

**HUMAN AND SOCIAL PROGRESS:  
PROJECTS AND PERSPECTIVES**

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines three important conceptions of social and human progress, evaluates them critically, and proposes an alternative conception of a rather different type.

The first three conceptions are respectively found in, or at least based on, Condorcet's theory of the historical progress of the sciences and the arts; Adam Smith's conception of the progressive increase of national wealth; and Karl Marx's ideal of the communist society. Despite their fundamental differences, these three theories have several common elements. Each one proposes a social project aimed at achieving an ideal society; each ultimately seeks the improvement of the human condition; each focuses however on social rather than human progress, so that its conception of the latter (and of humanness) must be constructed from a set of associated ideas about human nature, life, needs, worth, potential, or fulfilment, and about relations among these.

The social projects concerned have all become prominent in modern times. In Condorcet's case there is what may be called the *scientific-technological* project, based on an ideal of humanness which promotes knowledge as the universal means of unlimited benefit to the progress of virtue, material wealth, liberty and equality. Smith supports the *economic* project, but seems to hold two mutually exclusive ideals of humanness: the 'path of wealth and greatness' (where wealth is valued above virtue, liberty and security) and the 'path of wisdom and virtue' (where virtue is placed above liberty, security and wealth). Marx advocates the *political* project, with an ideal of humanness in which creative activity is the end of all freedom, and freedom is the end of all material wealth.

Although very different in content, these three projects all adopt a *static-universalist* perspective, in which the order of priority among the desirable dimensions of humanness is considered absolute, universal, immutable and empirically

determined. Moreover, in each case there is *one* dimension regarded as *the* universal means of (almost) unlimited benefit to the progress of all others.

By analysing the conceptual evolution of certain ideas from Condorcet to Daniel Webster, from Adam Smith to Friedrich Hayek, and from Marx to V. I. Lenin, I demonstrate the vulnerability of the *pyramidal model* of ideal humanness (promoted by the static-universal perspective) to anti-humanist and reductionist interpretations.

I propose instead a *dynamic-relational* perspective, in which: (a) all relations among dimensions of humanness are regarded as context-dependent; (b) no assumption is made that these relations will obtain in all circumstances; (c) some relations (including that of priority) may be seen as subject to choice; and (d) no one dimension of humanness may be regarded as *the* universal means of endless benefit to all others. Within this perspective I promote a *constellation* model of ideal humanness, in which all dimensions are (empirically) inter-limiting and (desirably) inter-supportive. This model may not promise the possibility of designing and implementing successful large-scale social systems to facilitate human progress, but it does provide an effective critical instrument for safeguarding ideals of human fulfilment against technocratic and reductionist distortions.

## DECLARATION

*This is to certify that:*

- (i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,*
- (ii) due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used,*
- (iii) the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of bibliographies and appendices.*

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Cristina Neesham

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# THE NADIR OF 'PROGRESS'

## - General Introduction -

*Or indolent, to each extreme they fall,  
To trust in everything, or doubt of all.*

### 1. Taking the pulse

Progress, one of the dominant culture-shaping ideas of our modern civilisation, is on trial. The main accusations are: the manufacturing of illusions, the creation of new and unnecessary suffering and problems, ineffectiveness against epidemics of disenchantment and despair, and loss of meaning.

All these symptoms are as many valid reasons to consider a radical review of the central concepts driving philosophical thinking about humankind today. Has the idea of progress come close to its use-by date?

First and foremost, it is important to distinguish here between *empirical* questions (such as whether the GDP of an economy is improving) and *evaluative* questions (such as whether an improvement of the GDP should count as progress, or as the most important, or even the only, measure of progress). The challenge of our time is not so much at the empirical level, where answers tend to be fairly accurate, provided that the evaluation criteria employed for this purpose are unambiguous. Tools can usually be improved until they serve the purpose. The enduring issue has always been clarifying the purpose itself.

The discouraging factor is not that progress cannot be achieved. In fact, in many strictly specified directions, the reality of progress is undeniable. When seeking progress, the almost insoluble difficulty seems to lie in establishing what it is that we are seeking to achieve in the first place. In a world fragmented by apparently irreconcilable ideologies, one of the key questions for our time is: what should count as progress?

