



## THE CLASSICAL-OBJECTIVE INTERPRETATION OF HUMAN EXISTENCE: FROM ANCIENT ATOMISM TO DARWIN AND MARX

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### ABSTRACT

*The article examines the classical-objective tradition of interpreting human existence, within which the human being is understood as an object subordinated to the order of being and determined by external causes, and therefore as a result rather than a free origin. The aim is to reconstruct the inner logic of this tradition and to identify both its achievement and its limit. Using comparative-historical and conceptual analysis of primary philosophical texts, the study traces the tradition from ancient atomism and Aristotelian naturalism, through the mechanistic materialism of Descartes, La Mettrie and Holbach, to its nineteenth-century scientific culmination in the evolutionary theory of Darwin and the social theory of Marx. The analysis shows that the objective interpretation achieves a genuine insight into the conditionedness of the human by nature and society, yet, taken in isolation, it cannot account for human freedom, self-consciousness and moral responsibility. It is concluded that this limit necessitates the complementary subjective interpretation and, ultimately, a dialectical synthesis of object and subject.*

### Introduction

The question of what the human being is constitutes one of the perennial problems of philosophy, and it is ontological in nature, for it concerns the place of the human within the order of being and its mode of existence. Throughout the history of philosophy this question has been answered along two divergent lines. The first interprets the human being primarily as an object — a being determined by an order that precedes and surrounds it, and hence as

a result of external causes. The second interprets the human being as a subject — a free origin that posits its own existence and confers meaning upon the world. The present article is devoted to the first of these lines, which may be termed the classical-objective interpretation of human existence.

The relevance of reconstructing this tradition is twofold. Historically, it represents one of the two great axes around which the philosophical understanding of the human has been



organised. Systematically, its naturalistic and reductionist impulse remains alive in many contemporary scientific conceptions of the human — from sociobiology to certain versions of social and technological determinism — so that a critical reconstruction of its logic and limits retains more than antiquarian interest.

The aim of the article is to reconstruct the inner logic of the objective interpretation and to identify both its genuine achievement and its inherent limit. The study forms part of a wider research project whose central thesis understands the human being as a dialectical unity of object and subject; the reconstruction of the objective pole offered here is a necessary moment of that larger argument.

#### **Literature review and methodology**

The two interpretive traditions are well attested in the scholarly literature on philosophical anthropology. The objective line is represented, at its origin, by ancient atomism and Aristotelian naturalism, and, in modern times, by mechanistic materialism and by the social and biological sciences of the nineteenth century. The subjective line, which falls outside the scope of the present article, is associated with existentialism and the philosophy of life. The aim here is not an exhaustive survey but a focused reconstruction of the objective tradition through its decisive representatives.

The study is theoretical and historico-philosophical in character. It employs comparative-historical analysis, which follows the objective interpretation across successive epochs

and identifies the continuity of its guiding idea beneath changing scientific vocabularies; conceptual analysis, which reconstructs the logical structure of each position and clarifies its central notions of cause, necessity, nature and freedom; and comparison, which assesses the respective strengths and limits of the positions examined. The source base consists of primary philosophical texts of the tradition, supplemented by authoritative scholarly editions, so that the inner logic of the tradition may be exhibited as clearly as possible.

#### **Results**

##### **The naturalistic conception in ancient philosophy**

The objective interpretation has its earliest roots in ancient philosophy. In the atomism of Democritus the human being, like everything else that exists, is regarded as a configuration of atoms moving in the void; even the soul is composed of finer, more mobile atoms, so that the human is explained entirely from within the order of nature [7]. Here, in nucleus, lies the founding gesture of the objective tradition: the human is to be explained by the same principles that explain any natural body.

Aristotle gives this naturalistic orientation a more differentiated form. In his treatise on the soul, the soul is defined not as a separate substance but as the form of a living body, inseparable from it as sight is from the eye [1]. The human being is classified within the order of living things as a “rational animal”, distinguished by reason yet firmly situated within the natural and political order that conditions it. The Stoic tradition reinforces this tendency: for the Stoics the human being is a part of a



cosmos governed throughout by an immanent rational necessity (logos), and human life is fulfilled by aligning itself with a cosmic order that it does not create [9]. Across these otherwise different ancient positions a common thread is discernible: the human being is understood from within an encompassing order of nature or cosmos, as a part determined by the whole rather than as an origin determining itself.

