that living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency...”<sup>67</sup> This claim is, so far as morality is concerned, the linguistic parallel at the level of consciousness of Althusser’s views on the inescapable nature of ideology in *constituting* human subjects and hence is, in this sense at least, anti-humanist in its

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<sup>66</sup> This concept of working within a moral framework has been developed separately within the field of environmental ethics by Andrew Brennan *Thinking About Nature* who uses it to defend a sophisticated form of moral pluralism.

<sup>67</sup> Charles Taylor *Sources of the Self : The Making of Modern Identity* p. 27.

orientation. (But see below.)

The motivation behind Taylor's paper is a desire to exclude Utilitarianism from the realm of genuine ethical theories. Taylor, quite rightly points out that Utilitarianism hinges upon a thin conception of the autonomous individual (and is therefore associated with a form of subjective rationality, although Taylor does not use this term). However, if moral decisions cannot be made by completely autonomous beings, but of necessity appeal to communally derived criteria like "good" and "evil", then it would follow that Utilitarianism can have no role to play in evaluating moral decisions. Decisions about right or wrong would have to refer to communal norms.

Taylor's paper performs a vital function in exposing the inconsistencies of utilitarianism and the inadequacy of its conception of the human individual. One cannot, as the utilitarian claims, simply own one's own preferences and moral opinions. Utilitarianism exemplifies the extension of 'subjective' rationality into the moral sphere. It makes no appeal to inter-subjective criteria in its moral evaluations, it simply sums the entirely subjective preferences of those involved. As far as the utilitarian theorist is concerned people's desires are all their own, i.e. people are completely morally

autonomous.<sup>68</sup> But, as Taylor remarks “The complete utilitarian would be an impossibly shallow character ....”<sup>69</sup> Their desires are completely lacking in what Taylor refers to as “depth”.<sup>70</sup>

The irony is that the “depth” which a person seems to have would on Taylor’s view be directly proportional to the influence of extra-individual, communal factors which enter into her moral decisions. In other words the wider the person’s social influences the greater the depth that their moral evaluations will have. This seems counter-intuitive at least insofar as it privileges authors of moral decisions, not in terms of their greater autonomy, but in terms of the width of their moral vocabulary and the experiences which have gone to

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<sup>68</sup>However Taylor’s argument does seem weakened by the fact that even Utilitarians must appeal to at least one inter-subjective distinction, namely that between happiness and unhappiness. That is, in arguing for Utilitarianism as a theory one must appeal to a communal conception of the intrinsic “worth” of happiness. Taylor claims that utilitarians only use the distinction between happiness and unhappiness in an entirely subjective sense. But, any attempt by a person to make a decision on utilitarian grounds necessarily involves making generalisations about the happiness / unhappiness created for others by that action. The measurement of utility thus seems to require at least some sort of an inter-subjective standpoint from which to make comparisons between subjects. This might reinforce Taylor’s position on the necessity of inter-subjective criteria in making strong evaluations but does seem to suggest that on his grounds utilitarianism might have to be counted a moral theory precisely insofar as it fails to establish itself as a *pure* form of subjective rationality, i.e. it does recognise intrinsic goods.

The extension of Taylor’s critique might also have radical implications, some of which the utilitarian may envisage as anti-democratic. Anti-democratic in the sense that the individual is no longer to be regarded as an isolated individual with separate preferences which s/he owns. It is however necessary to remember that utilitarianism defines its own conception of democracy which, far from reflecting the will of the people, rather comes to simply reflect the dominant ideology of the Western capitalist social formation in its exclusion of all grounds other than personal preference from the scope of political debate.

<sup>69</sup> Charles Taylor ‘What is Human Agency’ p. 26.

<sup>70</sup> The use of the term “depth” by both Taylor and “*deep*ecologist” critics of utilitarianism hardly seems accidental despite there radically different approaches.

construct that vocabulary. The ideal moral agent is no longer the same as the ideal free-agent, for in a very real sense one precludes the other.<sup>71</sup>

This raises a crucial point. Debates about moral autonomy are usually carried on in terms of free will and determinism. (Indeed philosophers tend to read the whole structure / agency debate in social theory as just another form of the same tired old argument.) However, the position of social theory allows a wider perspective to emerge on the nature of this debate. We can now see that those who believe in complete moral autonomy do so at the cost of sacrificing all depth in the individual. This applies just as much to the moral absolutism of many rights-based theory's as to Utilitarianism. In both cases their arguments are justified on the basis of a conception of human nature which leaves the 'autonomous' individual with absolutely no features which we can even recognise as human. As Kupperman states

“Despite the opposition between Kantians and consequentialists, it is easy ...to get the picture of an essentially faceless ethical agent who is equipped by theory to make moral choices that lack psychological connection with either the agent's past or future.”<sup>72</sup>

The anti-humanist is ironically able to argue against utilitarianism and other forms of subjective rationality on the grounds that it is *their* conception of human nature which does not fit with our moral phenomenology. However,

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<sup>71</sup> This necessary tension in Taylor's work means that he has difficulty in accommodating both those moralities which advocate the authenticity of the individual as a locus of moral value and those which attempt to change current moral taxonomies. His latest book *The Ethics of Authenticity* can be seen as an (unsuccessful but stimulating) attempt to bridge this gulf.

This is not to say that Taylor is unaware of the historical influences which have gone into the construction of modern identity, and in his book *Sources of the Self* provides one of the clearest accounts of its genesis. But insofar as he holds that certain personal preferences are autonomous his work exemplifies the standard humanist account of this identity.

<sup>72</sup> J. Kupperman 'Character and Ethical Theory'.

Taylor's radical rebuttal of utilitarianism is compromised precisely to the extent that he shares many of utilitarianism's assumptions about human autonomy in the realm of personal preferences, i.e. the humanist conception of the person as the owner / occupier of a mind filled with private thoughts and values absolutely divorced from the wider community. Taylor retains the myth of subjective rationality where personal preferences are concerned. There thus remains a lacuna in his argument, insofar as he seems to think that personal preferences are simply existential 'givens' based upon strength of feeling, and remain contingent upon the whim of the individual.

*If Taylor means what he says when he claims that the ultimate criterion for deciding upon a certain course of action in weak evaluations is simply what one 'feels like' then two problems arise.*<sup>73</sup>

First, Taylor would argue that the contrastive dichotomies used in deciding upon holiday destinations or one's choice of cake are not categories of "worth"; one simply feels like one sort of cake over another. However, we actually do use all sorts of conceptual schemes as a part of making decisions which we count as personal preferences, some of which make explicit reference to qualitative distinctions of "worth". For example, we might speak of the differing qualities of Swiss versus British cake manufacturers, the nutritional value of cakes etc. One might then come to hold and express such 'personal' preferences in terms of inter-subjective and consciously recognised concepts. Even if one accepts that these *might* not always be questions of *moral* worth this still leaves Taylor begging the question. It seems tautological to appeal to a distinction between criteria of moral worth and non-moral criteria to support an argument which is supposed to justify

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<sup>73</sup> Taylor *op. cit.*, n. 69 above, p. 7.

such a distinction. If personal preferences too can be explained and justified in inter-subjective conceptual terms then, in the final analysis, Taylor simply seems to be saying that moral decisions are moral only because they appeal to moral rather than non-moral criteria. Whilst this may be true to some extent, it is trivially so, as it gives no account of the relation between moral and non-moral categories, nor does it justify any claim that categories of moral worth are somehow deeper and more constitutive of human communal existence than appeals to non-moral categories. Why should one only count criteria of worth as adding depth to the subject. Surely one could say the same for any communal criteria which come to be a constitutive feature of the subjects being, including those that influence her personal preferences. That is, Taylor has not provided us with criteria which can make categorical distinctions between personal preferences and moral choice.

Second, because of his reliance on the moral subject's conscious appropriation and utilisation of linguistically formulated concepts Taylor remains confined within a humanist problematic of transparent consciousness. Taylor reintroduces a distinction between moral reasons and personal feelings. But, if preferences can be understood as sometimes appealing to conceptual schemes and taxonomies then it is also true that Taylor equally disregards the unconscious acquisition and utilisation of moral feelings. He disregards the ideological aspects of morality's functioning. Moral values are not just transparently carried by conceptual categories but frequently operate beneath the surface of language. They are incorporated at the heart of the concrete individual through her interpellation in society. This interpellation is not simply a function of her conscious (theoretical) appraisal of her position, of her ability to understand concepts,

but as Althusser makes clear, incorporates her dialectical experience, her practical involvement in a number of levels of society eg. economic and political. (See chapter 3.)

It is open for someone to claim that the ultimate criterion for any moral action may simply be that it feels right in the same way that it feels right to go North this summer, i.e. as an example of a "gut feeling". For example, I might just feel that I should go on a march to save whales rather than fix my bicycle, without being able to give any reasons for it; or again, I just jump in to save the drowning man without prior consideration. If pressed about my concern for whales there will come a point where I shall simply have to say that "justification comes to an end", that I simply feel that a particular course of action is appropriate. These non-verbalised grounds, these gut feelings, should not be taken as an indication of the *personal* origins of a particular action or decision. If Althusser is right they, no less than explicit appeals to communal conceptions of worth, are the result of the co-constitution of that individual in an ideology which is fostered in and produced by particular social practices.

For example, suppose a group of hill-walkers comes upon a game-keeper about to shoot at an eagle. One of them runs forward in the immediacy of the event to stop the killing. She does not stop to consider the rights or wrongs of the situation in *any* conceptual framework. Her decision is not reflective, but her action was none the less moral and a unique feature of her presence. It seems that Taylor must deny this kind of non-reflective action any moral validity on these counts and explain it simply as the expression of a first order desire.

Therefore, I would claim, it is not possible to make the absolute distinction Taylor wishes between morality and personal preference: for both *can* appeal to external criteria involving conceptual frameworks, and both can be irreducibly constitutive of a persons being and non-verbalisable. Despite the attractions of Taylor's position, it is doubtful that the act of appealing to conceptual frameworks can be reified as an *essential and necessary* condition of *moral* agency. Indeed, as the above example illustrates, it is not at all clear that moral agency must always entail the use of concepts. Many, if not most, of our moral decisions appear to be spontaneous and taken without reflection. If Taylor means that we must bring concepts to bear in making moral decisions then it seems he must deny that these spontaneous actions are the acts of morally autonomous agents. He must limit his account to being a description of what is entailed in *reflecting on and theoretically articulating* certain moral acts. That Taylor's framework operates only at the *conceptual surface* severely limits the explanatory power of his thesis.

Taylor betrays his humanist leanings with his concern to explain autonomy in terms of reasons and concepts as items to be called upon by the already existing subject. The emphasis on conscious thought underestimates the complexity of how values are produced and actually come into play in moral actions. In Taylor's account of morality, concepts await the summons of the reflexive subject, and once called upon are brought to bear in the transparency of a linguistically framed consciousness. He thus places limitations on the moral agent such that she only truly exists in the process of reflection itself. This misconstrues the role conceptual frameworks play in

the internalisation of norms and the constitution of the subject. Here then is a major difference between Taylor's conceptual frameworks and Althusserian ideology: for the later operates at a level beneath the reflective surface of the conscious process, it is constitutive of the very heart of the subject and her recognition of herself as that subject.<sup>74</sup>

What Althusser has in mind is a more radical anti-humanism where there is no necessity to appeal to conceptual distinctions at every turn. He holds that part of what it is to be human is to have internalised the ideological content of these concepts to such an extent that the taxonomies and values they express become a constitutive part of our being. We act in certain ways that are informed by prevailing moral distinctions because these categories now form a part of being who we are. Taylor cannot follow this argument through because he wishes to retain an absolute distinction between moral decisions and personal preferences. It seems spurious to keep a space where no such 'internalisation' has taken place, a realm of purely personal preferences in which we remain a pure and unadulterated "self". Taylor produces a humanist compromise which, whilst allowing that conceptual frameworks can constitute our identity, strictly limits the horizons of this constitution to the ethical / aesthetic sphere, preserving a space for the subject as an autonomous consciousness in the field of personal choice. Whilst Taylor argues that language enables us to have a reflective consciousness (and make second order decisions), and understands that this use of language ties us inextricably to the community at large, he fails to see the subtler ideological operation of language and the non-linguistic structures which

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<sup>74</sup> Although Taylor perceives himself as engaged in a philosophical anthropology, he still retains crucial humanist distinctions, for example between the human and the natural sciences.

also go towards constituting our values. He fails to see that concepts operate at other levels than their face-value, that language is not a transparent medium but an integral part of our forms of life. He operates with a version of the reason / feeling dichotomy, which sees feelings as the realm of the pure subject.<sup>75</sup>

Taylor's concept of strong evaluation highlights the need for a background within which moral (and indeed non-moral) discourse takes place. Without these frameworks, which have a superficial affinity with the Althusserian conceptions of ideology, the individual reverts to the shallow and inhuman caricature necessitated by subjective rationality. These frameworks both place limitations upon and facilitate the individual's decisions and actions. However, Taylor's argument is stronger than he seems to realise. The critique of the autonomous moral agent of subjective rationality can be extended far wider than the moral sphere. Indeed, once we have rejected this model of the moral subject we can see that social influences might extend to all aspects of the constitution of the individual. Taylor cannot maintain an absolute distinction between weak and strong evaluators because, in many cases, one no more owns one's own desires in the former case than in the latter. They are all, to a degree, socially constituted.

How then are we to see the relationship between personal preferences and

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<sup>75</sup> This is not to say that one cannot gain a critical distance from the language of one's society, nor that one's values simply reproduce those of society. Any critical theory requires that there be some ability for the individual to stretch the boundaries of their language and culture, to step beyond, reflect back upon and question the views of society at large. However, there is a great difference between allowing that we have such an ability, which is always based in communal forms of life and our unique relations to them, and holding that there are certain areas, namely personal preference, in which we are completely autonomous.

ethical valuations? If these are not differently constituted realms of activity, have we not opened the door for the economist or utilitarian to reduce ethics to the calculus of subjective rationality? On the contrary, I would argue that ethical values and many personal preferences are constitutive of human individuals precisely in such a manner that they are not thought of as tradable. They constitute that person's relations to society at a deep level. They are ingrained in both the character and personality of the individual and inscribed in that person's conception of the social and environmental formation. The attempt to make all values tradable is exposed for what it is: not the application of a neutral system of rationality but the imposition of an impoverished conception of the self - a political act which is itself value laden and must be exposed as such. The degree to which we extend the private sphere of personal choice into the domain of the community is a matter to be decided by public debate, not by the application of the very "market forces" and "subjective rationalities" which need to be brought into question.<sup>76</sup>

We can now return to examine some of the claims made about radical choice in the existential philosophy of Satre utilising and extending Taylor's own critique of moral autonomy.

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<sup>76</sup> For example Mark Sagoff's distinction between my role as a consumer and my role as a citizen does not have to be defended as an a-historical and a-contextual truth. Rather it can be seen both as a description of the current placement of the dividing line between the public and the private spheres and as a defence of an ideal positioning of that divide.

This distinction does have widespread ramifications for the interpretation of other theories of environmental ethics. For example Bryan Norton specifically ties his defence of "weak anthropocentrism" to an ability to distinguish between personal preferences and ethical ideals. He states: "Nor need weak anthropocentrism collapse into strong anthropocentrism. It would do so if the dichotomy between preferences and ideals were indefensible. If all values can, ultimately, be interpreted as satisfactions of preferences, then ideals are simply human preferences." 'Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism' pp.131-148. Norton's defence of weak anthropocentrism is thus justified but not on any absolute criteria.

## Anti-humanism and Moral Values

Sartre's theory of radical choice is not incoherent as Taylor claims simply because "...it wants to maintain both strong evaluation and radical choice."<sup>77</sup> Rather, it is inadequate because it retains a metaphysical conception of the subject as something possessing only a superficial connection with the wider environment. I want to argue that the subject can only obtain its form and identity as a subject through relations with society and the wider environment which are genuinely co-constituting.

Thus we can, by utilising an Althusserian picture of ideology, extend Taylor's critique of Sartrean radical choice to all aspects of the individual, deconstructing that banal picture of the autonomous human subject created in subjective rationality. Whilst it is true that I cannot *choose* my evaluative moral criteria because they are, in a very real sense, a part of what it is to be me (though ironically they are also often beyond my control), this is also true of many weak evaluations. My personal preferences often turn out to be infected by advertising and the mass media. There is thus also a need for a critical attitude towards the concept of radical autonomy inherent in the concept of "personal preferences".

From the perspective of the structure / agency debate in social theory, the anti-humanism espoused here maintains that there is no such thing as absolute autonomy, that one can only gain a *relative* autonomy, an autonomy that can only be articulated relatively to the dominant social ideology, the manner in which other subjects are interpellated into the social structure.

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<sup>77</sup> Taylor *op. cit.*, n. 69 above, p. 32.

This is why the question of moral autonomy is, from a structural social and environmental perspective, identical to the question of 'productive autonomy' ( the question of the effectiveness and functioning of the ideological apparatus of the social formation, of the limits and prescriptions laid down by the structure and history of a given society). How far, given the universal presence of ideology and the depths of its operation, its inescapable participation even in the production of the individual herself, can one make any sense of a concept of individual action, thought, or choice? Can one still choose to defy convention, to overcome those values and taxonomies which predominate, to counter the moral hegemony of a whole social formation from the perspective of a single individual? To what extent are the values expressed by an individual in a community her own? Do we produce our own values or are we simply conduits necessary for the reproduction of values already current in the social formation? Do we speak our own values or does the social formation speak through us? What seems clear is that we do not *simply* reiterate the moral precepts and rules of our social formation. We live them with at least the illusion that we have a degree of autonomy. We think of ourselves as individuals making free choices. The question remains as to whether this apparent freedom is, as Althusser claims, an ideological illusion inculcated by the concrete individual's interpellation into a bourgeois social formation.