Far from being confined to academic circles, the idea of progress permeates almost every aspect of our lives. It is a recurrent theme in our thoughts, actions and communications. It rings loudly in the language of justification in political discourse, economic analysis and public debate; and it lurks in the background, silent but resilient, in the sphere of our secret and very personal aspirations. In *The Age* of 31 January 2004, Richard Eckersley<sup>1</sup> wrote: ‘We assume that progress always makes our lives better. It’s time we re-examined what really matters – and what makes us truly happy.’

## **2. Historical co-ordinates**

The soaring idea of progress, unleashed from the grip of deism by the humanist revolution of the European Renaissance, has been the vehicle of a wide range of moods and attitudes, a range limited at one end by a constructive and all-embracing enthusiasm encouraged by discoveries of tremendous potential, and at the other end by sceptical, cynical and nihilist reactions to a pattern of unfulfilled hopes.

In European culture, modern preoccupations with the idea of progress are generally thought to have originated in the revolutionary social projects of the Enlightenment<sup>2</sup>. While the idea itself has much older roots, going back to ancient Greek thought, it is only in modern times that it has been elaborated into conceptions aspiring to universality in time and space, in an effort to account for humankind as a whole, for a globally shared life and destiny<sup>3</sup>.

The constant preoccupation of philosophers and social theorists with the development of conceptions of progress (even when taking the form of utopian, abstract, speculative exercises) may be interpreted as indicative of a perceived need for an adequate response (through human action, usually placed at a collective rather than individual level) to certain entrenched problems, ills or concerns seriously affecting human existence. Some recurrent candidates for the status of such entrenched problems have been: ignorance, powerlessness, poverty, violence, oppression, disease and other suffering, injustice, and loss of nature’s gifts<sup>4</sup>.

Intellectual attempts to address these problems, usually at the level of humankind as a whole, have shaped visions of progress around an ideal state in which such evils no longer occur and the possibility for them to occur is forever removed. In this sense, thinkers like Condorcet, Adam Smith and Karl Marx, for example, can be symbolically brought together through their engagement in social projects with similar objectives. The common question for all three was: What should we do, as humankind, in a concerted effort, to free ourselves and our fellow human beings from oppressing conditions?

It is obvious, however, that the conceptions of these authors differ greatly with respect to the answer they provide to this question. For Condorcet, the answer to all social ills was human reason in its ideal state of expansion and refinement; for Adam Smith, it was an ideal system of increasing material prosperity; whereas for Marx it was an ideal social order characterised by non-exploitative, non-alienating political institutions. In each case, the content of these ideals reveals the ultimate goals of humankind and the criteria to be used in evaluating progress (such as control of nature through knowledge and skill, material wealth, or political organisation). Hence, the methods or means recommended by each of the three authors for the attainment of the respective goals are also different. While Condorcet pleaded for universal equality, Smith postulated a system of natural liberty and Marx promoted the organising principles of communist society<sup>5</sup>.

### **3. Paradigms of social progress**

To organise in some way the historical material available to us, I propose that we use the concept of *paradigm*<sup>6</sup>, understood as a pattern of thinking about the progress of society, which is characterised by providing a particular answer to the question of what constitutes social progress.

For example, any conception of social progress identifying the valued object with technological systems and the valuation criteria with criteria inherent in the development of technological systems (e.g. power, speed, precision) will belong to

the *technological paradigm*. This does not necessarily involve assuming that the progress of technological systems is the only criterion that matters, but it is seen as, in some ways, the most important. Similarly, we can group historical approaches to progress into an *economic* paradigm, a *political* paradigm, a *social-relations* paradigm, a *moral* paradigm, etc.

In terms of their power and prominence in society, the dominant paradigms asserted so far have been: the scientific-technological, the economic, and the political. They have been dominant enough to command resources for the implementation of large-scale social projects, to deviate considerably from the original intentions of these projects, and to have such destructive effects that critical reactions to them often resulted not just in questioning their core structural assumptions but in desperately dismissing the drive for progress altogether, as some kind of social *malaise*.

By contrast, some recessive (i.e. historically not dominant) paradigms of thought on progress are: the *social relations* paradigm (on the rise), the *ecological* paradigm (on the rise), the *moral* paradigm, the *aesthetic* paradigm, and the *spiritual* paradigm.