### **Mechanistic materialism of the modern age**

The objective interpretation receives a radically new form in the modern age, under the influence of the mechanistic natural science of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The decisive premise is supplied, paradoxically, by a dualist: in conceiving the body as an extended substance (*res extensa*) governed wholly by mechanical laws, Descartes represented the living body as a kind of machine, reserving freedom and thought for a separate immaterial mind [4]. The very sharpness of this division, however, invited a materialist simplification.

That simplification was carried through by La Mettrie, whose work *Machine Man* abolished the Cartesian dualism and extended the mechanical model to the whole human being, mind included: thought itself was treated as a function of bodily organisation [8]. Holbach completed this line in his *System of Nature*, in which the human being is presented as a wholly natural being subject without exception to the universal chain of cause and effect; what is called free will is, on this view, an illusion arising from ignorance of the causes that determine us [5]. In

mechanistic materialism the objective interpretation reaches a first culmination: the human being is conceived as fully naturalised and fully determined — an object among objects, distinguished from other natural bodies only by its complexity.

### **The nineteenth-century scientific culmination: Darwin and Marx**

In the nineteenth century the objective interpretation acquires its most powerful scientific expression in two complementary forms. The natural form is given by Darwin, whose account of the descent of the human being situates it within the continuous process of biological evolution: the human is the product of natural selection, continuous with the animal world in its origin, its body and, in large measure, its mental faculties [3]. With Darwin the naturalistic intuition of antiquity receives empirical and theoretical confirmation.

The social form is given by Marx, who locates the essence of the human being in the totality of its social relations, defining it, in the sixth of the Theses on Feuerbach, as “the ensemble of social relations” [10]. On this view the human being is shaped by the material and economic conditions of its existence, and consciousness is conditioned by social being rather than the reverse. Just as Darwin objectifies the human in relation to nature, Marx objectifies it in relation to society and history. Different in content, the two accounts share the orientation of the objective tradition: the human being is to be explained by the conditions, natural or social, that produce it.

### **Discussion**



The results permit an assessment of both the achievement and the limit of the objective interpretation. Its achievement is genuine: it establishes, with increasing rigour, the conditionedness of the human being — the fact that the human is embedded in, and shaped by, the orders of nature and society, and cannot be understood in abstraction from them. Any adequate philosophy of the human must preserve this insight; a conception of the human as pure, unconditioned freedom would be no less one-sided than the objectivism it opposes.

Yet the objective interpretation encounters a definite limit. If the human being is nothing but the product of external causes, then its freedom, its self-consciousness and its capacity for moral responsibility remain unexplained — indeed, the very activity of the inquirer who frames the objective explanation cannot itself be accounted for in purely objective terms. To reduce the human wholly to an object is to lose precisely the subject that distinguishes it from other objects.

It is no accident that the decisive recognition of this limit is associated with Kant, who distinguished the human being as a phenomenon, subject to the necessity of nature, from the human being as a noumenon, capable of moral self-determination [6]. With this distinction the dimension that the objective tradition cannot capture — freedom as the ground of moral

responsibility — is explicitly opened, and the way is prepared for the subjective interpretation of human existence. As Cassirer observed, the question of the human being cannot be settled by any single science that treats it merely as one object among others, for the human is also the being that interprets itself [2].

### Conclusion

The reconstruction undertaken here permits the following conclusions. First, the classical-objective interpretation of human existence forms a continuous tradition extending from ancient atomism and Aristotelian naturalism, through the mechanistic materialism of Descartes, La Mettrie and Holbach, to its nineteenth-century scientific culmination in Darwin and Marx. Second, the unifying principle of this tradition is the understanding of the human being as an object and a result — a being derived from, and determined by, an order that precedes it. Third, the tradition achieves a genuine and indispensable insight into the conditionedness of the human, but, taken in isolation, it cannot account for freedom, self-consciousness and moral responsibility. Fourth, this very limit necessitates the complementary subjective interpretation of human existence and, ultimately, a dialectical synthesis in which the human being is understood as a unity of object and subject — the horizon of the wider research to which this study belongs.

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