To dismiss Althusser's insights is to operate with a much diminished (and humanist) concept of ideology which is liable to lead to an underestimation of the complexity of the social situatedness of the individual. To be simply influenced by (for example) a particular political problematic with certain concepts is not the same as being ideologically constituted. Nor is the rote

learning of phrases and moral opinions enough to explain the transmission of moral values from person to person or generation to generation. To operate effectively these values have to be 'internalised', not as concepts stored away in part of the brain and brought out for special occasions, but as co-constituents of the subject herself. Only in this way can we also come to begin to understand how moral taxonomies can be reformulated to suit a variety of novel moral situations. (This point is central to the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu. See chapter 9.)

As we have seen, Althusser's structural Marxism does not have to imply that the person is nothing more than her role in society. To this degree at least humanism has a place in emphasising the importance of individual *praxis* within the socio-environmental formation. It is precisely here that the philosophy of the later Althusser converges with that of the later Sartre. The "anti-humanism" of the later Althusser is not so very different from the so called "humanism" of the later Sartre. In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* Sartre's humanist *pour-soi* is supplemented by the concept of the *homme historique*, a being embedded in and deeply influenced by her social formation. The forms of Sartre's explanation also change.

"Personal characteristics that Sartre would previously have represented as part of a freely chosen project are now interpreted as ineradicable *structures* of the infant's facticity..."<sup>78</sup>

Sartre rightly rejects the absolute determinism and reductionism of the individual implied in an extreme structuralism: his subjects could never *just*

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<sup>78</sup> Christina Howells 'Conclusion: Sartre and the Deconstruction of the Subject' p.339. [My emphasis]

be the Träger of society - they always have a degree of effectivity even in his later work. The common ground between the later Althusser and the later Sartre goes beyond, but is no doubt influenced by, their common Marxist inheritance. Whilst both reject the label of “structuralist”, Althusser’s debts in this direction are obvious, but Peter Caws may not be far wrong in suggesting that one might, in some respects, interpret the later Sartre as a structuralist.<sup>79</sup> Sartre’s later project also has similarities with aspects of communitarian thought. For example, Sartre comes to recognise the import of language, which is prior to our personal existence, in structuring our thoughts.

“Sartre recognises in Lacan’s view of language elements that are compatible with his own, in particular the idea that we speak the language of others, that our speech is “stolen” from us, that it is second-hand, that we are born into a language that precedes us, alienates us, and determines us in ways of which we are often unaware.”<sup>80</sup>

With the exception of the point about alienation, which somehow suggests that there might be a state of human being without recourse to language, this could be Taylor’s (and Althusser’s) point precisely.

Sartre himself recognises this change.

“So, in *Being and Nothingness*, what you might call “subjectivity” is not what it would be for me today: the little gap in an operation by which what has been internalized [sic] is reexternalized as an act. Today, in any case, the notions of “subjectivity” and “objectivity” seem to me

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<sup>79</sup>Peter Caws ‘Sartrean Structuralism?’.

<sup>80</sup>Howells *op. cit.*, n. 78 above, pp. 337-338.

entirely useless. ... The individual internalizes his social determinants: He internalises the relations of production, the family of his childhood, the historical past, contemporary institutions, then he reexternalizes all that in acts and choices that necessarily refer us to everything that has been internalized.”<sup>81</sup>

My point in emphasising this convergence between humanism and anti-humanism in what were originally distinct and antithetical theses is twofold. First, it avoids naive interpretations of the humanism / anti-humanism debate which see no common ground between them. A return to Althusserian structuralism need not entail the re-running of old debates about structure and agency. Second, this new found communality in Sartre and Althusser provides a possible anti-essentialist and anti-reductionist point of departure from which one can criticise subjective rationalities.<sup>82</sup>

Althusser's concept of ideology, as an unconscious system of reproduction of the social formation and as the crucial factor in the production of individuals and individuality, has the potential to play a crucial role. For values to be passed from one place within a social formation to another they need to be compatible in some way with their new environment. They must find themselves in a habitat which is congenial for their growth. Moral values must therefore connect with the form of life of those who are the recipients, and this form of life is not determined by social convention only but also

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<sup>81</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre 'Situations IX' quoted in Howells *ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>82</sup> One might also include here the work of Anthony Giddens who sees acts as situated practices. “[I]n social theory, the notions of action and structure *presuppose one another*, but ... recognition of this dependence, which is a dialectical relation, necessitates a reworking of both....” Giddens *op. cit.*, n. 8 above, p. 53.

depends on the practical relation of society to the natural environment.

Here we can see the real affinities between structural Marxism and Deep Ecology. Both are critical of atomistic humanist conceptions of the individual. They both agree that no understanding of the self is possible in isolation, that any analysis which omitted an account of the structural relations which both constrain and facilitate the individual's development would be incomplete. For traditional Marxism these structural relations are those imposed by society, and particularly by economy, for deep ecologists they are those imposed by the natural environment. Both explanations deny the possibility of a completely autonomous individual and criticise Promethean anthropocentrism.

“Human beings - any one of us; and our species as a whole are not all important, not the centre of the world. That is the one essential piece of information, the one great secret, offered by any encounter with the woods or the mountains or the ocean or any chunk of nature or patch of sky.”<sup>83</sup>

The individual is not a 'given' - she cannot be understood as an object which remains fundamentally and essentially unchanged in her encounters with the surrounding environment. Her individuality must be seen as an evolving process through time and space rather than a static characteristic always present or reached at a certain stage of maturity. That surrounding environment is, at least in part, constitutive of her individuality, but she remains a unique locus; a 'geographical' place in a unique set of relations with that environment. It also follows from this that there can be no universal

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<sup>83</sup> Bill McKibbin quoted in the *Guardian*.

and timeless criteria of what individuality consists in. Not only is the individual inevitably and intimately connected to her surrounding environment, whether ideological or physical, but any description of that individual will also be historically particular - dependent upon the ideological / theoretical background assumptions which are specific to the analyst's society. In this sense too, both Marxists and environmentalists point to the historical genesis of our current conception of the individual - the former placing it in the rise of industrial capitalism, the latter in industrialism and modernism in general. Both theoretical problematics see links between the form of life engaged in by Western society and the conceptual maps that they reproduce.<sup>84</sup>

The value of adapting Althusser's anti-humanist approach to social theory lies in its critique of this autonomous conception of the subject. In particular, his theory of ideology provides an alternative problematic capable of accounting for the values held by individuals entirely in terms of their social situation rather than any properties of the individuals themselves. These two positions, the humanist emphasis upon the subject's complete autonomy and the anti-humanist denial of any constitutive role for the individual, form the extreme poles of the agency / structure debate.

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<sup>84</sup> In reemphasising the "structural constitution" of the individual, both deep ecologists and structuralist Marxists believe that they are engaged in subverting current ideological assumptions. But it should be remembered that they are not alone in their rejection of individualism, for many of the conservative thinkers opposed to the enlightenment such as Edmund Burke also condemned a subjectivism which they saw as undermining traditional ethical values and ways of life. There is a danger, as many of Althusser's critics have pointed out, of the structuralist falling into a reactionary conservatism in which individual humans count for nothing in themselves.

Althusser fully understands the historical and social particularity of the humanist conception of the individual and the central role it has come to play in the philosophy, politics, economics and ethics of the modern world. Western humanist philosophy sets itself unnecessary problems because it inevitably tries to explain the world and our values wholly in terms of a subjective rationality and an essential human nature.

“...to rediscover the world of history on the basis of *principles* (the *homo oeconomicus* and his *political* and *philosophical* avatars) which, far from being principles of scientific explanation, were, on the contrary, merely a projection of its own *image of the world*, its own aspirations, its own *ideal* programme ( a world which would be reducible to its essence: the conscious will of individuals, their actions and their private undertakings...)” <sup>85</sup>

It is the ubiquitous presence of humanist *ideology* that makes it almost impossible to break from it, as according to Althusser the later Marx did.

“The earlier idealist (bourgeois) philosophy depended in all its domains and arguments (its ‘theory of knowledge’, its conception of history, its political economy, its ethics, its aesthetics, etc.) on a problematic of *human nature* (or the essence of man). For centuries, this problematic had been transparency itself, and no one had thought of questioning it even in its internal modifications.” <sup>86</sup>

According to Althusser these two aspects of humanist explanation, its essentialism and its category of the subject, are two sides of the same humanist coin. These indissociable postulates serve only to show the unity

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<sup>85</sup> Louis Althusser *For Marx* p. 126.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, p. 227.

of such apparently diverse traditions of thought as idealism and empiricism.

(See Chapter 2)

“These two postulates are complementary and indissociable. But, their existence and their unity presupposes a whole empiricist-idealist world outlook. If the essence of man is to be a universal attribute, it is essential that *concrete subjects* exist as absolute givens; this implies an *empiricism of the subject*. If these empirical individuals are to be men, it is essential that each carries in himself the whole human essence, if not in fact, at least in principle; this implies an *idealism of the essence*. So empiricism of the subject implies idealism of the essence and vice versa. This relation can be inverted into its ‘opposite’ - empiricism of the concept / idealism of the subject. But the inversion respects the basic structure of the problematic, which remains fixed.”<sup>87</sup>

For Althusser the debate between empiricism and idealism has (to borrow a phrase of Jonathan Porrit's) all the import of that conducted between Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Both are aspects of the same humanist problematic which is part and parcel of the last few hundred years of Western European social development. Once the particularity of this problematic is recognised, and the individual is seen not as an absolute given but as a social (and environmental) construction who is also in part self-constructing, then that ‘subject’ can no longer provide an objective or indubitable foundation for those political, ethical and economic theories which are at the heart of the despoilation of our planet.

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<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, p. 228.

Of course, it is necessary to go somewhat further than this, because we cannot simply replace one taxonomic dualism with another, i.e. the object /subject dichotomy with the structure/agency dichotomy. We cannot as the early Althusser seems to suggest simply throw out all those ideas and values which are so intimately associated with the concept of the autonomous individual, the subject of humanist philosophy and the moral agent, in favour of a structural explanation which reduces the person to a mere functional role. This question of structure and agency takes the form in Marxist circles of a debate about who makes history, the human individual or impersonal economic and social forces. This debate stretches back to the works of Marx himself who stated that:

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”<sup>88</sup>

Criticism of Althusser has frequently taken the form of comparing and contrasting various interpretations of Marx with often crude accounts of Althusser's own position. Not surprisingly this debate has remained internal to Marxist intellectual circles and proved entirely sterile. In focusing upon the textual exegesis of difficult passages in an attempt to establish orthodox interpretations, it failed to address the profound insights and possibilities opened by Althusser's structuralist and anti-humanist leaning. Althusser's extreme reductionism of the agent to Träger of society also runs the risk of

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<sup>88</sup> Karl Marx 'The Eighteenth Braumaire of Louis Bonaparte' p. 398.

falling into the very form of essentialist explanation he previously associated with humanism. For Althusser the debate between structure and agency is simply the difference between a scientific explanation and an ideological one. It is therefore not surprising that he makes little attempt to incorporate the phenomenological experience of "individuality" within his structural problematic. It might therefore seem that there is little possibility of reconciling the poles of the structure / agency debate. If all that human individuals are is a particular kind of interchangeable support for the relations and forces of production, then they would seem to be definable in terms of this essential functional role. To be human would not be to be rational, but to be that kind of creature whose being required her to be interpellated into certain economic and social rather than environmental niches. Placing the stress upon complete individual autonomy leads to the undermining of all ethical values other than those systems of utilitarianism associated with subjective rationality - a devaluation of the social in favour of consummating the temporary whims of the individuals concerned. In contrast, the early Althusser's stress upon structure leads to a situation whereby the individual becomes nothing other than her functional role in society, a person who can contribute nothing new to ethical debate but only reproduce current values. There are problems in taking too reductive a structuralist line. Althusser's account of the role of ideology in reproducing social formations is too static. On Althusser's account we simply reproduce the ideology that surrounds us and yet history and societies do not stand still. One might easily argue that of all the social formations known to us the one which changes its form most rapidly, the least stable of all, is that of Western industrialised capitalism. Even over the course of a single generation the very structure of our society has changed almost beyond recognition and our

moral values have changed too though at differing rates.

A philosophy of consciousness (like Taylor's and to a lesser extent Sartre's) simply leaves us back in the humanist problematic in which we started. What seems to be required is a form of "compatibilism"; a structural explanation which does not ignore our personal moral phenomenologies - one which, whilst admitting the full extent to which material realities and factors external to the individual's consciousness in the sense that it does not entirely deny that individual a role in the formulation of their own values. This new formulation must also account for the way in which theory and individual thought, though comprised of communal language, can *produce* novel values rather than simply *reproducing* those of the past. The anti-foundational aspects of Althusser and the later Wittgenstein's problematics can, I believe, help to formulate a theoretical perspective conducive to a reworked and environmentally sensitive anti-humanism. This is precisely the position which Bourdieu has attempted to occupy and forms the basis of chapter 9. First I shall examine some of the implications of this reformulated anti-humanism for theories of environmental ethics. In particular I shall examine the work of Jim Cheney, who, I shall claim, exemplifies a rather naive anti-humanism and mistakenly rejects much of the intellectual background which might inform his position on the spurious grounds that modernism as a whole is indelibly tainted with humanism.

## CHAPTER 8: JIM CHENEY: ENVIRONMENTAL POSTMODERNISM AND ANTI-HUMANISM.<sup>1</sup>

### Preliminary remarks on 'Postmodernism'

This thesis began by sketching a number of inter-related "humanist" dichotomies which, it was argued, might be seen as products of, and influences upon, the development of modern Western society. The concept of "subjective rationality", derived from the Frankfurt school via Weber, linked the creation of modern man [sic] - the abstract, autonomous, Promethean, self-interested subject of much humanist discourse - with an equally abstract concept of a supposedly 'neutral' reason.

Modernity may be understood as that social state which provides the context for our current experience and recent history. As practices proliferate and rates of social change increase communities are fragmented, their members' forms of life become increasingly disparate and common values more difficult to find. To plug this gap humanism produces a number of unifying myths, most especially those of the universal human subject and of a 'neutral' rationality, an instrument which these subjects may utilise *without prejudice* to organise society. For example, as we saw in the last chapter, humanism, faced with disparate conceptions of the good, utilises an apparently value-free notion of instrumental or subjective rationality which eschews any particular conception of the good in favour of a discourse founded in an

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the material included in this chapter will appear as 'Cheney and the Myth of Postmodernism'.

abstract and impoverished conception of human nature. Social fragmentation dictates that these humanist myths have to remain at a very general level to fulfil their unifying function yet their very abstraction means that they fail to recognise those important components of human life which are inextricably contextual.

In the previous chapter a communitarian critique of the liberal humanist subject informed by an amended version of Althusser's concept of ideology was used to theoretically undermine these humanist myths. Such features should not be seen a-historically: they are not the neutral foundations they claim to be, but the expressions of a particular humanist ideology produced in modern society. Of course, we are all enmeshed in humanist presuppositions. Even Althusser's anti-humanist theory could not make the complete break from past ideologies required of it. Indeed the attempt to epistemologically privilege one form of discourse (theory) as a 'true' interpretation of the social formation, a discourse uncontaminated by social ideology, could be interpreted as a form of scientistic humanism. This conception of science and epistemology was criticised in chapter 4 using the work of Michel Foucault, work which is regarded many as an exemplar of "postmodern" or "poststructuralist" critique.

The claim that modernity is coming to an end is now commonplace. Modern "theory" is to be replaced by "postmodern discourses". I have not the space here to provide a detailed exposition of the widely varying philosophies which are labelled "postmodern" (a label which I shall use for the sake of convenience, but which is actually rejected by many of those philosophers to

whom it is applied). I shall simply point out that postmodern practitioners are frequently aligned with theoretical anti-humanism in their criticisms of those features of humanism presented in chapter 1.<sup>2</sup> In particular, postmodernists proclaim the dissolution of the humanist subject, they reject the 'neutral' conception of rationality and representational and foundationalist epistemologies. This in turn implies that no one discursive field such as that of science can be epistemologically privileged. Thus, for example, the foundational role of the humanist subject is challenged by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who produce a psychology / philosophy in which the autonomous ego is dissolved and replaced by "desire" as an object of study.<sup>3</sup> Foucault too refuses to recognise the existence of an a-historical and essential subject, stating that

"My objective ... has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects."<sup>4</sup>

This interest in producing localised accounts of the production of those subjects (which are presumed by humanism to be identical in all important respects) points to a further feature frequently associated with postmodernism, namely its repudiation of "*totalising*" theories. Postmodernists frequently advocate local and contingent discourses as opposed to general and universal theories. The degree to which it is actually possible to avoid reference to some form of all encompassing Grand Theory

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<sup>2</sup> See Kate Soper *Humanism and Anti-Humanism passim*. The existence of common humanist enemies in no way implies that postmodernism offers a uniform philosophical framework with which to replace them.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari *Anti-Oedipus*.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault 'The Subject and Power' p. 208. See also Richard Rorty 'Moral Identity and Private Autonomy: The Case of Foucault'.

is a moot point. Certainly many avowed postmodernists seem on occasion to lapse into claims that are just as deterministic and general as their modern predecessors.<sup>5</sup> For example, Jean Baudrillard, the self styled doyen of postmodernism, comes close to espousing a wholesale technological determinism in his later work by placing so much emphasis upon the *machinery* of communication. The importance of postmodernism lies in its attempt to avoid the imposition of over-arching theoretical constraints upon thought. Thus Foucault, exhibiting an awareness of the ideological functioning of theory, avoids making a-historical generalisations or foundationalist and essentialist claims. I shall argue that whilst it is necessary to retain a healthy reflexivity about the limits imposed by particular theoretical frameworks one also needs to recognise theory's role in *facilitating* as well as *constraining* discourses. In this sense totalising discourses are not *necessarily* to be avoided at all costs, for so long as one is aware of their limitations they may nevertheless provide valuable insights into particular events. In any case as Frederick Jameson points out

“...everything significant about the disappearance of master narratives has itself to be couched in narrative form. Whether, as with Gödel's proof, one can demonstrate the logical impossibility of *any* internally self-coherent theory of the postmodern - an anti-foundationalism that really eschews all foundations altogether, a nonessentialism without the last shred of an essence in it - is a speculative question; its empirical answer is that none have so far appeared, all replicating within themselves a mimesis of their own title in the way in which they

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed Quentin Skinner claims that Foucault, Derrida *et al* can, ironically, all be seen in the light of *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* .

are parasitatory on another system (most often on modernism itself)..."<sup>6</sup>

That Postmodernism itself cannot always avoid dependence upon totalising theory does not diminish the importance of the reflexive awareness which the critique of humanism preaches.<sup>7</sup> However, Jameson's point about the 'parasitic' reliance of postmodernism upon the modern is important because postmodernism is frequently vaunted as a radical break with what has gone before. I shall argue that this is a serious mistake for, in distancing themselves from modernism, postmodernists risk repeating the errors of their predecessors: they impose a monolithic framework which misconstrues the relations between modern theoretical problematics by overlooking their important differences. Insofar as postmodernists arrogantly dismiss all that is deemed modern, they risk falling into a theoretical vacuum.<sup>8</sup> Anti-humanism is not the sole preserve of postmodernism.