What is important to observe here is that paradigms do not just group similar theories about progress, but that each paradigm forges a distinct path or marks a distinct historical evolution of a particular idea about social progress. Influential theories of social progress, like those of Condorcet, Smith and Marx, are considered by historians to have created ample trends and movements of thought around them, stimulating intellectual debates and response theories aimed at applying the premises of the matrix theory to a wide variety of areas and levels of experience.

Accordingly, it is generally believed that Condorcet's vision of reason as indefinite progress of knowledge inspired later conceptions of social progress understood in terms of technological advancement, and of increasing human capacity to master the laws and powers of nature.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the trend of thought created by Adam Smith (among others) is considered to be the source of modern conceptions of progress as growth of material wealth, with economic productivity and efficiency as

central evaluating criteria.<sup>8</sup> Finally, Marx's conception of progress is regarded as crucial in the proliferation of a particular group of conceptions which define social progress in terms of the improvement of political organisation, mainly through a consolidation of the power of the state and its bureaucracy, with a view to controlling and regulating both modes and relations of economic production.<sup>9</sup>

As dominant paradigms, each of the three groups discussed here (the scientific-technological, the economic and the political) has enjoyed sufficient historical momentum to acquire a 'skeleton in the cupboard', although by now the errors committed in the name of each principle are so obvious that the cupboard looks more like a showcase or display window with their respective debris for all to see.

Thus, the scientific-technological approach to social progress is said to have produced the large technical systems as deterministic structures of modern society, which represent an oppressive, even brutal obstacle to human fulfilment<sup>10</sup>. Similarly, the economic approach is often made responsible for the irrational destruction of the environment and the exacerbation or even creation of poverty in the Third World through reductionist development projects<sup>11</sup>. Finally, the political approach based on the Marxist model is regarded as the ideological parent of some of the most oppressive regimes in the history of humanity<sup>12</sup>.

#### **4. Post-modern critiques of the dominant paradigms: anti-humanism and unidimensionality**

In the aftermath of some disastrous outcomes resulting from the application of the dominant paradigms to human and social life, two main charges have recurrently been brought against these paradigms, namely that their underlying premises fail to recognise (1) the necessity to subordinate the 'needs' of social systems to the imperatives of human life and human development; and (2) the plural (or multi-dimensional) nature of social and human progress.



In a radical critique of the dominance of systemic or technical (non-humanist) thinking in the progress of human civilisation, Jacques Ellul<sup>13</sup> elaborates on the phenomenon of *technique* as the most insidious and dangerous enemy of community life and of human life in general:

‘The most recent sociological studies (even those made by optimists) hold that technique is the destroyer of social groups, of communities (of whatever kind), and of human relations... Technique has progressively mastered *all* the elements of civilization... Man himself is overpowered by technique and becomes its object. The technique which takes man for its object thus becomes the center of society; this extraordinary event (which seems to surprise no one) is often designated as *technical civilization*. The terminology is exact and we must fully grasp its importance. *Technical civilization* means that our civilization is constructed *by* technique (makes a part of civilization only what belongs to technique), *for* technique (in that everything in this civilization must serve a technical end), and *is* exclusively technique (in that it excludes whatever is not technique or reduces it to technical form).’ (Ellul, *TS*, pp. 126–127)

And further:

‘Technique’s own internal necessities are determinative. Technique has become a reality in itself, self-sufficient, with its special laws and its own determinations.’ (Ellul, *TS*, p. 134)

Applied to social and human progress, technical thinking promotes as goals of progress those criteria which are inherent in the development of technical systems, and not in the development of human beings from a holistic perspective. In other words, according to Ellul, technical thinking is essentially divorced from the genuine goals of human existence, and because of its domineering autonomy, it ends up militating against human existence. Therefore it becomes anti-humanist.

The second main post-modern charge against the dominant social projects is somehow related to the first. One of the most serious problems caused by the ‘technicalisation’ of all matters related to social and human progress is the reductionism inherent in technical thinking, its incapacity to deal with levels of complexity and uncertainty beyond specific, pre-designed patterns.

The plurality of human existence is thus reduced to the uni-dimensionality of technical systems, and the potential for social change is stifled by a technical logic which cannot articulate and co-exist with non-technical alternatives. The most eloquent case against this feature of technical thinking is made by Herbert Marcuse in *One Dimensional Man* (1964)<sup>14</sup>:

‘In this society [i.e. the advanced industrial society], the productive apparatus tends to become totalitarian to the extent to which it determines not only the socially needed occupations, skills, and attitudes, but also individual needs and aspirations...In the medium of technology, culture, politics, and the economy merge into an omnipresent system which swallows up or repulses all alternatives. The productivity and growth potential of this system stabilize the society and contain technical progress within the framework of domination. Technological rationality has become political rationality.’ (Marcuse, *ODM*, pp. 13–14)

In discussing critiques of technical thinking, it must be noted that this kind of thinking is usually understood as not just confined to the scientific-technological paradigm. It can equally occur in the economic and political paradigms, and indeed in all other possible paradigms. To put it simply, technical thinking tends to emphasise a particular, uni-dimensional criterion of progress at the expense of all others, and to conceive of social and human progress in general as somehow subordinated to the inherent development of the technical system(s) designed according to the emphasised criterion. A more detailed analysis of the distinction between technical and humanist thinking, as well as of the key differences between the progress of systems and the progress of people, will be undertaken in Chapter One of this thesis.

The two criticisms of the social projects, as presented above, are indeed profound. Their force consists of a well-documented questioning of the very foundations of some of our most cherished beliefs about the ultimate goals of human and social

life. In this context, it becomes of crucial importance to examine the historical evolution of social projects thinking, and to identify its strengths and weaknesses.

## **5. Genealogical claims**

In the case of each of the three dominant paradigms discussed above, certain claims have been made by historians regarding the origins of the main tenets of social progress which characterise the respective paradigm. I shall briefly discuss these claims below.

### **5.1 The scientific-technological paradigm**

What are the apparent historical sources of the scientific-technological perspective on social progress? Leo Marx, for instance, identifies these sources in the rationalist ideas of 18<sup>th</sup> Century French, English and American Enlightenment (Condorcet, Priestley, Jefferson and Franklin). He attributes to the hereby mentioned authors the premise that 'history, or at least modern history, is driven by the steady, cumulative, and inevitable expansion of human knowledge of and power over nature'<sup>15</sup>. More boldly, in *After Progress* (1999), Anthony O'Hear contemplates the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century as a programmatic copy of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century: 'If we are living in an Enlightenment world, in that the human beings who inhabit modern society are very much those beings described by Enlightenment psychology, there is a yet more precise sense in which the 1990s are recapitulating the 1790s'. In analysing the progressivist ideas of thinkers like Voltaire, Diderot and Condorcet, O'Hear compares these ideas with the 20<sup>th</sup> Century 'faith in science', concluding that 'scientific-style enlightenment also characterizes many political initiatives of the 1990s' (O'Hear, *AP*, pp. 84–85).

But is the correspondence thus established between Enlightenment conceptions of progress and the later developments of the scientific-technological paradigm so evident and unproblematic? In discussing the technocratic ideas of some of the more prominent American politicians of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, such as Daniel Webster and Edward Everett, Leo Marx himself states as the main feature of technocratic

thinking the propensity to value ‘improvements in power, efficiency, rationality as ends in themselves’. When comparing Webster’s uncritical enthusiasm for technological progress with the more complex political ideals of Jefferson and Franklin, Marx is aware that an important divergence from the Enlightenment project has occurred. The means is now the end, the medium is the message, and the original multi-dimensional context of the technological imperative has somehow been lost on the way, leaving the intrinsic criteria of technological development at liberty to shape our lives and society.

## **5.2 The economic paradigm**

At least two imperatives are usually believed to have been promoted by this paradigm: economic growth and the free market. The former is commonly regarded as the main rationale of the modern discipline of political economy. The latter has been embraced as its most popular and successful ideology.

In his book on *Progress and the Invisible Hand* (1998), Richard Bronk remarks that, if science and technology were to be seen as driving forces of social progress and be employed towards a noble purpose, that purpose had to be, in modern thought, economic growth – which had the advantage of providing an objective, simple and direct measure of social progress:

‘Technological advance was a vital contributory factor to economic growth...Furthermore, if economic growth provided an additional mechanism of progress, the measurement of that growth in money value terms seemed to provide a measure of progress in human welfare, an objective standard of human advance.’ (Bronk, *PIH*, p. 88)

As Bronk suggests, it has always been the dominant ideology of the affluent Western societies that the best economic arrangements capable of delivering economic growth are the free-market mechanisms (Bronk, *PIH*, p. 89).