This chapter focuses on Jim Cheney's recent attempt to provide a 'postmodern' account of the production of environmental values. I shall

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<sup>6</sup> Frederick Jameson *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* p. XII.

<sup>7</sup> What it does show is that one should retain a healthy scepticism about claims to hold a postmodern high ground and claims to have made a complete break with the past.

<sup>8</sup> Postmodernists are frequently very selective about the origins of their ideas. Thus, for example, postmodernism's rejection of the neutral conception of reason is frequently traced back to Nietzsche's criticisms of Western Philosophy and Heidegger's attacks upon metaphysics. "For Heidegger, the triumph of humanism and the project of a rational domination of nature and human beings is the culmination of a process of the "forgetting-of-Being" that began with Socrates and Plato." Steven Best & Douglas Kellner *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* p. 22. Yet, as we have seen, the attack on instrumental reason and the domination of nature also plays a central role in the analysis of the Frankfurt School and Weber.

argue that his account ultimately fails because, in his wish to argue for a specifically postmodern ethics, he neither recognises nor learns from the (in his terms) 'modern' precedents for his own thesis. In particular, he fails to recognise the common faults shared by his attempt to provide a naturally founded anti-humanism and the early structuralist's attempts to produce a socially founded anti-humanism.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the importance of the postmodern claim to radically break with modernism the nature of this break is often obscure. Thus, Best and Kellner criticise Jean Baudrillard because,

"..he never adequately describes or theorises the assumed absolute break between the modern and the postmodern eras and thus never develops a theory of postmodernity which adequately periodizes, characterises, or justifies claims concerning an alleged break or rupture within history. ... Baudrillard's theory tends to be abstract, one-sided, and blind to the large number of continuities between modernity and postmodernity..."<sup>10</sup>

I shall argue, along with Frederic Jameson and Anthony Giddens, that there is a more of a continuum between modernism and postmodernism than is frequently recognised. Indeed it might always be the case that,

"[r]ather than entering a period of postmodernity, we are moving into one in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalised and universalised than before."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless I am generally sympathetic to much of Cheney's anti-humanism.

<sup>10</sup> Best & Kellner *op. cit.*, n. 8 above, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Giddens *The Consequences of Modernity* p. 3.

I shall now turn to the work of Jim Cheney to further examine some of these points.

### Jim Cheney and the Myth of Postmodernism

That postmodernism should enter the world of environmental ethics was inevitable. The most explicit attempt to produce a postmodern environmental ethics to date is Jim Cheney's intricate, and sometimes obscure paper "Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as Bioregional Narrative". This paper raises important considerations, not least in its emphasis on context, or *place* in determining ethical values.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, as I shall argue, Cheney's paper is marred in certain respects which hamper his avowed aim of *recontextualising* ethical discourse.

I shall draw critical parallels between Cheney's work and various aspects of *modernism* which he has ignored or misrepresented. The three main areas of criticism are, first, that Cheney's history of ideas is appallingly crude. He amalgamates *all* past western philosophical traditions irrespective of their disparate backgrounds and complex interrelationships under the single heading, "modern". Following this, he posits a radical epistemological break between a deluded *modernism* defined, in terms reminiscent of my

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<sup>12</sup> Jim Cheney 'Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as Bioregional Narrative'. I concentrate almost entirely on this paper as an expression of Cheney's philosophy rather than his later 'The Neo-Stoicism of Radical Environmentalism', which is a more specific critique of certain Deep Ecological approaches.

characterisation of humanism,<sup>13</sup> as foundationalist, essentialist, colonising, and totalising, and a contextual *postmodernism*. Cheney seems unaware both of the complex genealogy of postmodernism and of those aspects of modern traditions which prefigure his own thesis. Second, Cheney's account of *primitive* peoples is both ethnocentric (though positively so) and inaccurate. Third, Cheney reduces context or *place* in the last instance to a concept of bioregionality. The individual becomes little more than a conduit for the promotion of values produced and grounded in the structural relations of nature. Thus he reinstates a privileged but anti-humanist foundationalism which should by his own definition make his philosophy modernist. This chapter develops these criticisms to suggest a less restricted contextual approach to environmental values.

Cheney's paper centres on an explicit thesis which divides human history into three epochs:

PRIMITIVE / MODERN / POSTMODERN

According to Cheney the change from the "primitive" to the "modern" period began "some nine or so millennia" ago with the appearance of agriculture, that from modern to "postmodern" only very recently. The dominant worldview of the whole of Western society and consequently all Western philosophy until now has been modern.<sup>14</sup> These historical epochs are associated with radical changes in social ethos. Postmodernism represents

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<sup>13</sup> See chapter 2

<sup>14</sup> Cheney 'Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as Bioregional Narrative' p. 122. Although Cheney names 7000 B.C. as the starting point of modernism his evidence is hardly supportive of this, for example, one author cited declares that a unified concept of the *self* developed between the composition of the Iliad and the Odyssey, i.e. some 6000 years later!

a long awaited return to a primitive understanding of our place in the world. Although historically and sociologically disparate, being separated by an age of modernist domination, these world-views are linked by a number of supposedly “shared affinities”:

“With the advent of postmodernism, contextualised discourse seems to emerge as our mother tongue; totalising, essentialising language emerges as the voice of the constructed subjective self, the voice of disassociated gnostic alienation.”<sup>15</sup>

If such a structural axis is represented as;

PRIMITIVE & POSTMODERN / MODERN

the homologous associations implicit in the above passage can be represented as following;

CONTEXTUAL DISCOURSE / TOTALISING DISCOURSE  
 FEMALE / MALE  
 NATURE / CULTURE  
 AT HOME / ALIENATED.

In all cases Cheney wishes to re-privilege the left hand side of the dichotomy. These qualitative divisions remain constant throughout Cheney's paper, and reinforce one another. Thus, the boundary between primitive and modern corresponds to a change from contextual discourse to a totalising discourse, from female influence in society to male control. It also marks the appearance of the individual subject as a fundamental *given* ( i.e. the “intuitive “obviousness” of the Cartesian privatised self” \* ) as well as the

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 120. I use Cheney's conception of myth throughout this chapter rather than introduce any of the many technical meanings the term has in anthropological literature or structuralist writings like Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*.

point at which language lost its rootedness in natural place.” Conversely postmodernism supposedly heralds a return to primitive homologies, especially contextual discourse.

According to Cheney, the primitive paradigms of contextual discourse are tribal mythologies. For this reason a mythological approach can “significantly inform postmodern thought on discourse”.<sup>18</sup> Myths are both fabulous stories with moral connotations and forms of “knowledge shaped by transformative intent.”<sup>19</sup> They are “historically sociologically and geographically shaped system[s] of reference that allow... us to order and thus comprehend perception and knowledge.”<sup>20</sup> Mythic narratives are the ‘primitive’ alternative to theory, they reflect upon, and are tied to, specific contexts. By contrast totalising discourses are forms of theory abstracted from place and context. Once divorced from the specific settings and practices which originally gave it meaning “language closes in on itself, becoming inbred.”<sup>21</sup> Totalising discourses tend to be universalising, acontextual and possess an internal autonomous logic or grammar which often claims to *represent* the world’s underlying structure. As far as Cheney is concerned the blame for environmental destruction lies firmly on the shoulders of totalising discourses and the societies which have developed them.

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 122. Barbara Bender ‘Prehistoric Developments in the American Midcontinent and in Brittany, France’ challenges the anthropological evidence for such a division into so-called *hot* and *cold* societies, those with history and those without, those that change and those that supposedly do not.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>20</sup> Paula Gunn Allen in Cheney *ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 126.

Cheney's paper is, at heart, a defence of mythical narrative and its concomitant associations against totalising discourse. He presents a myth of a past Golden Age with a tribal humanity at one with itself and nature, a present alienated society uprooted from the natural world and a future postmodern millennium.<sup>22</sup> Each stage is epitomised by the form of language it uses. In an attempt to bolster this position Cheney cites Heidegger's parallel distinction between *primordial* and *fallen* languages. *Fallen* obviously carries with it all the moral overtones he requires to disparage the discourse of modernism.

### The World and Language

Cheney deconstructs subjectivity and replaces it with a concept akin to Heidegger's "being-in-the-world". This deconstruction takes the form of rejecting the traditionally accepted division between the world and language. A frequently cited aspect of postmodernism is its refusal to accept any taxonomic divisions as absolute givens i.e., there are no *facts of the matter* upon which we can safely ground argument. Cheney takes this line in his discussion of the relationship between ontology and language.<sup>23</sup> He accurately portrays the general postmodern consensus that it is best to "practice ontological abstinence", to treat language without epistemological presuppositions about just how it relates to the world. The usually cited

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<sup>22</sup> Cheney's reference to male domination and intratribal violence in contemporary tribal societies as a "deterioration" exemplifies this Arcadian myth. In saying this, he implies that these tribes enjoyed a past in which these vices were absent.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 118-120.

postmodern alternatives are to treat language as “either a set of tools” or the “free creation of conscious persons and communities”.<sup>24</sup> Cheney is dissatisfied with these options and favours instead a “more useful ... feminist standpoint epistemology” as an alternative. Here

“[o]bjectivity is defined negatively in relation to those views which oppositional consciousness deconstructs. A voice is privileged to the extent that it is constructed from a position that enables it to spot distortions, mystifications, and colonising and totalising tendencies within other discourses.”<sup>25</sup>

This conception of objectivity, or rather *privilege*, is not a “claim to having access to the way things are” but a positional concept describing the world as it seems from a particular *place*. Cheney’s form of standpoint epistemology recognises that there is no wholly objective position from which we can determine how the world really is. At the same time it alters the role of the human subject. The voice we hear is not that of an atomistic individual separated from the surrounding environment. Rather the particular contexts within which a person has developed are supposed to speak through her.<sup>26</sup> At least, Cheney argues, this is what happens in primitive conditions where the surrounding environment is natural. Primordial language is the original contextualised language within which the “world speaks through us”. It results from a “meditative openness to the world”.<sup>27</sup> In primordial language

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 118. These are not the only “postmodern” options but it should be recognised that to treat language in these ways hardly eschews ontology or makes a radical break with modernism. Instead, these options resurrect elements of modern philosophical traditions. The former alternative is an example of pragmatism, the latter a type of anthropocentric idealism.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 119.

we are not trapped but 'free'. Primitive societies' residence in natural contexts ensures the contextuality of their discourse; "the world discloses itself by our being *rooted* in the world." [my emphasis]

In contrast, fallen (modernist) language, as the opposite structural pole, "uproots itself." Because it is abstract it becomes a vehicle for repressive power which can be exported from one context to another. Modern societies utilise their discourses in the colonisation of other areas and cultures. This causes environmental problems because the colonising language will almost certainly have developed in surroundings very different to its new circumstances. The practices it enjoins therefore disrupt the delicate balance which Cheney thinks was reached between primitive humanity and its natural environment.

The unhealthy tendency for discourses to become bases for oppressive power needs to be overcome. Cheney believes that simply deconstructing the current dominant paradigm is not enough, for as soon as one totalising discourse is overthrown, another takes on its oppressive role. How then can we avoid this need for constant recontextualisation?

"Is there any setting, any landscape, in which contextualising discourse is not constantly in danger of falling prey to the distortions of essentialising, totalising discourse? Perhaps not. A partial way out might be envisioned, however, if we expand the notion of a contextualising narrative of place so as to include nature - nature as one more player in the construction of community."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 128.

In other words Cheney tries to ground the notion of *place* in particular natural regions:

“[o]ur position, our *location*, is understood in the elaboration of relations in a non-essentialising narrative achieved through a grounding in the geography of our lives.”<sup>29</sup>

and again, “Bioregions provide a way of grounding narrative...”<sup>30</sup>

Klaus Eder identifies three alternatives to modernism - namely, postmodernism, traditionalism and primitivism. All of these alternatives “give up the idea of a society disembedded from its cultural tradition and from nature.”<sup>31</sup> Communitarians who, like Alasdair MacIntyre, bewail the loss of past communities with unified conceptions of “the good”, obviously fall into Eder’s category of “traditionalism”. “Primitivism” goes one stage further and claims that the direction of Western society has been radically and inherently wrong from the start. It also appeals to romantic conceptions of ‘primitive’ humanity’s rootedness in nature, a rootedness which assured a sustainable balance. In optimistic strands of postmodernism the Arcadian myth of a

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 128. The concept of bioregional foundationalism has a distinctly modernist ancestry. “The earth was one whole. But geographers also recognised the existence of regionality. Phenomena peculiar to a particular region were the causes of other equally regional phenomena - for example, climatic and environmental conditions influenced human society so that, as Kant wrote, “in the mountains, men are actively and continuously bold lovers of freedom and their homeland”. Malcolm Nicholson, ‘Alexander von Humboldt and the Geography of Vegetation’ p. 170. Certainly Cheney would abjure Kant’s simplistic causality of place determining personality and replace it with place “speaking through” people. But is this really any less naive? Both see *place* primarily as a bioregional concept. (This is not to disparage bioregionality *per se*, merely certain formulations of it.)

<sup>31</sup> Klaus Eder “The Rise of Counter-culture Movements Against Modernity: Nature as a New Field of Class Struggle” p. 27.

natural past is frequently replaced with the Utopian vision of a future society unconstrained by modernist dichotomies and a-historical conceptions of the subject and society. Pessimistic postmodernism provides a rather bleak prospect of a continual struggle to avoid the imposition of totalising discourses and ideologies.

Cheney obviously combines Eder's category of primitivism with an optimistic view of postmodernism. However, this raises a serious question which Cheney should, but does not, address on the compatibility of these two alternatives. If Frederick Jameson is right, when he claims that postmodernism arises from the expansion of the sphere of culture, then it would seem antithetical to the spirit of environmental conservation or primitivism.

“Postmodernism is what you have when the modernisation process is complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more fully human world than the older one, but one in which “culture” has become a veritable “second nature””.<sup>32</sup>

With these points in mind we can now turn a critical eye upon Cheney's “myth” of the postmodern and the primitive outlined above. There are a number of problems associated with the dissolution of the world / language barrier and its replacement with Cheney's dichotomy between narrative and totalising theory, perhaps the most obvious being the status of Cheney's own proposals. Cheney's taxonomy of discourses seems to conflate a number of concepts with very different meanings:

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<sup>32</sup> Frederick Jameson *op. cit.*, n. 6 above, p. 392.

TOTALISING / CONTEXTUAL  
 ESSENTIALIST / NON-ESSENTIALIST  
 COLONISING / IN PLACE  
 FOUNDATIONAL / NON-FOUNDATIONAL

The terms on the left hand side are all used almost synonymously for any form of modernist discourse and those on the right for what is postmodern and primitive. It is possible to argue that on all the above classifications Cheney's own discourse is not mythological but is itself a modern, abstract, theory. It is *foundationalist* insofar as it makes bioregions the necessary grounds for all properly contextual discourse. It is *colonising* to the extent that it appears in an international journal written in English, the most widespread colonial language. It is *essentialising* in its conception of all modernism as *inherently* divorced from place.<sup>33</sup> The reader is left wondering how Cheney can defend his monolithic treatment of modernism and his view of primitive peoples as uniformly environmentally friendly.

It would be difficult to enter a debate upon the nature of discourse in prehistoric societies. Evidence of whether such societies were contextual, as Cheney claims, or totalising is simply unavailable. By definition, prehistoric societies leave no discourse for posterity. Cheney does however consider there is some evidence for his claims; namely, that the discourse of contemporary "primitive" i.e. tribal peoples is contextual. I would argue that such a claim involves a parochialism reminiscent of Victorian anthropology.

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<sup>33</sup> It is also inconsistent, for how can Cheney repudiate totalising attempts to give one true picture of the world at the same time as endorsing Ridington's' remark that "the *true* history of these people [Beaver Indians] will have to be written in mythic language" [my emphasis] Robin Ridington "Fox and Chickadee" in Cheney *op. cit.*, n. 14 above, p. 121.

Other cultures are taken as anachronisms, survivals from the evolutionary past of our own society, rather than as separate peoples with their own cultural development. In effect, by privileging tribal world-views the Victorian assumption of modern superiority over the primitive is simply reversed. More importantly, by generalising about primary peoples and their language, Cheney is in danger of engaging in a kind of essentialist discourse himself. Instead of noting the vast cultural differences between tribal peoples, he simply buries these under the weight of a supposed *essential* similarity, namely their possession of contextual discourse!

What is the nature of contextual discourse? Cheney seems to confuse the context which produces a particular statement, its epistemological standpoint, with the content of that statement (in particular, whether or not it makes universal claims). He certainly cannot hold that primitive peoples do not make universal generalisations. Indeed the example Cheney offers of a contextual discourse, that of the Ainu, an indigenous people of Japan, actually claims that "everything is a Kamui [spirit] for the Ainu." This is an abstract statement which is just as universal as any claim a contemporary scientist might make. The Ainu may be contextual in the sense that they come from a particular locale and have a language specific to that context, but they are certainly not contextual in the sense that they do not use totalising generalisations i.e. that they do not have a framework whether 'theoretical' or 'mythical' which they can apply universally.