In his essay on ‘Adam Smith’s Message in Today’s Language’<sup>16</sup>, Friedrich Hayek – one of the most prominent free-market theorists – implicitly claims a certain continuity between Smith’s epistemology and his own. He elaborates on Smith’s

metaphor of the invisible hand to support his own theory of the free market as a natural spontaneous order, a *catallaxy*, in which omniscience, predictability and overall design are virtually impossible.

According to Hayek, we are more likely to obtain a positive response to our desires if we let society follow the course of its own progress spontaneously, without trying to plan it. Obviously, society's progress consists of the accumulation of material riches, assisted by the expansion and accumulation of knowledge and technology. In this process, our normative judgements about what should constitute progress are hardly relevant. What drives social progress is inevitably dictated by the criteria inherent in the logic of growth of material wealth. There is no guarantee that these criteria will always coincide with our aspirations but the accidental encounters between these two types of criteria are likely to be more frequent if we do not interfere with the inherent criteria of progress thus defined<sup>17</sup>.

To briefly conclude on this point, Hayek's theory of the progressive society is a combination of empirical determinism with a reductionist understanding of social progress as economic (and, secondarily, scientific-technological) in a systemic, non-humanist sense. In his perspective, the connection between social progress and human progress is so loose that it is reduced to mere accident (e.g. set up the system and hope for the best).

As will become clear from the analysis of Smith's theory later in this thesis, Hayek's accidentalism bears little resemblance to Adam Smith's idea of a perfect system of natural liberty, whose perfection is measured by its capacity to deliver to all human beings, in a fair manner, the goods they are entitled to in virtue of their skills and efforts<sup>18</sup>.

### **5.3 The political paradigm**

Under this heading, I would like to briefly refer to V. I. Lenin, who regarded himself as a practitioner of Marx's political and social ideas, and to his application

of Marx's ideas in the October Revolution, which he regarded as a trigger and platform for revolutions in the advanced west.

Lenin's conviction that the supreme end of all our efforts for social progress is the achievement of communist political organisation is well-known. The casualties that resulted from this belief and its implementation are also well-known. In Lenin's conception of political revolution, although a revolutionary situation is created spontaneously and through historical necessity<sup>19</sup>, the actual success of a revolution is a matter of conscious class organisation led by a group of professional revolutionaries<sup>20</sup> with experience in disseminating the right ideas, mobilising the right forces, seizing political power and maintaining it. The noble quality of the goals is not sufficient: the practical achievement of the best society through political change is, in essence, a technical issue, which requires dedicated specialists.

Lenin's identification of social progress with political change indicates the uni-dimensional character of his conception. While Marx appears to have articulated the political imperative with goals of increased leisure time and opportunities for human development, with Lenin, the unconditional commitment to the political imperative increases with the consolidation of the political power of the Communist Party. As this power grows, so does the emphasis on political progress understood technically, in the sense of effecting the desired political structures and institutions at the expense of any human sacrifice<sup>21</sup>.

#### **5.4 A common pattern of evolution**

Despite the differences in their major substantive assumptions about social progress, the three paradigms display a similar pattern in their historical evolution. Firstly, the foundations are laid by a complex, multi-dimensional conception of social progress, in which the dominant dimension is provided with a rich (cultural and human) context of development. Later developments tend to reduce social progress to this dominant dimension.

Secondly, as will become apparent from later discussions in this thesis, the original conceptions of social progress were founded on well-articulated, substantive conceptions of human progress, of humanness and the good life. Moreover, human progress was invariably invoked in these conceptions as the ultimate end of all social projects. Later developments tend to convert this instrumentality into finality, and prescribe that human progress should be guided by the intrinsic, technical criteria promoted by the social projects.

Since, within the context of social progress, the premises of uni-dimensionality and technocracy are (for reasons discussed in Chapter One of this thesis) of inferior quality to multi-dimensionality and humanism, it seems sensible to place the starting point in our reconstruction of the problematique of social progress with the more refined theories. Consequently, for the purposes of this study, I propose that an evaluation of this problematique be confined to a guided reading of the three classical theories mentioned above: Condorcet (as perhaps the most advanced exponent of Enlightenment rationalism applied to the idea of progress), Adam Smith (as one of the ‘fathers’ of political economy) and Karl Marx (as the creator of the communist utopia).