For Cheney, the totalising discourse of modernism is indelibly associated with the artificial, the unnatural and the colonising (that which is abstracted

and applied outside its own remit - a remit that in natural circumstances is bounded within a bio-geographical region). He states that “[t]he possibility of totalising, colonising discourse arises from the fact that concepts and theories can be abstracted from their paradigm settings and applied elsewhere.”<sup>34</sup> In contrast, it is simply not possible for contextual discourses to be applied out of *place*. “[T]hey are not thought of as exportable.”<sup>35</sup> In one way this makes perfect sense. The carrying of a language from that part of the world in which it developed to another might well cause serious problems. Just as a tropical plant *may* not be *at home* in a temperate climate and either does not flourish there or destroys indigenous flora, taxonomies designed for one place *may* be disruptive in other places.

However, there is no reason to suppose that, in general, a language of *place* (bio-geographically) need be environmentally friendly. Places are not static, environments change, and the development of language and place hand in hand may have been one which saw the destruction of many features of the original prehuman landscape. It *may* be that ‘stable’ ecological relationships tend to evolve when language, people and place have been associated for long periods. But to hold *a priori* that this is universally the case for all tribal cultures is surely unwarranted.

For Cheney totalisation is a consequence of language closing in on itself as it gets further from the natural world.<sup>36</sup> But, to operate at all language has to be closed in on itself to some degree. Language is a means of

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, see p. 120.

communication between different *places* (people, social groups etc.) in the world and so must be abstracted as a condition of its existence. It has to be a *relatively autonomous* aspect of the world. Cheney provides no anthropological evidence to show that tribal languages are less abstract than others. Rather, his argument merely shows that mythic narrative frequently incorporates metaphors of natural place. *All* languages are abstracted from place insofar as they *can* be carried by human vectors. Thus any kind of distinction that can be made between mythic narrative and modern theory on the grounds of abstraction seems likely to be one of degree rather than kind. (See chapter 9.) Cheney has to recognise that any language is potentially exportable and *could* become colonising.

Primitive taxonomies are not necessarily less rigid than modernist ones. Further, not all primitive peoples live statically in one geographical locale. Most have moved at some period and when they move they take their language with them. A language which is less general, and more tied to bioregional place, seems to have just as much potential to be disruptive as a more generalised language. One reason for this is that general languages might of necessity tend to be more flexible in their construction of boundaries than those that are tied to specific locales. The best sort of language to export, if any, will be one that is not essentialist, one that recognises the need to be flexible and fit language into place wherever it might end up. This anti-essentialist form of contextuality is not inevitably tied to residence in particular bioregional locales. In short it is not totalising discourses *per se* that are at fault but their a-contextual *application*.

Next, consider whether, as Cheney suggests, close contact with specific natural environments leads, via a meditative openness, to a mythical account of the relations between people and the world. It is at the level of this mythical narrative that moral norms are supposedly expressed and justified. The suspicion that abstract theory somehow creates a barrier between the world and our speaking of it is not only characteristic of some postmodernists but was common to many romantics. In general the romantic answer was to re-privilege the feeling side of a perceived dichotomy between reason and feeling. Attentiveness to primitive feelings was seen as an antidote to rationally imposed structures. So for example;

“like the other Romantics, Herder idolised early language and literature, from a time when these had still been direct expressions of inner feeling, not yet spoiled by the sophistication of reason and reflection.”<sup>37</sup>

Others saw the answer not in terms of inner feelings but in a meditative openness to nature which seems very close indeed to Cheney's and Heidegger's prescription. There can be few better examples to show the complexity of the modern traditions lumped together by Cheney than Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Here is a figure central to Enlightenment thought who was also a profound Romantic. His philosophy, like Cheney's, was inspired by an Arcadian myth of a prehistoric society rooted in nature. Meditative openness to nature also plays an important role in Rousseau's work. In *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* Rousseau provides a paradigm for letting the world speak through him:

‘The more sensitive the soul of the observer, the greater the ecstasy

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<sup>37</sup> Nicholas A. Rupke ‘Caves, Fossils and the History of the Earth’ p. 253.

aroused in him by this [natural] harmony. At such times his senses are possessed by a deep and delightful reverie, and in a state of blissful self-abandonment he loses himself in the immensity of this beautiful order, with which he feels himself at one. All individual objects escape him; he sees and feels nothing but the unity of all things. His ideas have to be restricted and his imagination limited by some particular circumstances for him to observe the separate parts of this universe which he was striving to embrace in its entirety.”<sup>38</sup>

This passage is particularly striking with its talk of self-abandonment, sensitivity and reverie. This could be read as a romantic version of the deconstruction of the self, the rejection of taxonomic boundaries and an openness to the world that allows it to speak through us.<sup>39</sup>

The links between Cheney and Rousseau go deeper still. Both have very

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<sup>38</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker* p. 108.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 110-111. It is a great shame that this work which was Rousseau's last seems to have been overlooked in the literature on environmental ethics. Amongst other things it contains beautifully expressed and witty passages on the distinction between the instrumental and intrinsic valuation of nature. “There is one further thing that helps to deter people of taste from taking an interest in the vegetable kingdom. This is the habit of considering plants only as a source of drugs and medicines ... No one imagines that the structure of plants could deserve any attention in its own right ... Linger in some meadow studying one by one all the flowers that adorn it, and people will take you for a herbalist and ask you for something to cure the itch in children, scab in men, or glanders in horses ... These medicinal associations ... tarnish the colour of the meadows and the brilliance of the flowers, they drain the woods of all freshness and make the green leaves and shade seem dull and disagreeable... It is no use seeking garlands for shepherdesses among the ingredients of an enema.” Rousseau was also aware of the dangers of such instrumental evaluation. “This attitude which always brings everything back to our material interest, causing us to seek in all things either profits or remedies, and which if we were always in good health would leave us indifferent to all the works of nature...” *ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

partial views on the advantages of primitive societies. Both over-estimate the quality of life and degree of freedom obtainable in such societies. The well-known depiction of the “noble savage” was itself influenced by the findings of contemporary explorers. For example, when Bougainville brought reports of Tahiti and its populace back to France it seemed as if a primitive Arcadia had been found. But Bougainville himself only had the most superficial acquaintance with the customs of the islanders. That Tahitian society had strong class and gender divisions and was adept at human sacrifice only emerged as contacts with the culture became more prolonged. Nor were Tahitians’ relations with the natural world all that the romantics might have envisaged. At the time of Tahiti’s ‘discovery’ by Europeans it had a massive population of approximately 200,000:

“A single bread-fruit tree was often owned by two or more families, who disputed each others’ rights of property over the branches. Infanticide was habitual.”<sup>40</sup>

Closeness to nature and the absence of theoretical orthodoxy is no guarantee of human freedom. Indeed the absence of theory may actually exclude the possibility of voicing heterodoxy, of questioning the ideological assumptions incorporated in that society’s world-views, ethical values etc.<sup>41</sup> (See chapter 9.)

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<sup>40</sup> Henry Adam *Tahiti* p. 6. Bougainville touched only the Eastern side of Tahiti at Hitiau in April 1768. Douglas C. Oliver *Ancient Tahitian Society* reports that violence was endemic and mass rape of those females on the losing side in battle a common occurrence. “Sometimes when a warrior felled his opponent he would beat the body to a flat pulp, cut a slit through it large enough for his own head to pass through, and then wear it, poncho fashion as a triumphant taunt.”

<sup>41</sup> For a detailed anthropological discussion of this question see Pierre Bourdieu *Outline of a Theory of Practice* pp. 159-171.

If there is anything to the analogy just drawn it might suggest that Cheney's distinction between postmodernism and modernism is certainly one that is difficult to justify on grounds of philosophical concerns.<sup>42</sup> Modern traditions influence him more deeply than he admits, but the point is not to claim Cheney for modernism. Rather what I am suggesting is that the dichotomy between modernism and postmodernism is unconvincing.

### Modernism and its context

Modernism needs to be seen in the context of its specific historical and cultural origination. Modernisms have their own myths, no doubt in part influenced by particular biogeographies. There is then no *a priori* reason why modernism does not deserve attention as an example of the world *speaking through* people, a world of artifice, no doubt, but nonetheless a part of nature in the wider sense in which humanity is natural too. Cheney is willing to extend this contextual privilege to some instances of modernist discourse where the predominant influence is supposedly natural. One

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<sup>42</sup> Cheney also characterises all modernist philosophy as accepting a subject / object divide. He endorses Paula Gunn Allen's description of the modernist position where "there is such a thing as determinable fact, natural - that is right explanations, - and reality that can be determined outside the human agency of discovery and fact finding" Cheney *op. cit.*, n. 14 above, p. 121. See also Cheney's own remarks on p. 120. Cheney's paper drastically underrates the complexity of modern Western world-views. He rightly notes the connections frequently found between a *representational* epistemology (which sees theory as a wholly autonomous realm mirroring the world) and conceptions of a rational autonomous human subject. But, in equating this *humanism* with modernity, he completely overlooks the many alternative problematics. There are many philosophies, including that of Althusser, which deny just these humanist presuppositions but which cannot by any stretch of the imagination be termed postmodern.

example is Aldo Leopold's land ethic which states "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."<sup>43</sup> Cheney sees this ethic as in part formed by a *rootedness* in the Sand Counties of Wisconsin, but there is no doubt that it is meant to apply beyond Wisconsin's boundaries. It is therefore a "colonising discourse", in the sense Cheney gives to this phrase and, as a principle abstracted from the practice in which it originated and theoretically prescribing our relations to the world, it must also be considered totalising.

Can other modernist claims be seen as analogously *rooted*? Why can modernism's totalising discourses not be regarded as instances of particular places operating, in Cheney's words, "all the way up"? The answers to these questions lie in Cheney's acceptance of the particular set of hard and fast homologies outlined earlier. He has not yet begun the work of social negotiation for his own culture because his overt acceptance of the nature/culture and modern/postmodern dichotomies will not allow this.<sup>44</sup> To escape the necessity for a constant recontextualising of social discourse he

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<sup>43</sup> Aldo Leopold *A Sand County Almanac* pp. 224-225.

<sup>44</sup> In a different context Cheney has asked a similar question. "Might we listen with the same ear to the residents of Harlem (or to the corporate executives engaged in the destruction of the old-growth forests) with which we listen to the voices of a tall-grass prairie in southern Wisconsin? What would such a listening be like?" He seems to think that we might and must achieve this listening. "Even the strategies of the colonisers must be understood ecologically. They are not to be understood or condemned using timeless and ahistorically "true" criteria." Unfortunately he does not seem to have realised the implications of this answer for his own methodology. He criticises Deep Ecology for "its [modernist] dualistic opposition of anthropocentric and ecological consciousness" and its acontextuality whilst working with just such rigid dualisms himself. Jim Cheney 'The Neo-Stoicism of Radical Environmentalism' pp. 317- 318.

depends upon an idealised picture of a timeless natural environment and opposes this the historicised artificial environment of our cities. But this division is merely a continuation of a myth that is undoubtedly modernist in origin, even in his own terms. For, if modernism is that which broke the connections between the human, *qua* abstract subject, and the world, then the nature / culture division upon which Cheney relies is very much a modernist creation.<sup>45</sup>

Cheney's Arcadian myth of a primitive people rooted in nature is allied to a utopian vision of a return to contextuality with the advent of postmodernism. But what does this mean for the majority of people who live in urban and agricultural environments? Is it impossible for *place* to speak through mediating subjects in modern cultures? To be sure, the city environment is not one populated with salmon, unless they lie cold on the supermarket slab, but it is populated with its own ecology of cars preying upon pedestrians, the rich upon the poor. In Britain we live in an environment with no wilderness left. *All* the geography and landscapes are human influenced, yet the land, its history and its occupants, human and otherwise can still speak through us. Like Cheney I can speak out against the horrors of the city and against much of the history that made me. We are free to produce our own myths or alternatively we are all tied to producing the myths of our personal *place*. Each of us is a product of our particular place in the world, a product whose place can be described in terms of geography, history, family, biology and so

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<sup>45</sup> The intuitive obviousness of this culture/nature dichotomy is being broken down in many respects. Bill Mckibben suggests that with the advent of the greenhouse effect and ozone depletion we see *The End of Nature*. Human influence is now so widespread as to preclude the existence of untouched wilderness.

forth, a product that is also *to a degree* self-constructed, internally motivated etc. The world does not *just* speak through us, we also form an active part of it.<sup>46</sup>

To the extent that we are a product of a particular society at a certain historical period (a *social formation*), both the theoretical/mythic pictures we draw and our everyday actions are ideologically infused. There is no reason why theories, like myths, cannot be seen as an *expression* (rather than a *representation*) of a particular modern place. Correspondingly theory also forms an important part of the modern environment which can be ideologically incorporated at the very heart of the individual. Our dispositions and ethical values are constructed in, influenced by, and in turn influence place (including our theoretical place). Insofar as such values and perspectives are theoretically articulated they attain a relative paradigmatic autonomy but remain open to transformative criticism inspired by alternative theoretical expressions and by practical experiences of the non-human and the non-theorised.

The importance of place is not an invention of postmodernism, rather the opposite. But “place” in this sense has to be something much wider than Cheney’s bioregionalism. He excludes important aspects of Martin and Mohanty’s multi-faceted conception of the contextual background of discourse which they term *home*. Their original concept included

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<sup>46</sup> Cheney’s reduction of individuals to vectors of a mythological language originating in natural structures can be seen as a naturally grounded version of the social anti-humanism promoted by structural-Marxists such as Althusser. It similarly underestimates the degree of individual human autonomy.

“geography, demography and architecture, as well as the configuration of ... relationships to particular people”<sup>47</sup> that is, elements of both ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. But Cheney’s conception of bioregionality puts exclusive emphasis on the importance of ‘natural’ contexts. It might therefore be appropriate to question his bioregional foundationalism by re-privileging one of Martin and Mohanty’s “cultural” elements, namely architecture. Let us do this through an examination of the following remarks of Le Corbusier, unquestionably a doyen of modernism:

“Every modern man has the mechanical sense. The feeling for mechanics exists and is justified by our daily activities. This feeling in regard to machinery is one of respect, gratitude and esteem. Machinery includes economy as an essential factor leading to minute selection. There is a moral sentiment in the feeling for mechanics. The man who is intelligent, cold and calm has grown wings to himself.”<sup>48</sup>

Here are all the hallmarks of modern (humanist) discourse, the emphasis upon the abstract human subject and “his” calculating rationality, the reference to *essential factors* inherent within machinery etc. However, from another perspective it can be read as a piece of contextual writing upon the condition of a group of people *placed* within a modern environment. It states that the world “speaking through” these particularly placed people is such that they come to regard some of the mechanical constituents of that world in a moral light, come to entertain a certain epistemology, engage in particular practices and so on. In this world even machinery *can* be spoken of in

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<sup>47</sup> Cheney *op. cit.*, n. 14 above, p. 126.

<sup>48</sup> Le Corbusier *Towards a New Architecture* pp. 115-119.

ethical terms. Our ethical values have come to incorporate our practical relations to the modern world and Le Corbusier can, in this sense, be seen as a mythographer of modernity. As Walter Gropius states - modern architecture in all its abstraction can also be spoken of in terms of its *expression* of the relations inherent in the social formation.

“...although the outward forms of the New Architecture differ fundamentally in an organic sense from those of the old, they are not the personal whims of a handful of architects avid for innovation at all cost, but simply the inevitable logical product of the intellectual, social and technical conditions of our age.”<sup>49</sup>

The problem for Cheney is this: if *all* geographical (or wider) environments, are admitted to be influential, to speak through people, then how can he privilege the natural and its concomitant contextual (geographically speaking) discourse above artificial (and sometimes totalising) discourse? His only recourse is one which sees any discourse espousing opposition to “modernism” as being privileged just because it is oppositional. Although this allows almost any position whatsoever to be positionally privileged (given a certain characterisation of modernism) it provides no grounds at all for taking these views as objectively right. It is merely to admit that all discourse comes from place. But this is precisely what he seems to deny in

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<sup>49</sup>Walter Gropius *The New Architecture of the Bauhaus* p. 18. In this respect perhaps one could also note Marx’s remark that “Within the division of labour [social] relationships are bound to acquire independent existence in relation to individuals. All relations can be expressed in language only in the form of concepts. That these general ideas and concepts are looked upon as mysterious forces is the necessary result of the fact that the real relations, of which they are the expression, have acquired independent existence.” Karl Marx *The German Ideology* p. 406.

the case of modernism.

Cheney is caught in a bind because, despite his standpoint epistemology, he is loath to admit that there is no way of being objectively right. To make such an admission in no way lessens the importance nature might have for us nor does it entail that we should worship machines. Nor need this admission weaken criticism of those forms of foundationalism which aim to prove that nature is not morally considerable. The paradox of Cheney's paper lies in its attempt to privilege an oppositional mythical narrative (i.e. his own theory). This opposes the general tendency of his thought towards a much more radical *positionality*: a relational view of taxonomy and discourse which would see "nature" as "one more player [amongst many] in the construction of community". The reason for the aporia is Cheney's desire to see an environmentally-friendly stance, one that maintains close connections with nature, as being objectively correct. The "correct" stance towards the environment would be a myth able to transcend boundaries and cultures. Insofar as his position depends crucially upon the opposition of 'contextual' myth to totalising and foundational discourse he must be judged inconsistent.

By contrast a wider and less constrained positionality than Cheney's has great potential. Such an account would not be identical with a cultural relativism of the kind which holds that one ethic cannot be judged better than another. Such anthropological relativism takes cultures as isolated and essentially incommensurable. A modest positionality, on the other hand, would suggest that there may be similarities and differences at all levels. Moral values in different communities might converge due to similarities in

geography, biology, cultural practices, problematics, histories or any combination of these or other aspects of “place”.

In terms of the modest account it would be possible to develop a conception of place with similarities to Wittgenstein's idea of *forms of life*. Form of life would not just be a narrowly defined concept grounded in either human culture or the natural world but would include instead a wider conception of community including all relevant aspects of past and present environment. Humans tend to have similarities with each other on many levels in their practical as well as discursive encounters with the world and these similarities make communication possible. Without similarities at some level discourse becomes impossible but communication also entails a meeting of places, an expression of different perspectives.