## **6. The present study: purpose, objectives, structure**

I started this enquiry with an interest in providing a sounder philosophical basis for the development of indicators which could guide and assess the achievement (or not) of certain goals in a variety of social projects. From this original intention, the study has somehow developed a meaning and life of its own.

Although historically sensitive and historically motivated, the enquiry proposed in this thesis differs substantially from an historical account of social progress. It is not the aim of this study to identify the historical reasons why certain conceptions of social progress have actually produced certain outcomes, or whether certain historical claims made by more recent thinkers to classical theories are legitimate.

The purpose of this thesis is to evaluate *philosophically* the views about the nature and goals of social and human progress adopted by the conceptions proposed for discussion, and thus to provide insights on the soundness of these views.

To achieve this, I propose a four-step approach, which can be outlined as follows:

- (a) develop an analytical and terminological framework (as a minimal set of basic concepts and premises) to guide our investigation of the three classical theories;
- (b) explore these theories using the proposed framework and identify the answers provided by these theories to the issues raised in the framework;
- (c) evaluate the adequacy of these answers; and
- (d) suggest alternative, improved answers where appropriate.

Although any conceptual framework is imperfect, and I believe it would be impossible to obtain an absolutely basic and uncommitted framework, there are three points I can make in support of the framework I am proposing in this thesis: (1) the choice of a framework is necessary to make possible any analysis; (2) the issues and themes addressed by the framework proposed here are the most frequent and prominent among the contemporary attitudes and perspectives on social and human progress; and (3) this framework, does not purport to provide *the* ultimate answers to all the questions raised in an enquiry on progress, but proposes to offer (in some important respects) more plausible and consistent ways of approaching some of these questions.

Accordingly, Chapter One contains an exposition of this framework, which briefly clarifies some semantic features of the concept of progress in general, identifies certain conditions for well-formed and sound conceptions of progress, discusses some specific issues in defining social and human progress, clarifies the nature of the progress of social systems versus the nature of the progress of people, and emphasises the importance of the humanist premise in establishing a general means-end relation between the progress of social systems and the progress of people.



One chapter will then be devoted to each of the three social projects proposed by Condorcet, Smith and Marx (Chapters Three, Four and Five, respectively). Each of these chapters will discuss the main features of the explicit social project, its humanist foundations, and the main substantive and formal features of the underlying conception of human progress.

The conclusions from the analyses undertaken in these three chapters will then be summarised and evaluated in Chapter Five, with emphasis on apparent weaknesses or inconsistencies which call for revision, especially in relation to certain premises about human progress. This chapter aims to provide the key elements for the construction of an alternative perspective on human progress, which will be outlined in Chapter Six. Again, the proposed alternative perspective is not regarded as the only or best possible answer to the issues of human progress and of its relationships with social projects, but simply as an example of what an alternative conception of human progress would look like, based on the revision of certain premises criticised in Chapter Five.

Finally, a brief Conclusion will evaluate the findings of this study and highlight possible directions in which this research can be used and continued.

## **7. A response to post-modern nihilism**

As the lifeline of technocracy is resistance to any humanist feedback, the two outlooks on progress (the humanist and the technical) have polarised to the point of a war on all fronts, including the humanist rejection of the idea of progress itself as purely ideological, and ultimately meaningless. Within the post-modern malaise, there is no progress because there is no direct meaning for human life in the technical criteria proposed to us as universal means to our happiness.

Indeed, the idea of progress as developed to date, with all its semantic avatars produced by its various theories, has now grown to evoke, simultaneously, all the jubilations of modernity and all the discreditations and ironies of post-modernity.

As Anthony O’Hear writes in the previously mentioned study *After Progress* (1999), in the course of developing its dominant characteristics, modern absolutism seems to contain and offer fertile ground for the seeds of its own destruction. The positivist outlook promoted through science has favoured an interpretation of experimental results which suggests that ‘nature’ is non-rational, indifferent to our interests and aspirations, to our search for meaning and value. *From the point of view of nature itself*, there are no meanings and no values; and human beings are just an insignificant form of life, in no way more privileged than others, whose behaviour is entirely the product of laws of survival and reproduction.<sup>22</sup>

In relation to this materialist view on humanness, O’Hear remarks that both communism and the free market in the 20<sup>th</sup> century rely on the premise that ‘we are nothing beyond material existence, and that there is nothing sacred beyond the satisfaction of our desires. Reason, to the extent that it exists, is just a means by which to achieve desire satisfaction’ (O’Hear, *AP*, p. 162).