Human social practices, including discursive practices, do not just exist in place but themselves form a part of place. As Hans Peter Duerr states

“the questions that have meaning within a particular form of life are not *determined* by that way of life, but constitute themselves *elements of life* of that world view.”<sup>50</sup>

We can expand Wittgenstein's concept to provide a vague perspectival standpoint where forms of life are to be seen as the background in which and against which humans function as nodes of positionality.<sup>51</sup> A broadly similar interpretation to that offered by Lynne Rudder Baker who, to reiterate, writes:

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<sup>50</sup> Hans Pater Duerr, *Dreamtime. Concerning the Boundary between Wilderness and Civilisation* p. 96.

<sup>51</sup> Cheney alludes to this view of the positional subject in the work of Linda Alcoft. *op. cit.*, n. 44 above, p. 318.

“[t]he idea of a form of life emerges as the result of a kind of transcendental argument: We have language that we use to communicate; ..... meaning requires a community. ‘Form of life’ is Wittgenstein’s way of designating what it is about a community that makes possible meaning. Given this role of the idea of a form of life, it is hardly surprising that little meaningfully can be said about it.”<sup>52</sup>

In this sense we can treat Wittgenstein’s statement that “[w]hat has to be accepted, the given, is - so one could say - *Forms of life*”<sup>53</sup> in a much less anthropocentric and sociological way than is usual. Such an admittedly vague form of totalising but anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist myth seems a more promising ground for understanding the complexities of morality than any narrow concept like bioregionalism. We can see that bioregionalism is only one amongst many aspects of community which we can use to recontextualise social discourse. Finally, this *positional holism* does not reduce the human subject to a completely functional role as the voice of nature. To quote Duerr once more:

“[i]t seems a mistake on which extreme relativists and dogmatists of the ‘transcendental’ bent agree ..... to be convinced that the form of life is the framework in the strict sense of the word *within* which all questions have to find their meaning.

Dogmatists tend to hold.... that we do not think the myths but the myths think themselves in us.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Lynne Rudder Baker ‘On the Very Idea of a Form of Life’ *and see chapter 5 of this thesis*

<sup>53</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* p. 226e.

<sup>54</sup> Duerr *op. cit.*, n. 50 above, p. 97.

It is ironic, important and probably not accidental that there is a current re-emphasis of context in philosophy. This has occurred at a moment in history when global uniformity is proclaimed from the offices of governments and powerful multinationals. When all place comes to mean to anyone is how close one is to the nearest MacDonald's the totalising discourse of mass-communication, of television and radio, will have triumphed. We will not be free even to create our own modernist myths but will have them created for us by the commercial exploiters of our planet encouraging us to join them in the death of the "natural" world.

The most devastating myth we are fed is that of economic humanism, the reduction of all value to economic value, determined by a "free" market of isolated selfish individuals. This myth has already become a part of the ideological place of many people. But perhaps we can resist it if our position is such that we are able to see the over-simplified essentialist nature of its discourse. To this extent I agree with Cheney, not in the privilege accorded to this opposition but in its necessity for those who have and wish to promulgate different world-views. In this sense those of us who value nature for itself cannot but oppose this particular modernist myth. However, whilst insisting upon the value of nature, we must forgo any claim to step outside of ideology, to obtain a transcendental perspective via privileged access to nature and the natural. Instead, the strength of the environmentalists' argument must be seen in its coming from many places to similar conclusions, in the overdetermination of natural value and the overdetermination of environmental policies and decisions.

## CHAPTER 9: ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND COMMUNITY

This concluding chapter will attempt to weave together some of the threads which have run through previous sections, namely, the epistemological critique of “representationalism”, the subject / object dichotomy, notions of “subjective rationality” and “objective science”, the concept of “ideology”, ideas of “social practice” and “production” and the deconstruction of the ‘humanist subject’. It is no accident that these concerns come together in the social theory and anthropology of Pierre Bourdieu, who is heavily influenced by both Marxism and the later Wittgenstein. His work can be seen as a contemporary response to the extreme structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and the early Althusser. Bourdieu’s primary aim is to transcend the structure / agency debate without rejecting the insights that structuralism provides.

“I wanted, so to speak, to reintroduce agents that Lévi-Strauss and the structuralists, among others Althusser, tended to abolish, making them into simple epiphenomena of structure. And I mean agents, not subjects.”<sup>1</sup>

Bourdieu’s work attempts to overcome this structure / agency dichotomy in two ways. First he attacks the epistemological perspectives he associates with each of these conceptions. He claims that phenomenologists and structuralists conceive of their own theoretical activity as giving subjective and objective accounts of society respectively. Insofar as they do this Bourdieu claims that they have fundamentally misunderstood their theoretical relationship to their ‘objects’ of study. Second, he posits a theory

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<sup>1</sup>Pierre Bourdieu *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* p. 9. In this sense at least Bourdieu is engaged in that same project as the work of the later Althusser and Sartre. See chapter 7. For a useful introductory account of Bourdieu see Derek Robbins *The Work of Pierre Bourdieu : Recognising Society* and Richard Jenkins *Pierre Bourdieu..*

of social production and reproduction which neither privileges the individual social actor nor reduces her to merely a support of the social structure. His aim is

“... to construct the theory of practice, or more precisely, the theory of the mode of generation of practices, which is the precondition for establishing an experimental science of the *dialectic of the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality*, or, more simply, of incorporation and objectification.”<sup>2</sup>

That is, Bourdieu reconceptualises social theory so as to make the production and reproduction of values central to both theoretical and empirical investigation. He rejects the objective and subjective categories which have moulded past debates in favour of a problematic which is reflexively aware of its own origins. This problematic refuses to think in terms of humanist categories, it is both a critique of them and an alternative to them. It is not, as the following section attempts to illustrate, a version of a naive structuralism but is as opposed to reductive concepts of structure as it is to the autonomous agency of liberal humanism.

### The Epistemological Critique

The translator of Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Richard Nice, claims that Bourdieu's work is best understood as a response to and rejection of structuralism. He warns readers to avoid thinking of Bourdieu as a structuralist; for “...nothing guarantees that, for some readers, the work, written against the currents at present dominant in France, “structuralism” or

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu *Outline of a Theory of Practice* p. 72.

“structural-Marxism” will not be merged with the very tendencies it combats.”

<sup>3</sup> Yet, despite Nice’s warning, there does remain a genetic and theoretical linkage with structuralism in more than one sense. Bourdieu leans heavily upon the insights that structuralist anthropology has provided and his work emerges out of the same philosophical and anthropological problematics and the same epistemology of science which so influenced Althusser. In particular, like Althusser, Bourdieu is indebted to Gaston Bachelard. Bachelard’s concept of the epistemological break, so vital to Althusser, survives in Bourdieu, as a break not between science and ideology but between different conceptions of epistemology, different understandings of the status of scientific and theoretical knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

First Bourdieu criticises those phenomenological accounts of social theory where the only justifiable explanation of a social activity is that which the participants in that society might provide. To accept these explanations at face value is to believe that the social world is entirely transparent to those occupying it, and to hold that people can give a ‘true’ account of the motivations behind their every action. (Insofar as phenomenological sociology does this it resurrects elements of the Cartesian and humanist subject.)

Second, Bourdieu criticises those accounts which see anthropology, sociology etc. as providing objective and true accounts from the supposedly privileged point of view of a scientific observer. Bourdieu associates these objectivist pretensions with scientific structuralism (e.g. the work of Lévi-

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Nice in Bourdieu *ibid.*, p. viii.

<sup>4</sup> See chapters 3 and 4 for an account of the epistemological break.

Strauss, who claims to uncover the underlying structures of social organisation) and views such structuralism as fundamentally flawed.<sup>5</sup> The problem with structuralism as practised by Lévi-Strauss does not lie in its rejection of phenomenology and the philosophy of the humanist subject, but in its selective amnesia about its own origins. One cannot simply conceive of theory as a process of uncovering the truth, an *opus operatum*, but must rather see that science (*qua* theoretical practice) is itself a particular form of life - a *modus operandi*. Despite rejecting 'scientism' Bourdieu claims that such an 'objectivist' epistemological perspective forms an inevitable stage in the break from phenomenology - a break which is necessary before one can start to understand events in their social and historical context. A naive structuralism retains a positivistic and representationalist belief in the objective position of the scientific observer. The greatest mistake of objectivism is to constitute "...practical activity as an *object of observation and analysis, a representation*."<sup>6</sup> Instead we should understand theory as a particular form of practical activity relative to our own social framework. Theory does not *represent* objects but is an expression of the practical interaction of the theoretician with their surrounding environment. Bourdieu thus believes that a second epistemological break is required to create a social theory with an epistemology based in social practice. One must break with the objectivist pretensions of structuralism as well as the subjectivist

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<sup>5</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss *Structural Anthropology*.

<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu *op. cit.*, n. 2 above, p. 2.

assumptions of phenomenology.<sup>7</sup>

One can imagine these alternative accounts of human dispositions as follows. An anthropologist wishes to investigate the value systems of a particular culture. She can understand the epistemological status of her own research in a number of ways and these different understandings are reflected in the methodology she chooses to use. The phenomenological, or ethnomethodological, approach would claim that those engaged in activities have a privileged understanding of those practices through their phenomenological experience of them. This being so it might be thought that the correct methodology is to record the explanations given by members of the culture being studied for their values, dispositions etc., this would reflect the belief that they, and only they *know* what they are doing. By contrast the naive structuralist or objectivist account claims that the anthropologist is, by her position as dispassionate observer, able to uncover the real underlying reasons why members of that culture behave in particular ways, whether these reasons are psychological, environmental, historical etc. From this perspective the explanations given by those observed are

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<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu is mistaken in interpreting *all* structuralist theories as exhibiting a naive representationalism. As chapter three endeavoured to show, Althusser's epistemological position is much more complex than this generalisation would allow. Indeed, this objectivist epistemology, which Althusser associates with positivism, is one of the grounds on which he denies that he is a "structuralist". There is a genuine, but largely unnoticed, communality of thought between Althusser and Bourdieu in their wish to break with epistemologies of objectivism and subjectivism - to break with naive humanism. However there is also no doubt that Bourdieu rejects Althusser's attempts to reconstitute and re-privilege science as a completely autonomous practice. Instead he emphasises the historical particularity of current scientific practices and the ideological background which this privileged view of science assumes. In this respect Bourdieu's analysis of science could be said to be very close to the criticisms already made of Althusser. (See p. ) Bourdieu's conception fits well with a view of sciences as *relatively autonomous* forms of social practice.

only superficial rationalisations of their particular cultural *milieu*. They lack the ability to see their practices in a wider context. This form of objectivist account is provided both by structuralists and of course by earlier anthropologists working within a positivist framework. It is, for example, the position taken by J. G. Frazer in the *Golden Bough* who claims to have deduced the historical origin and underlying events responsible for the creation of the myths he investigates.<sup>8</sup>

The Wittgenstienian critique of objectivism, which has heavily influenced Bourdieu, would claim that such an account ignores the position of the anthropologist as a 'prisoner' of *her own* cultural *milieu* i.e., that of Western society in general and more particularly of a particular scientific 'culture' within that society.<sup>9</sup> It is impossible for the anthropologist to escape her own presuppositions, to take a position from nowhere. Thus the scientific explanation is always the construction of the anthropologist's practical activity, of her own and her culture's relations to any other culture. This explains why other members of the anthropologist's own culture find her explanations convincing.

So, although Bourdieu praises structuralism for its break with phenomenology, for making space for "theory" as a form of understanding beyond that given by direct experience, this break does not, by itself, provide a warrant for its epistemological assertions. What is required is a second epistemological break where a science like anthropology (and indeed any theoretical field) comes to see itself as a historically and culturally specific

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<sup>8</sup> James George Frazer *The Golden Bough*.

<sup>9</sup> See chapter 4.

practice in a dialectical relationship with its subject matter. Any account of social theory needs to take into account the theoretician's own practical interactions with the material of her study and the propositions upon which that practice is based. This second epistemological break entails the reflexive recognition that theories produced to explain actions, values etc. incorporate the social structures of the observer's society as well as those to be observed. The presuppositions inherent in Western anthropology form an integral part of the theoretical picture which emerges from its study of any other society no matter how disparate from our own. Anthropology is a cultural practice which actively produces a knowledge tied to its particular practical interactions with alternative cultures (or sub-cultures). Of course this point about anthropology can be extended to theoretical discourses in general, including philosophy.

Bourdieu's analysis points to a further problem for any social philosophy. Starting from the complexity of the social situation and the dialectical relation of the observer to the observed he argues that mechanistically construed ideas of underlying structures or rules governing behaviour are impossibly simplistic. The structuralist project of uncovering the *real/objective* processes and associations underlying social behaviour is bound to fail: it is reductive, rigid, and entails a synchronic perspective which ignores the dynamic context of actual social actions. Whereas phenomenology "...excludes the question of its own possibility",<sup>10</sup> structuralism freezes practical activity in a timeless and a-contextual discourse. It ignores the dynamism of social processes by producing a fixed map which is supposed to *represent* reality. In doing so it reifies knowledge produced in a dialectic

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<sup>10</sup> Bourdieu *op. cit.*, n. 2 above, p. 3.

which says as much about the culture of the theoretician as about that of the society it studies. In some senses this latter form of synchronisation is inevitable "...[b]ecause science is possible only in a relation to time which is opposed to that of practice it tends to ignore time and, in doing so, reify practices."<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu claims that this very science and its frozen synchronistic presentation of its theoretical content is a product of a modern society which is itself held together by synchronic and explicit rules. This analysis of modernity has obvious affinities with those of Weber and the Frankfurt School. (See chapter 1 and below.)

### Bourdieu's Concept of Habitus

In keeping with his reflexive epistemology of social theory, Bourdieu rejects the usual explanations of the regularities produced and reproduced in social formations. Such regularities are frequently explained in terms of 'rules'. Here, as elsewhere, there is a tendency to fall back into a discourse of subjectivity and objectivity: to see 'rules' either as consciously formulated by individuals and transparent to them, or as underlying structures recognised and expressed by the anthropologist. Bourdieu spurns both these alternatives and, developing a conception of rules similar to that found in the later Wittgenstein, he introduces a looser conception whereby such rules are no longer to be envisaged as consciously formulated limits on social action but rather ideologically incorporated and open ended *strategies*. Bourdieu's strategies are the embodiment of Wittgenstein's 'rules' *qua* flexible

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

dispositions.<sup>12</sup> Strategies, unlike explicit rules, are not concrete artifacts applied to situations by rote. The members of any given society usually have no need of such rules, instead they have a feel for the social field in which they exist; an 'unconscious' ability to act within the expected bounds of that field. Just as, for example, a football player may exhibit a mastery of the game by knowing when to pass or when to shoot at goal without ever following explicit laws on such matters.

This feel for the game is incorporated into the individual through her immersion in society. Our behaviour is not to be understood as driven by hard and fast laws but as the product of dispositions "inculcated in the earliest years of life and constantly reinforced by calls to order from the group, that is to say, from the aggregate of the individuals endowed with the same dispositions, to whom each is linked by his dispositions and interests."<sup>13</sup> The anthropological or sociological observer may express the perceived patterns of these dispositions in terms of rules, but no such rules actually exist - one must not make the mistake of reifying the results of scientific practice as existing entities. Where explicit rules do exist in other societies, they exist only as a second line of defence "intended to make good the occasional misfiring of the collective enterprise of inculcation"<sup>14</sup> We must try not to impose the pattern of our own, rule governed society, upon those which are strategy driven. (For Bourdieu the reification of the conception of human behaviour entailed in the view of humans as expressions of *Homo economicus* represents just such an imposition.)

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<sup>12</sup> Thus when I refer to rules in this chapter I mean explicit formulations not the Wittgenstienian conception.

<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu *op. cit.*, n. 2. above, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 17.

This system of dispositions transmitted from generation to generation is referred to as the 'habitus'. This generative *habitus* is, Bourdieu explains, a "series of dispositions *acquired through experience*, thus variable from place to place and time to time",<sup>15</sup> a form of practical sense which operates without the necessary mediacy of conscious thought but which is nonetheless not a simple application of a set of a-contextual abstract rules. This difference might be expressed in terms of the difference between the spontaneous improvisation of an actor and the explanatory framework which the audience constructs to explain her activities. Where the actor's activities and language flow unconsciously by dint of her feelings for the situation of her character etc., the audience tends to impose a rigid and inflexible storyline onto the acting by dint of their relation *qua* audience to what unfolds before them.<sup>16</sup> They posit specific reasons as the cause of her actions. By contrast, the term "habitus" stresses the importance of a *practical* capacity. Each society and field within that society has a habitus which individuals incorporate and reproduce.

"The habitus, the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisation, produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularity immanent in the objective conditions of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation..."<sup>17</sup>

In other words, the habitus is a dynamic immanent structure which

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<sup>15</sup> Bourdieu *op. cit.*, n.1 above, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> Of course this improvisation does not spring from nowhere but is a product of inculcated dispositions.

<sup>17</sup> Bourdieu *op. cit.*, n. 1. above, p. 78.

imperfectly reproduces the social relations of its past in the strategies of members of future generations.<sup>18</sup> It does not induce knee-jerk or mechanical reactions to events but rather instils creative dispositions, bounded by limits imposed by social conditioning but at the same time mediating a whole variety of reactions to what must always in some respects be the unique circumstances in which individuals find themselves.

“Action is not the mere carrying out of a rule, or obedience to a rule. Social agents, in archaic societies as well as in ours, are not automata regulated like clocks, in accordance with laws which they do not understand. In the most complex games, matrimonial exchange for instance, or ritual practices, they put into action the incorporated principles of a generative habitus:....”<sup>19</sup>

The habitus is a feature not only of entire cultures, but of fields of social activity within those cultures. (These “fields” of activity play a very similar role in Bourdieu’s problematic to forms of life in Wittgenstein’s later theory. See chapter 5. ) Bourdieu’s conception of social practice brings together aspects of both Marxist-Structuralism and Wittgenstein. Society is composed of a number of fields, which can be seen as *relatively autonomous social practices*, each one with an internal practical logic, its own approaches and concerns, habits and expectations, and usually its own linguistic terminology and discursive patterns. The concept of a “field” thus plays a similar, but more restricted role than that of “form of life”, but retains a non-essentialist notion of interconnectedness on a number of levels which together produce distinguishable practices. Each field has its own habitus and this habitus

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<sup>18</sup> For an account of the concept of an immanent structure see chapter 3.

<sup>19</sup> Bourdieu *op. cit.*, n. 1 above, p. 9.

guarantees the mutual intelligibility of each member's actions and speech.

“One of the fundamental effects of the construction of the habitus is the production of a common-sense world endowed with the *objectivity* secured by consensus on the meaning (*sens*) of practices and the world.... The homogeneity of the habitus... causes practices and words to be immediately intelligible and foreseeable, and hence taken for granted.”<sup>20</sup>

Thus we can also see Bourdieu's "habitus" as the mode of operation of ideology - as those aspects of the social structure which are incorporated into the very being of individuals within a particular social formation or field within that formation. With the concept of habitus Bourdieu has developed a radical critique of the humanist subject. Individual subjects are no longer the transcendental autonomous foundations of human societies but exist within a specific social context which impregnates their every action in daily life. At the same time Bourdieu's problematic provides a mechanism or site for the functioning of ideology. The habitus expresses "...the necessity, the constraint of social conditions and conditionings, right in the very heart of the 'subject'...."<sup>21</sup> Bourdieu's theory also has the advantage of reintroducing the temporal axis lost in the synchronic structuralism of Lévi-Strauss (and to a lesser extent Althusser), re-emphasising both the dynamic and dialectical nature of the theory and the interpenetration of the individual in her social context. Bourdieu has produced by his own account a "genetic structuralism" where "agents participate in accordance with their position in the social space and with the mental structures through which they apprehend this

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<sup>20</sup> Bourdieu *op. cit.*, n. 2 above, p. 80.

<sup>21</sup> Bourdieu *op. cit.*, n. 1 above, p. 15.

space.”<sup>22</sup>

Like “ideology” in Althusser’s problematic, the habitus plays a role as an explanatory term which links the reproduction of the social structure with the production of new individuals who incorporate that structure within themselves. Thus the habitus is not only the generative principle of the individual’s dispositions, but also the ‘social cement’ which binds those individuals together in the matrix of social relations. The habitus becomes a *second nature* incorporated into the very being of the people composing that field.<sup>23</sup> Thus by placing the concept of the habitus at centre stage Bourdieu hopes to overcome the unnecessary extremes of humanism and structuralist anti-humanism.<sup>24</sup>

“One of the points I would stress... is the need to move beyond couples of oppositions... For example, on the one hand, you have humanism, which at least has the merit of inciting one to move closer to people. But they are not real people. On the other hand, you have theoreticians who are a million miles away from reality and people as they are. The Althusserians were typical of that attitude.”

As Bourdieu states, the “use of the notion of *habitus* .... can be understood as a way of escaping from the choice between a structuralism without subject

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> This term “second nature” is often used as a synonym for ideology - for the unquestioned and unquestionable presuppositions which form the framework for practical activities. For example this ideological conception of ‘second nature’ plays a central role in the environmental philosophy of Murray Bookchin and the ecofeminism of Janet Biehl. Murray Bookchin *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays in Dialectical Naturalism*, and Janet Biehl *Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*.

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Chambordon & Jean-Claud Passeron *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries* pp. 251-252.

and the philosophy of the subject.”<sup>25</sup>

### The Habitus. Codification and Ideology.

Bourdieu develops a sophisticated form of cultural relativism whereby the ideological presuppositions of one society determine, at least in part, the interpretation and understanding that can be achieved of other societies. Bourdieu produces an epistemological critique of anthropological and sociological understanding focusing upon its inadequate conception of its own relations to the 'objects' of its study. He then proceeds to formulate an alternative way of understanding the apparent regularity of social relations, as ordered by strategies rather than as the result of following explicit rules. This underlies the way in which the epistemological presuppositions of a problematic are an integral part of the accounts given of the world by that problematic. It emphasises the dialectical construction of knowledge. The rules that anthropologists claim to find can be interpreted as the result of our imposing the mode of juridical social regulation and formal rationality of our own modern society onto others - i.e. a result of unreflexive anthropological practices which take no account of their own social origins. We naturally and unthinkingly take such rules as a model for the regulation of all other societies. But, once we have become aware of this tendency the possibility of our escaping this cultural imposition arises (although, inevitably we cannot be aware of and avoid all such impositions). Thus Bourdieu might be seen as advocating a kind of critical hermeneutics. If one's epistemology rejects

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<sup>25</sup> Bourdieu *op. cit.*, n. 1 above, p. 10.

any possibility of exhuming rules, as Bourdieu's does, then we need other hypotheses to account for the maintenance and reproduction of social order found in other societies. This is the role of the "habitus" in Bourdieu's problematic.<sup>26</sup>

This whole approach hinges upon a particular analysis of modernity and a corresponding analysis of ancient societies which, in one way at least, sees them as quite different. Bourdieu claims that in ancient societies there are very few explicit rules, that society is regulated by the reproduction of the habitus within a shared but largely unspoken world-view.<sup>27</sup> Ancient societies can operate in this way because they are more culturally homogeneous. In Tonnies' terminology we are dealing with community (*Gemeinschaft*) rather than a society or association (*Gesellschaft*). Bourdieu refers to the experience of this unspoken world-view as a *doxa*. Traditional societies have a communal *doxa*.

"...in the extreme case, that is to say, when there is a quasi-perfect correspondence between the objective order and the subjective principles of organisation (as in ancient societies) the natural and social world appears as self-evident. This experience we shall call *doxa*, so as to distinguish it from orthodox and heterodox belief

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<sup>26</sup> This is not to claim that the habitus is itself an objective representation of ancient societies, it is of course the product of Bourdieu's own ideological assumptions, of the break with the positivistic conception of rules. The break with empiricism (in Althusser's very wide use of the term) does not mean that one must abjure from theoretical speculation, but it does diminish the persuasive power of certain humanist kinds of theoretical account.

<sup>27</sup> Bourdieu admits that there are some explicit norms, e.g. proverbs in ancient societies, but claims that these norms are rarely obeyed. One might of course make just such a point about most of the explicit norms in our own society e.g. speed limits on roads. It is important to notice the links here with Weber and the Frankfurt School's theses about the peculiar formal rationality of modern society

implying awareness and recognition of the possibilities of different or antagonistic beliefs.”<sup>28</sup>

In traditional societies power distribution and social values are relatively uncontested; they are untheorised and so largely unquestionable, forming the second nature of all who live in that community. As Eagleton puts it, paraphrasing Bourdieu, “What matters in such societies is what ‘goes without saying’ which is determined by tradition; and tradition is always ‘silent’, not least about itself.”<sup>29</sup> Of course, this concept of a communal doxa also expresses a very similar view of pre-modern cultures to the neo-Aristotelian conception of communities of shared virtues and ethical values propounded by MacIntyre and Taylor. The incorporation of the habitus to reproduce communities structured by a common doxa is then one mode of operation of ideology - it reproduces a form of life and its associated dispositions and values in a manner such that they remain unquestioned and unquestionable, - stable over many generations and relatively unchanging. Non-conformity would be rare in such a society since all are inculcated by the same habitus and incorporate the same world-view. The relatively static nature of such societies means that the relations between various practices within the society are fixed in respect of each other, thus the tensions between different experiences of social life are kept to a minimum. Where tensions do exist, as they frequently do due to the different practices associated with certain roles, e.g. in the disparate roles played by men and women, they are experienced by both parties as part of an unchangeable natural ordering of the world. These social inequalities are built into the

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<sup>28</sup> Bourdieu *op. cit.*, n. 2 above, p. 164.

<sup>29</sup> Terry Eagleton *Ideology: An Introduction* p. 157.

system at its very roots. Ethical values are stable and shared by all members of society in respect of their given roles in that society. There is little need for, or possibility of, ethical and meta-ethical speculation. (This is important, for naive primitivisms like Cheney's promise to oppose the destructive activities of modern society only at the cost of re-imposing these fundamental constraints on individual expressions of difference.) Indeed, Bourdieu claims, there is little need for theory at all in traditional societies. The transmission of the habitus occurs through the experience of practices themselves rather than through the medium of theoretical discourse. Bodily communication performs a much more important function - "bodily *hexis*" is incorporated *directly* into the individual's dispositions.

"So long as the work of education is not clearly institutionalised as a specific practice... the essential part of the *modus operandi* which defines practical mastery is transmitted in practices, in its practical state, without attaining the level of discourse."<sup>30</sup>

Our deportment, body language, and forms of life are incorporated and reproduced without being theoretically articulated as we are brought up and interpellated into certain communally recognised niches.

All of this changes radically in modern society. The homogeneous community is fragmented by continuous and rapid change and by the proliferation of disparate practices. The increasing complexity of society and the increasing specialisation seen within it diminishes the degree to which everyday practical life can be shared by all members of that society. Each has to find some method of communicating her values and dispositions if the society is to continue to function, for the values and dispositions which

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<sup>30</sup> Bourdieu *op. cit.*, n. 2. above, p. 87.

develop within these relatively autonomous fields of society may be radically different. As they can no longer be inculcated through direct experience of those practices the spoken and written word together with other methods of mass communication come to mediate between increasingly isolated individuals, each enveloped within, and formed by, her own unique place in a set of social fields. Inculcation can no longer occur simply by practical participation in society without the mediacy of theoretical discourse and formal education systems. Discourse in general and theoretical discourse in particular becomes the primary mode of operation of ideology. (Although Bourdieu would not necessarily express the difference in terms of *ideology*.)<sup>31</sup> But as theory become the locus of ideological transmission, discourse has to *codify* practices that were previously experienced through other levels of society. Explicit rules become more and more necessary to maintain social coherence as the doxa is challenged and dispersed.<sup>32</sup>

The doxa is challenged in times of social crisis - when a gap opens between practical experience and the doxa - when common-sense presuppositions no longer seem to hold true. Theory then steps into the place of doxa and forms a second line of defence of tradition, a holding action until a new doxa can develop.

“It is when the social world loses its character as a natural phenomenon that the question of the natural or conventional

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<sup>31</sup> Bourdieu's repudiates the term “ideology” because he claims that it both lacks specificity and is often treated as synonymous with false consciousness.

<sup>32</sup> Bourdieu's contrast here seems to rely upon a rather loose use of the term “discourse” which might be thought to conflate meanings such as a) language of any kind, b) the formulation of explicit rules and c) the formulations of theory *qua* a product of theoretical practice. See here my comments below.

character ... of social facts can be posed.”<sup>33</sup>

In societies like our own which are in a constant state of flux, that move from crisis to crisis, then theory has to take an increasingly active role. It does this by codifying practical experience, reducing it to clear, simple, basic formulae which because of their simplicity and generality are communicable between members of that society. It thus ensures a minimal degree of communality.

To codify is to come to regulate social practices by formal rules - to *objectify* the previously unspoken doxa in a juridical discourse. “Codification is an operation of symbolic ordering, or of the maintenance of the symbolic order...”.<sup>34</sup> As more and more of the society’s activities become objectified in this way, the doxa becomes less influential and theory becomes a site of conflict, where experiences of practices clash with, or agree with, the expression given to or denied to them in theoretical practice. The implicit doxa is replaced by an explicit orthodoxy which because it no longer has the unquestioning consent associated with the doxa, can be challenged by explicit heterodoxies.

A process of increasing codification has engulfed society such that it now exerts an influence throughout the modern social formation. It is expressed in an understanding of theory as a representation of the ‘external world’. As theory becomes more abstract and autonomous it begins to picture itself as a *world apart* from practice, a world of pure thought mirroring that which is external to the mind.<sup>35</sup> At the same time the dissolution of the doxa and the

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<sup>33</sup> Bourdieu *op. cit.*, n. 2 above, p. 169.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>35</sup> For a more detailed account of this process see Richard Rorty *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*

increasing isolation of the individual leads to the conception of a subjective realm of thought. Thus the poles of objective / subjective reason are born. The ability to communicate and describe the world is put down to a universally shared rationality, an ability to think and calculate directly and consciously about all of our actions and values. The reification of this concept as neutral 'reason' could only have happened in a framework where codification has assumed such power and control. The autonomous subject (discussed in chapter 7) is the end result of this process.

This picture Bourdieu paints of modern society is one where an explicit logic rules both society as a whole and the individuals who compose it. These individuals follow juridical regulations and consciously calculate the outcome of their activities. They are imbued with a subjective rationality and are no longer guided by a simple *feel for the game*. Without wishing to engage in armchair anthropology, this picture does seem over-simplistic in its apparent denial of a modern *doxa*. Indeed it seems that in trying to account for the development of a humanist conception of society Bourdieu has fallen into the trap of actually believing that such a society exists here and now - that humanist subjects do guide their own actions by rational calculations concerning utility and by prior conscious thought, that subjective rationality has triumphed and fully replaced the habitus as the mode of reproduction of society.

The differences between ancient and modern societies correspond with the perceived differences between levels of discourse, between practical and

codified discourse.<sup>36</sup> It is because of this difference that the mechanism of society's reproduction and the inculcation and formation of the individuals is different. But, even given that modern society is less homogeneous and no longer tightly unified by a singular doxa there do seem to be commonly held, indeed almost universal assumptions about individual autonomy etc., assumptions questioned only in very specialised practices such as philosophy and social theory. These assumptions, which are those of humanism, are currently becoming more rather than less widespread as capitalism spreads its influence across the globe. I would suggest that the habitus has not disappeared in modern society - to be replaced by a transparent level of theoretical discourse - but that discourse now marks the place of its ideological operation. The consensual values and dispositions which unify society are, I claim, now largely transmitted by the unspoken assumptions and values carried by discourse. Society reproduces itself through linguistic systems rather than bodily *hexis*. Nevertheless the incorporation of the values and dispositions that will encourage society's reproduction carries on apace and these result in successive doxic stages.

Bourdieu's problematic can be seen as adding a Wittgensteinian subtlety to the Frankfurt School's analysis of codified discourse in modern society. Bourdieu places necessary emphasis upon theory's ideological operations in a manner akin to Althusser. He reminds us that theory operates unconsciously in defining relations to social taxonomies and values. He dismisses the idea of a neutral rationality which he sees as a form of rhetoric.

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<sup>36</sup> Bourdieu is not simply making a distinction between theory and practice and claiming that the former exists only in modern society. Rather he claims that modern society is both reproduced and dominated by a particular type of theory, one which has forgotten its practical origins and instead wishes represent and control the world in a quasi-judicial discourse.

All discourse is imbued with a certain “symbolic capital”, it expresses certain power relations within society. (In this sense his analysis also has affinities with the later Foucault.) The formalisation of theory seems to be an inevitable consequence of its increasingly important ideological role in interpellating individuals and reproducing the social structure. However, he seems to overplay the distinction between practical and codified language; he introduces a simplistic dualism which overplays the distinction between codified, formalised language and the practical language associated with the habitus. At one point he even suggests that the process of codification - the synchronising action of theory which abstracts and classifies, providing determinate, precise and explicit boundaries - entails a change of ontological status between practical and totalising logics.<sup>37</sup> He seems to envisage two levels of language. One is the home of everyday practices; it is dominant in traditional societies, as an adjunct to the habitus and never more than a part of its internalised creation. The second is a level of fixed and determinate meanings backed with public authority and explicitly defined. This is the language he takes to be predominantly associated with modern societies. This latter “formal logic” finds the vagaries of everyday practical logic anathema, and imposes its own quasi-judicial definition of reality. It tries to apply its own criteria to habitual behaviour by claiming to excavate a logic or grammar which underpins everyday life, a logic which is not really there but is a fiction of its own theoretical / practical relationship to the dispositions it observes.

The hard and fast distinction that Bourdieu has generated between uncodified and codified discourse is itself an example of the drawbacks

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<sup>37</sup> Pierre Bourdieu *op. cit.*, n. 1 above.

inherent in codification which attempts to petrify precise and transcendental distinctions. It also crucially weakens the role of the habitus, threatening to reduce it to a feature of the “body” rather than the “mind” i.e. to revert to humanist distinctions. I do not believe that this gap in codification is nearly as serious as Bourdieu sometimes suggests. The production of explicit taxonomies seems to me to be an integral part of even the simplest practices and, for that matter, bodily *hexis* is important in our society.

It may well be that the habitus has a more narrowly defined role in ancient societies, but there seems little reason to think that it loses its importance in modern society, or that its ideological mode of operation is so radically different. Of course once the doxa has become an explicit orthodoxy, there is more room for heterodoxy to operate. We also have the ability to consciously consider the wider set of rules that modernity generates and decide whether to follow them or not, always remembering that these decisions will themselves largely depend upon the degree to which we have incorporated the norms of society or of fields within that society into our very being. Codification does not just work at the level of conscious rules. Such rules, which may originally be explicit, soon cease to operate explicitly and become a part of the ideological background incorporated into the person's world-view, dispositions and values. Theoretical language has an ideological moment, it inculcates a feel for the game and becomes, in subjects like philosophy, the territory on which the game is largely played. This is to say that no language is ever fully explicit and that theory is only ever *relatively* autonomous. Indeed it is difficult to see how it could operate in any other way. One seldom needs to bring rules before one's mind to follow them, and rarely 'calculates' in explicit terms the benefits and losses to

accrue should one follow or break such rules. These rules are influential in producing the second nature of the member of modern society but tend also to express themselves in the dispositions of people, as strategies rather than by strict adherence to their letter. There are certainly differences between modern societies and ancient ones, but these differences have more to do with the method by which ideologies are transmitted and social cohesion maintained than with qualitative differences in the ontology of individual's thought processes, or the presence or absence of ideology. That is, in modern society theoretical practice comes to play a more autonomous and important role. Indeed Bourdieu himself seems to suggest as much when he states that certain moderns might need to become virtuosi in having a feel for when to apply or not to apply rules, i.e. there might need to be a habitus concerning rules themselves, a feel for when to break them, for how far they can be bent, when to apply them etc.<sup>38</sup>

The dispersal of the doxa does not mean that all *communication* must cease, but rather that the grounds for this communication and the form it takes must change. Values and other dispositions come to be inculcated largely through the medium of discourse rather than through direct practical experience or bodily hexis. We do not and can not live and understand the relationships between the multifarious and changing forms of life without some form of theoretical taxonomy. We come to live social relations vicariously through theory. Ideology begins to function to a much greater degree through the medium of language. But this necessarily means that a gap emerges between theory and practices, at least between those theories

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<sup>38</sup> Bourdieu's exact position on this seems a little hazy for he also wants to claim that the members of primary cultures where codification is less common actually have a more acute feel for the social game than members of modern society. *ibid.*, chapter 4.

and discourses which attempt to mediate relatively autonomous fields within society and people's experience in those fields.<sup>39</sup> Such theoretical accounts face a dilemma for, as Wittgenstein shows, a discourse's ability to function communicatively depends upon those that engage in it sharing in aspects of certain forms of life. In most cases these forms of life might be predominantly practical activities. But in a society where each person has a much more divergent practical perspective, where the forms of life experienced by people have less and less in common and are in a rapid and continuous state of change (e.g. modern society), the grounds upon which theory can carry communicative meaning become increasingly narrowed. Theory separates from practice and begins to become internalised, becomes itself a form of life in which people share, but a form of life which by this very action threatens to divorce itself from people's real experiences and values. Theory retains power in modern society because it plays such an important role in holding it together, allowing one part of society to communicate with another. But this very role is its undoing, since insofar as it does this it ceases to speak of people's places but replaces this diversity with its own internal and monolithic logic, its own internal grammar. Insofar as it ceases to express the practical experiences of the residents of certain fields it opens up the possibility of heterodoxy or dissent, culminating in the eventual overthrow of

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<sup>39</sup> The existence of this gap, between the language of a specialised practice like theoretical physics and that of ordinary life, is frequently noticed in attempts to translate and mediate between the two.

that theory and ways of life associated with it.<sup>40</sup>

To replace theory as such becomes impossible in modern societies as they are currently constituted. Theory is the current site of ideology's action in reproducing society, a society characterised by its very diversity. This inevitably seems to lead to the reification of theoretical categories and the sidelining of many people's lived experience. The grounds that theory can propose for unifying society are slim, and so it often chooses shallow categories, e.g. individualism, as unifying concepts. (See chapter 7.) Thus subjective and objective rationalities proceed hand in hand. The simplicity required of theory, a function of its need to communicate between disparate places, means that it has to operate at the level of the lowest common denominator of social experience, which it presently constitutes as that of the individual human, i.e. it is currently *de rigueur* to promote a theoretical framework of individualism (which in humanist terms means subjectivism). However, it is certainly possible to overcome certain of these humanist aspects of theory, those epistemological universalisms which go hand in hand with the political imposition of modern Western society. This requires that we deconstruct all aspects of theory as it is presently understood,

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<sup>40</sup> This change will itself only come about through its structural overdetermination. (See chapter 3.) That is, our current environmental problems might combine with an assault upon the presuppositions of humanist thought so as to undermine the authority of the current social paradigm. The increasing impact of environmental constraints upon society may well change this as people once again find a common ground of practical experience, as they did in their experience as classes in the process of the industrial revolution. This communality could inculcate values and dispositions at a different level from those induced by current theory and thus give grounds in a common form of life for a new revolutionary class, a new heterodoxy. This heterodoxy will of course also need to express itself theoretically, and one of the ways it will inevitably do this is through a re-theoretisation of our current predicament. Indeed this is part of the role the current work hopes to begin.

especially its claims to possess epistemological privilege.

### Re-contextualising Ethics: the Feminist Critique of Humanism

Without doubt the most important recent attempt to specifically question the role of theory in current moral paradigms is that undertaken by feminists like Annette Baier. They believe that theory, seen as a “systematic account of a fairly large area of morality, with a keystone supporting all the rest”<sup>41</sup> simply fails to express the concerns and experiences of women. The production of systematic, foundational and totalising theories favoured by humanist philosophers obscures the particular experiences of women who are subsumed under abstract and synchronistic discursive generalities. These generalities, it is argued, reflect predominately masculine paradigms. The production of abstract moral logics is undertaken by, and incorporates, a largely (though not exclusively) male world-view.<sup>42</sup> The feminist alternative to this humanist moral practice is commonly referred to as the “ethics of care”.<sup>43</sup>

This particular debate over the relations between contextual and theoretical ethics originally came to prominence through Carol Gilligan’s questioning of

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<sup>41</sup> Annette Baier “What do Women Want in Moral Theory” p. 55.

<sup>42</sup> Carol Gilligan *In A Different Voice*. Gilligan associates this claim with a thesis about the role of women as mothers and child carers which has distinctively conservative implications.

<sup>43</sup> There is a danger of being accused of tokenism in bringing feminist ethics in at this late stage of a thesis. However, I hope that it is plain that I see certain forms of the feminist project (generally speaking those which are not closely tied to liberal or socialist humanist problematics) as an important component of the critique of humanism. See for example, the importance placed upon the work of Seyla Benhabib in chapter 7 and the remarks on ecofeminism in chapter 3.

Lawrence Kohlberg's psychological studies which claimed to show six stages in the moral development of all human subjects.<sup>44</sup> Women typically reach only stage three of the developmental sequence of this supposedly universal ontogenetic pattern. In stage 3, the subject comes to employ techniques of empathy with others' problems and particular circumstances, thus contextual interactions are regarded as characteristic of this stage of morality. Few women, it is claimed, utilise either the abstract rules which characterise stage 4 or the universal generalisations of stages 5 and 6, the generalisations which typify utilitarian and deontological systems e.g., Rawls' *Theory of Justice*.

Gilligan claims that this does not indicate a congenital immaturity on the part of women; the contextual ethics which typify female thinking are not faulty or inferior in any way to those stages supposedly succeeding it. Quite the contrary. Gilligan claims that it is Kohlberg's developmental teleology which is sexist and Eurocentric. Although, as a matter of empirical fact, women tend to speak in a different contextual voice, this is actually a sign of their moral superiority, insofar as women are better equipped to understand real day to day problems where we need to take practical moral action at a personal level.

Whether or not the contextual voice is more closely aligned with women's valuations than men's (and I certainly don't want to deny that this is currently the case), and whatever the underlying causes of this alignment might be, it is certainly true that the dominant form of moral evaluation is an a-contextual moral logic which operates at a very abstract theoretical level. For example,

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<sup>44</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg *The Philosophy of Moral Development*.

the contextual voice gets little chance to speak in utilitarianism or rights-based theories. Values which do not fit precisely within the appointed theoretical framework are simply excluded as irrational or self-contradictory. (See the comments made by Beckerman in chapter 2.) Cheshire Calhoun claims that,

“...concentrating almost exclusively on rights of non-interference, impartiality, rationality, autonomy, and principles creates an ideology of the moral domain which has undesirable political implications for women.”<sup>45</sup>

To summarise, this feminist rejection of abstract theory involves at least three aspects.

First, the reconstruction of conceptions of the self to include factors which are frequently constitutive of women’s experiences of the world. This project is allied in many respects to the communitarian critique of the abstract humanist liberal subject and, like communitarianism, favours its replacement with a richer and more contextual conception of the subject. That is, the feminist critique claims that we should recognise the diversity present in concrete subjects and oppose attempts to define a norm which is so abstract as to be universalisable across genders, times, places etc.

Second, this rejection of a universal concept of human nature leads inevitably to the dismissal of universal moral theories which rely upon such foundations and to the re-emphasis of context in ethical evaluation, highlighting the importance of *practical* activity fitted to particular circumstance. The claim here is that, insofar as current moral theory

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<sup>45</sup> Cheshire Calhoun “Justice, Care Gender Bias” p. 453.

excludes attention to contextual detail in favour of the formal and abstract rules, it overlooks components of vital importance in determining values. (See here the critique of axiological theories in chapter 2 and the critique of subjective rationality in chapter 7 of this thesis.) The ethics of care emphasises *attention* to detail - to the particular idiosyncrasies of each case rather than providing general rules which are claimed to express and represent current ethical insights.

“This view does not imagine our moral understandings congealed into a compact theoretical instrument of impersonal decision for each person, but as deployed in shared processes of discourse, expression, interpretation and adjustment between persons.”<sup>46</sup>

Third, the ethics of care emphasises communication and inter-relationships rather than the lonely and impersonal calculus of autonomous and disinterested individuals. It abjures an allegedly neutral reason and recognises the importance of conversations which are always and already value-laden.

In all of these three senses the feminist programme outlined here leans towards an anti-humanism. However, in discussing ethical relations Gilligan has placed too much stress upon the importance of face to face contact and communication between those concerned. Whilst there is no doubt that care, to be effective, requires some knowledge of the particular circumstances, a less restrictive ethic of care might recognise the need to incorporate those members of the community who cannot speak for themselves and with whom

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<sup>46</sup>Margaret Urban Walker 'Moral Understandings: Alternative "Epistemology" for a Feminist Ethics' p. 166.

we might have no direct personal contact, including whales, trees, mountains, rivers etc.

There are also close parallels between the feminist critique of “theory”, typified by Baier and Gilligan, and that of postmodern philosophers like Jim Cheney. (See last chapter.) Both identify theory as synchronistic, essentialist and representational and argue against these tendencies towards abstraction and codification. However, whilst, to an extent, all theory has to be codified, and hence synchronistic and abstract, not all theory has to regard itself as representational or essentialist. Some anti-humanist theories are reflexive, in the sense that they recognise and attempt to explain the aporias which their own codification of the world entails. Cheney’s postmodernism and Gilligan’s feminist ethics do not adequately distinguish between theory in general and humanist conceptions of theory in particular, they mistakenly tar all theory with the same brush.<sup>47</sup> I would claim that given the importance of theory in the modern world it is important that we retain a space for a *critical theory*, in particular, theories which are able to oppose humanist tendencies at their own level. We cannot simply abandon all attempts to engage in theoretical discourse. The rejection of theory *en masse* would severely limit our understanding of modernity and our current predicament. We need to articulate our understandings of the roles of codification in society, we need theories of theoretical practices, which can allow, in Derrida’s terminology, for *différance* at the theoretical level.

The rejection of “theory” which the ethics of care and the postmodern ethics

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<sup>47</sup> Wittgenstein thought of having a line from Shakespeare’s King Lear “I will teach you differences” as a motto for the *Philosophical Investigations*.

of Jim Cheney advocate is mistaken because it seems necessary in any discussion to engage in some form of codification. The mythical language which Cheney supports is no less synchronistic than abstract theory, indeed it is *timeless* only because of the atemporal and conservative nature of the tribal societies in which it develops. Gilligan's conversations too will involve the use of abstract concepts. Rather than rejecting theory outright, we need to develop a post-humanist mythology which recognises itself as tied to particular sociological and environmental "places" or traditions, an anti-foundationalist myth to counter that of foundationalist humanism.<sup>48</sup>

This anti-humanist understanding might be summarised as follows. Theory engages in a necessary act of *codification*. That is, it posits a formal grammar or logic to explain the practical relations observed. However, not only is this logic a function of the dialectical relation between observer and observed, rather than a direct representation of the observed and her practices, but it is always synchronistic, it does not and cannot follow the vagaries of the practical activity of everyday life which is ruled by the habitus. This grammar runs the risk of becoming a single totalising framework which, when applied rigorously, swamps practical experience in a totalitarian wave of regulation. But to blame the theoretical world itself for our current predicament is to misunderstand the complexity of the situation and the historical and social processes which brought this situation about.

In the current backlash against Enlightenment thought, "totalising theory" has itself been regarded as the enemy of a postmodern theoretical pluralism.

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<sup>48</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno put it thus "Myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology" *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* p. xvi

The irony is that in attempting to escape from the *control* of monolithic theoretical logics some have started to look back with nostalgia to pre-modern societies with their shared values. They forget that this atheoretical doxa excludes the possibility of questioning that community's form of life at all. There is nothing liberal and pluralistic about such societies, and they have little in common with the theoretical anarchism expounded by postmoderns from their comfortable positions within late capitalist societies.

The absolute rejection of theory on the grounds of its totalising nature forgets that this totalisation is not an essential feature of theory itself but is associated with a humanistic conception of theory as something that is outside of practice. If we accept that theory can also be a discursive *expression* of place then we can reject a vision of theory as a teleological march towards truth, towards an accurate and transcendental *representation* of the world. Rather, theory is seen as a historically and socially relative form of practice, which evolves to cope with its present environment, as an evolutionary fitting in place rather than a teleological progression. Like biological evolution theory has only certain material bequeathed to it by history to work on. The past plays a continuous role in the expression of the present. This conception of theory as *critical hermeneutics* opposes the humanistic faith in formal rationality, it undermines the epistemological claims of such rationality and exposes its wider relations to politics, economics and ideology. For example subjective rationality's bogus claims to be a "neutral system" are seen as relying upon and supporting the current hegemony of humanism.

Formal logic liberates the bureaucrat from the need to inquire into the

particular case; it does away with the intuition and practical reasoning which come from acquaintance with, and involvement in, actual concrete moral circumstances. It replaces practical reasoning with an abstract and explicit rationality of rules, laws and calculus which only account for 'general' characteristics. But, as Bourdieu shows, these general and abstract characterisations are not neutral facts of the matter. They are recognised and imposed by particular societies and classes within societies and the process of abstraction and reductionism makes all things *commensurable, inter-changeable and tradable*. The 'clarification' produced by formal rationality entails a necessary oversimplification which edges society towards one-dimensionality, a monoculture which plays off the short-term gains made by a few humans against the survival of the planet. Formal rationality presents itself as neutral but embodies at its very heart a particular world-view. Rationalisation imposes an *official* line - it canonises particular conceptions of human nature, modes of life, etc., which replaces a *modus vivendi* with a cult of efficiency for its own sake.

Perhaps then, rather than dismissing ethical theory altogether, we can distinguish between humanist and anti-humanist ethical theories. The former consciously see themselves as uncovering and making explicit the underlying rational principles behind moral actions. The latter see ethical theory as a communicative discourse which is an expression of particular forms of life, rather than of fundamental principles. Thus those with differing forms of life, or with utopian expectations which fall outwith the current consensus, can not simply be included in a moral calculus which is itself a

feature of that ideological consensus.<sup>49</sup> As we have seen (in chapter 2) the intention behind humanist ethics is to provide a rubric which can be applied to a variety of situations to determine what is right and what wrong. Ethics is given a role as arbiter - as a tool for passing judgments or evaluating actions. Whilst supposedly neutral this very conception of ethics implies a particular understanding of the relations between theory and practice - a relation that claims to encapsulate and *represent* the *essential* features of moral activities and then re-apply them in different circumstances.

“Society is understood as an arena of rival and competing interests and what morality supplies are rules which from a neutral and impartial point of view set constraints upon how these interests may be pursued. The rules are neutral and impartial in that they are such that any rational person who has detached his or herself from the distorting causal influence of his or her interests would assent to them.”<sup>50</sup>

This humanist perspective attempts to reduce the irreducibly multi-level dynamism of communal relations to the one-dimensionality of a synchronistic and abstract system of rules.<sup>51</sup> We cannot formulate rules in abstraction; they can only be formulated from particular contexts, which necessarily implies that there are boundaries and limits to their ‘applications’ and that their form and content embodies particular social and environmental perspectives. There is thus a tension between the contextual background within which codification ensues and the a-contextual synchronicity which codification

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<sup>49</sup> Thus we return to the relationship between ideology and utopia which formed the basis for Mannheim’s problematic and of Ricoeur’s lectures - *Ideology and Utopia*. See chapter 4.

<sup>50</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre ‘Does Applied Ethics Rest on a Mistake’.

<sup>51</sup> Here lies the import of Althusser’s Spinozistic metaphysics: his refusal to reduce society’s complexity to a single formula.

entails. Humanism takes this a-contextuality as a sign of neutrality (when it embodies its own particular world-view) rather than a sign of imposition.

### The Habitus and Ethical theory: Towards an 'Epistemology' of Morals.

Bourdieu's synthesis of Althusserian, Bachelardian and Wittgenstienian perspectives can help us develop a anti- (or post-) humanist perspective. This requires that we make an epistemological break on a number of planes, which must change the taxonomy of discourse away from the categories presupposed and reified in humanism. First, this *coupure* must occur at the level of the concepts employed by an anti-humanist problematic: e.g., those of ideology, production, reproduction and practice. This change necessitates a change in our understanding of the concepts previously central to the humanist problematic e.g., consciousness, subject, human nature, (neutral) rationality.<sup>52</sup> Second, it must also be able to theoretically account for its own origins and those of the discourse of humanism which preceded it. (Just as it behaved relatively to explain Newtonian physics.) Third, this break also has to provide an understanding of "theory" itself, in terms of its epistemological relations to its contents and the wider social and natural environment. Bourdieu's theory of practice, which combines the subtlety of Wittgenstein's treatment of language with the non-reductive and relational metaphysics of Althusser, goes some way towards fulfilling this role. This anti-humanist framework focuses on the ideological role of theory in terms of the production and reproduction of modern society. It gives a broader theoretical framework within which to speak of the Frankfurt School's worries about formal

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<sup>52</sup> See chapter 3.

rationality and, at the same time, conjoins this with a view of ideology which is very similar to Althusser's.

Bourdieu stresses that the habitus is "that regulated disposition to generate regulated and regular behaviour outside any reference to rules; and in societies where the work of codification is not very advanced, the habitus is reproduced through and a feature of the modes of production."<sup>53</sup> Whilst Bourdieu may overemphasise the degree to which societies without codified rules exist (the difference between primary and modern civilisations), it is none the less true that in modern Western society such codifications abound. Yet, Bourdieu seems to suggest that the habitus somehow becomes less important in modern society. Whilst it may be true that codified language comes to have a more autonomous role in modern society one can still question the nature of its operation. If, as Althusser suggests, language operates ideologically beneath its surface meanings, i.e. in ways which are largely hidden to consciousness, then one might still be inclined to posit a habitus for modern societies. Instead of seeing modernity as characterised by the disappearance of a common doxa one could argue that it is the form taken by the doxa which has changed. In other words, the "feel for the game" characteristic of the habitus actually comes to be induced, to a large degree, by the incorporation of theory itself into the individuals dispositional and value systems rather than through bodily *hexis*. In modern society, theory becomes, as Althusser suggests, a relatively autonomous field of structuration. Rules which are more often juridical, set down in writing and given absolute status, form part and parcel of the environment in which the modern person develops. Indeed the individual's ability to incorporate these

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<sup>53</sup> Pierre Bourdieu *op. cit.*, n. 1 above, p.65.

quasi-juridical theories becomes a necessary part of the feel for modern forms of life, whether one is an academic, a computer programmer, a philosopher etc. However, this incorporation is not, as humanists suggest, just a conscious grasping of and subsequent application of concepts. The reason why theory is such a capable second line of defence when the doxa fails is not just because it replaces the implicit with the explicit, the strategy with the rule, opacity with transparency - but because it too acts ideologically: it is incorporated into the very being of the subject. It becomes her unconscious *second nature*.

The development of a separate level of theory has a fatal impact. At the same time as it opens up new fields of potential difference it also starts to inculcate its own dispositions in people. It can operate both critically and ideologically. The categories and taxonomies it operates with become reified in the structures of thought and action. Left to its own devices the generation of a *theoretical habitus*, in our case the ideology of individualism and the myth of humanism, might, in time, create a shared form of life - that of Marcuse's "one-dimensional man". Given time, as the theoretically induced habitus reinforces itself; reproduces itself throughout all fields of the social formation, it creates a new conformity, a new shared form of life in which people's values genuinely are shared and reproduced. If this process goes unchallenged in our society then perhaps future generations will come to be more and more like economic man. It was this vision, and its seeming inevitability, that engendered such a pessimistic appraisal of our current predicament by Weber and the Frankfurt school. World events seem, so far,

to have fully borne out such pessimism.<sup>54</sup> Theoretical practice emerged through its role as a second line of defence, a social cement for a continuously changing modernity. If, as humanism presupposes, types of synchronistic formal rationality gain ascendance, i.e. the ideological functioning of theory dominates its utopian potential, then we run the risk of becoming locked into that increasingly all pervasive bureaucratic and economic system which makes the Earth's destruction inevitable.

In a 'static' society (e.g. tribal or pre-modern) the possibility for thinking changes are few, the *doxa* is transmitted from generation to generation without much alteration. Given no external inputs a *modus vivendi* is reached and theoretical innovation is minimised. Indeed theory plays a relatively unimportant role. In our society, theory has become an important and relatively autonomous axis of structuration in its own respect. (In Althusserian terminology, a "theoretical practice".) Theory forms a part of the social structure, the (theoretical) environment which may become incorporated in the ongoing processes of social production and reproduction. Theory does not bypass the habitus but, in modern society, is itself a site of its operation. It is not separate from ideology, but a different mode of its transmission. Codified language carries its codes unbeknown to those who think it. Just as the economic and political spheres emerge from, and then encourage, certain forms of life, theory too plays a role in the determination of social structures. Sometimes theory is in concert with other structuring practices and they operate to overdetermine the resultant society, sometimes it is in opposition to, it *contradicts* other social components

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<sup>54</sup> For reasons which will become apparent I do not believe that this conception of economic man is sufficiently robust to maintain a cohesive social structure. The challenges that our current environmental predicament poses may well be its undoing.

expressing a heterodoxy.

Humanism, as a theoretical paradigm, has grown up inscribed with and expressing certain social and environmental relations. It imposes this ideological complex upon those who have little choice but to think it.

Opposition to the economic and political aspects of humanism, which have wreaked such havoc on the non-human world, will only be successful if this opposition too is overdetermined. That is, those of us who value the non-human environment need to think oppositionally, in different and unorthodox ways which allow us to express the values which emerge in our forms of life.

The post-humanist paradigm outlined here operates with concepts of production and reproduction, social practice and ideology etc., rather than a taxonomy of fact / value, subject / object. It rejects those theses which posit *essential, qualitative* differences between the human and non-human realms - differences like conscious (transparent) / unconscious (opaque) and free (subject) / determined (objects). Consciousness, I have argued, is never transparent; freedom is only ever relative. We do not escape from the world via the magic of the concept. As Wittgenstein and Marx both show, the idea that language can step outside of the world, to reach a position over and above it is a fallacy. It is the philosophers' stone of humanism. Thus we should not see theory as throwing light upon past mistakes in the sense of revealing our true nature. Rather anti-humanism preaches a "hermeneutic of suspicion" and in anti-humanism's deconstruction and reconstruction of current problematics philosophy loses its last claims to reveal ultimate truths. Instead it becomes merely one practice amongst many - in today's society neither the least nor the most important.

I now wish to turn to the implications of this anti-foundational and critical theory for ethics. One purpose of this thesis has been to argue that those of us with radical environmental, political or feminist views need not attack theory *qua* theory but do need alternative theoretical paradigms to think our different practical experiences. These paradigms need not be created *de novo* but can be synthesised from our humanist and anti-humanist traditions, whether they be Romanticism, post-structuralism, Marxism etc., to create a post-humanism. This synthesis is no more and no less 'arbitrary' than humanism, but it does provide an alternative field of thought and action which can be opposed to the hegemony of humanist rationality.

The acceptance of this view of theory completely transforms moral philosophy, in terms of both its scope and contents. It necessitates a different conception of the relations between moral theory and moral practice. Theories no longer provide rubrics for the calculation of right or wrong; we cannot have the same concept of *applied* ethics.<sup>55</sup> Instead theories have themselves to be seen as expressions of particular places in the world, expressions which are *always already* value laden. Theory is *not* transparent to the user. It cannot provide a neutral tool to be applied without prejudice. It is intrinsically prejudiced and those theories which claim to provide absolute criteria, whether utilitarian, deontological etc., are themselves attempts to impose a form of moral absolutism upon people and nature.

Whatever one may think of Gilligan's claims about the different voices of men

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<sup>55</sup> See MacIntyre *op. cit.*, n. 50 above.

and women, there is surely something right in her emphasis upon the importance of re-contextualising ethics. I would argue that this re-contextualising must also emphasise, as Gilligan points out, the communicative dimension. The formal and abstract solution is to work “impersonally through systems of logic and law”, the contextual and narrative account works through a “process of communication” which involves the forming of a relationship between those concerned.<sup>56</sup> She is right to reject the formalisation of humanist conceptions insofar as they embody a political discourse which excludes and marginalises certain values and modes of experience which are constitutive of being, in favour of an allegedly neutral (but actually partial) rationality.<sup>57</sup> Gilligan is right to bring ethical theory down from its pedestal and place it at the heart of communities. She shares this wish with some of those ethicists referred to as discourse theorists.

### Discourse and the Community of Ethics

As we have seen, post-enlightenment communitarians recognise the constitutive role played by the community in producing concrete individual subjects with heartfelt values. Discourse ethics provides one possible solution to the problem of accounting for the different valuational constitutions of concrete individuals and societies. Rather than applying (imposing) general axiologies to particular situations, discourse ethics aims to engender communicative discussion between interested parties. Discourse ethics rejects the claims of philosophy to provide *expert* opinions

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<sup>56</sup> Gilligan *op. cit.*, n. 42 above, p. 29.

<sup>57</sup> Bernard Williams *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* also argues for less abstract and more contextual conceptions of moral reasoning.

or neutral methodologies for determining the moral rights and wrongs of a particular situation. Instead it represents a radical extension of democracy. One of the foremost proponents of discourse ethics, Jurgen Habermas, envisages a procedural universalism which, recognising the complex and already value-laden life of concrete individuals, aims to reach consensual conclusions about ethical issues. He envisages a moral community engaged in a discourse which all involved in consider fair, i.e. an ideal speech situation.

“Discourse ethics replaces the Kantian categorical imperative by a procedure of moral argumentation. Its principle postulates [that] Only those norms may claim to be valid that could meet with the consent of all affected in their role as participants in a practical discourse.”<sup>58</sup>

Such debate has to be unimpeded by formal constraints other than those which *all* those participating in the debate would recognise and agree to. Personally held values become objectified communally just as they were, in a different way, originally constituted communally. In many respects this procedural universalisation can be seen as a more sophisticated version of Rawls’ *Theory of Justice*, with the sole difference that no universal assumptions are made about the nature of the individuals concerned. Habermas’ individuals are not those impoverished atomistic creatures of humanist discourse and calculus. However, Habermas is still engaged in setting up universal and formalised criteria of justice when he posits an “ideal speech situation”. To this extent it is pertinent to ask why (and if) *all* people need consent to the norms of discourse ethics for it to be valid.

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<sup>58</sup> Jurgen Habermas *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* p. 197.

Seyla Benhabib argues that there is no need for discourse ethics to make such grand universal claims. One could retain the insights of discourse ethics, its recognition of concrete individuals and its fundamentally intersubjective nature, whilst seeing ethical discourse itself in terms of a “...continuation of ordinary moral conversations in which we seek to come to terms with and appreciate the concrete others’ point of view.”<sup>59</sup>

“In such a conversation of moral justification as envisaged by communicative ethics, individuals do not have to view themselves as “unencumbered” selves. It is not necessary for them to define themselves independently either of the ends they cherish or of the constitutive attachments which make them what they are. In entering practical discourses individuals are not entering an “original position.” They are not being asked to define themselves in ways which are radically counter-factual to their everyday identities. This model of moral argumentation does not predefine the set of issues which can be legitimately raised in the conversation and neither does it proceed from an unencumbered concept of the self.”<sup>60</sup>

Instead of reaching a consensus we may only be able to reach an understanding at the level of discourse. But at least an understanding of this sort has advantages over formal systems of *applied* ethics in that it is aware of the particularity of cases and recognises that the community is the proper sphere of ethical deliberation. The community is both the sphere where such values originated and the nearest we can come to a sphere where their

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<sup>59</sup> Seyla Benhabib *Situating the Self : Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p.73.

implications can be understood. However, ethical values are also produced through our non-linguistic practical experiences, our dialectical relations to our surrounding natural and social environments. (See chapter 6.) In situations where a sub-set of the totality of practices imposes particular forms of rationality then it may become literally impossible, for those constituted through different channels, to speak their values at all. In present systems of formal rationality their values are simply regarded as subjective expressions of (unreasonable) *feelings*.

Thus those of us who are in part *constituted* by our experiences of nature as something other than a resource, for example as something mysterious, beautiful, spiritual, different, and / or worthy of respect, are excluded from the economic and utilitarian calculus current in modern society. Our voice is not heard because the language we have open to us is either seen as 'arcane' or 'emotional', as something not fitting the current circumstances of the modern world. Thus simply sitting over a table to discuss values is not enough in itself, for the very language we use is tainted. The post-humanist problematic must try to give voice to these different experiences.

When considering the environment, it is obvious that even discourse ethics will not allow those members of our community which do not speak with our voice direct entrance to the community of values. The wilderness is still excluded from the communal fireside. It is up to those of us who feel its presence to cross the dividing line between the two and to bring something of the fear and wonder of the non-human back into our increasingly narrow horizons, whether by poetry, such as the work of Gary Snyder, or by philosophy in a broad sense. We also have to live this alternative set of

values practically. Alternative values can only be incorporated and felt by opposition to the hegemony of current consumerist lifestyles. We can retain little of our sense of 'nature' and its value if we live a life dominated by the car, dish washer, and tumble dryer. These icons of modernity place limits on our values as we internalise their import. They are a mark of our subservience to the most destructive regime the world has ever known.

It is vital that we overcome the anthropocentric tendencies which have led even these authors who object to the current consensus in moral theory to exclude the non-human from the construction of our communities and therefore our personal identities. What is required is a form of communion with nature as well as with our fellow human beings. We need to build a community which is *considerate*, in the broadest sense of the word, to all of its members, recognising them as having certain roles and relations in respect of the community as a whole and particular individuals. This does not mean that we have to posit these relations in a timeless and absolute manner or award some statutory notion of equality to all members of a community. We cannot, I argue, envisage any procedural norms which will satisfy all members of the community. We have to recognise and cherish differences in communities as well as similarities.

This thesis advocates a paradigm transformation; one that cannot work in isolation at the level of theory alone, but necessitates the production of different forms of life. Primarily it advocates the decentralisation of society and the resurrection of communities which are imbued with ecological awareness. It is a utopian theory in the sense that it posits an alternative to

the current world.<sup>61</sup> It is not common sense or realistic in the sense that it does not comply with, but actively opposes, current ideology. It is an alternative which reconstitutes the categories of humanism and makes a theoretical space for a variety of post-humanist common-senses to operate. This radical shift in paradigm is aligned with that espoused by radical greens and deep ecologists.

Thus, if one reads Arne Naess' work from an anti-humanist perspective, one can see that his whole conception of the human self (see chapter 2) recognises the constitution of concrete individuals in terms which are wider even than those proposed by communitarian philosophers (chapter 7). Naess sees that the concrete individual is not a shallow abstraction, but is constituted by her place in a wider community. This community is not only based in a shared ethical language (which is where Taylor, for example, places his emphasis) or even by the whole community of *social* relations (Althusser) but also includes the 'natural' communities of which we are a part: *mixed communities* of different species and 'objects' (e.g. ecosystems) which come to be recognised in the dialectical of practices between human and non-human influences.

Naess argues (and I agree with him) that in relatively stable *communities* (as opposed to modern societies) a sort of *modus vivendi* is reached between these different members of the community. Naess provides an example of the problems associated with codification as it applies to a "mixed community" of bears wolves and humans. In Norway bears occasionally kill

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<sup>61</sup> There is a long tradition of 'green' utopias which have a constitutive relation to radical ecological politics and philosophy. See, for example, Robert Nisbet 'The Ecological Community'.

sheep. This is expected to happen and regarded as perfectly normal. Farmers are paid compensation for their losses and bears are not hunted unless they become persistent offenders. Bears and humans develop particular relations to each other as members of a community. These relations (which include ethical relations) form the strands which weave the community together on all levels and are incorporated into the concrete individuals in those communities. The relations between bears, sheep, wolves and people are complex and are certainly not reducible to formal claims e.g. about all members of the community being 'equally' valuable.<sup>62</sup> Different species come to have different relations and are valued accordingly. Naess says that these values are rooted in cultural traditions but we might use Wittgenstein's terms and say forms of life. And, since anti-humanism needs to break down the barriers between fact / value, we might further adapt Wittgenstein and say that the value of an 'object' depends upon its place in the form of life which recognises it. This conception of value maintains an ethical anti-essentialism.

Modern Western society cannot reach such a *modus vivendi* because continual *change* is its guiding star, whether through economic growth or 'progress' of some other kind. Modern society also requires to power this change the continual discovery and utilisation of 'resources'. Thus anything which sets certain resources out of bounds will be anathema. The utopian dimension of theory, its ability to be a catalyst for change, is stifled insofar as it is tied to a narrow humanism which plays the ideological role of replacing one form of 'social cement' i.e., the "habitus", with another i.e., "formal

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<sup>62</sup> Although Naess himself often makes his 'biocentric' claims in terms of "equality" between species and individuals of different species.

rationality”.

For these reasons environmentalists must not pander to formal rationality- must not get embroiled in a form of rationality which gets its prestige from its role in supporting, and conforming to, the very form of humanist society which necessarily destroys 'nature' in order to survive. The growth of practical solutions depends upon a radical agenda which breaks from modern Western society in a number of fundamental ways to produce new forms of ecologically aware communities. Those who spend their time developing methodologies which suit the bureaucrat are helping, not hindering, the long-term destruction of the planet.

The radical post-humanism I have outlined here, which one might call an Ecosophy (after Naess, see chapter 2), aligns itself with aspects of deep ecology, eco-feminism, and radical green politics which see 'progress' in terms of a steady state economy, decentralisation, local (bioregional) modes of living and living in a rough balance with nature (*a modus vivendi*). Ethical discourse could become an arena of conversation which recognises and communicates the particularity of events, traditions etc. rather than a formal logic imposed from above.

The choice between conformity and opposition is one of degree, but this makes it no less important. We cannot move from where we are now to where we want to be, from ideology to Utopia, either by rejecting our heritage outright and returning to Cheney's primitivism, or by proposing a postmodern 'childhood'. We need to do more than "play amongst the ruins" of modernity. We need to match theory with political and economic strategies. These

strategies have to recognise the constitutive role of ideology in producing our values and take proper account of the depths at which ideology functions. Theory allows us to criticise current forms of life, to a degree, but this theoretical expression of our oppositional place is always a hermeneutic criticism, a criticism which is necessarily tied in some way to where we are now. We are embedded within particular social and environmental relations which produce our values. This embeddedness can however be the source of our opposition to certain aspects of that society. Because of our positions as concrete individuals standing in co-constitutive relations to a 'natural' environment which is being destroyed and a society engaged in that destruction we can come to feel and voice that opposition. Herbert Marcuse spoke in his last lecture (delivered in 1979) of "Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society".<sup>63</sup> As Kellner states,

"[a] radical ecology... which relentlessly criticised environmental destruction, as well as human beings, and that struggled for a society without violence, destruction, and pollution was part of Marcuse's vision of liberation."<sup>64</sup>

Marcuse emphasised the "*introjection*" of society within individuals and the dialectical relations between the individual, society and nature. Humanity is embedded in 'nature' and 'culture' and, paradoxically, this embeddedness both constrains our thoughts and facilitates criticism. It is in this dialectic between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, between ideology and utopia, that any hopes for the future must lie.

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<sup>63</sup> Herbert Marcuse 'Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society'.

<sup>64</sup> Douglas Kellner Commentary on Herbert Marcuse 'Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society' p. 45.

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