To summarise, the historical picture looks something like this. Inspired by the promise of the Absolute suggested by the Enlightenment, we have launched into finding objective truth, meaning and value by using the instruments of comprehensive explanation. Disappointingly, we have not found a world that is responsive to our forms of enquiry. For a generation accustomed to aspirations transcending the lifespan of the individual, this finding is a source of deep despair, and this is indeed what the first generation of post-moderns experienced. Several generations of relativism, however, have changed the mood and sensibility of Western communities. The post-modern reactions to the loss of a common sense of values are based on the conclusions that any values and judgements are as good as any other, and that the attempt to organise common action for progress is futile.

O’Hear describes this value-neutral equality as follows:

‘If each life is ultimately insignificant and pointless, then it makes little sense to think of some human beings or some activities as better than others. There is a democracy and equality of taste and judgement. The task of reason becomes

simply that of allowing as many preferences and needs as possible to be satisfied simultaneously.’ (O’Hear, *AP*, p. 161).

With respect to the value of human action in producing human and social progress, O’Hear concludes:

‘What, then, is to be done? Nothing. Nothing is to be done.... It is one of the great illusions of progressivist thought that there is always something to be done; that there is a solution to every problem that faces us, that we can discover that solution by reason, and that the solution consists in doing something, either politically or individually’ (O’Hear, *AP*, p. 237).

With an increasing amount of empirical evidence in support of the idea that the values likely to inform our criteria for evaluating social and human progress are not absolute and universal but context-specific (or context-dependent), it appears justified to embrace the nihilist attitude that questions the very purpose of trying to meaningfully talk about social and human progress at all.

However, one must remark here that simply recognising that values are context-dependent does not necessarily, by itself, recommend that we should abstain from making judgements about other people’s values (for example, on the ground that, although different, these values may be as ‘valid’, in their own context, as our values are in our own context)<sup>23</sup>. In other words, accepting the relative plurality of values does not commit us to having to avoid value judgements of any kind, and similarly does not prevent us from committing ourselves to particular values, despite our awareness of the historical and cultural contingency of those values. For example, as most other people, I am committed to the values of liberty, virtue and knowledge. Even if these values are in some way culturally determined, this is no reason to abandon them.

Moreover, assuming that the relative plurality of values prohibits commitment to particular values would mean adopting precisely the type of universal premise relativism itself refutes:

‘It has sometimes been thought that moral relativism gives a special support to toleration as a moral attitude to codes which diverge from one’s own. Paradoxically, however, if that were accepted as a universal (and universally morally approvable) attitude, it would contradict the relativism which disallows any universally authoritative principles.’<sup>24</sup> (Honderich, 1995, p. 758)

In this context, as illustrated in Chapter Six of this thesis, while admitting the contingent nature of the selected values, I assume commitment to these values in virtue of the cultural tradition I belong to – a fact which does not require further justification in terms of an absolute perspective on these values.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> R.Eckersley, ‘Is Life getting Better or Worse?’, in *The Age* (Melbourne), 31 January 2004, Review section, pp.1–2.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the best historical commentaries on these cultural roots of the idea of progress can be found in: Anthony O’Hear, *After Progress: Finding the Old Way Forward* (1999); Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (1980); Sydney Pollard, *The Idea of Progress: History and Society* (1968); Charles Frankel, *The Faith of Reason: The Idea of Progress in the French Enlightenment* (1948); Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (1932); and J. B Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* (1921).

<sup>3</sup> The idea of progress has most often been discussed as progress of humankind as a whole rather than the progress of cultures, communities or individuals. The evolution of conceptions of progress in recent times indicates the polarisation of levels of analysis, especially the individual versus the collective. This distinction will be briefly discussed in Chapter One.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the more popular 20<sup>th</sup> Century examples of works written in response to urgent social problems are Bertrand Russell’s *Prospects of the Industrial Civilization* (1923), Georges Sorel’s *Illusions of Progress* (1969), Alvin Toffler’s *Future Shock* (1970) and *Third Wave* (1980), Cristovam Buarque’s *End of Economics?: Ethics and the Disorder of Progress* (1993), Dennis Pirages’ anthology on *Building Sustainable Societies: A Blueprint for a Post-Industrial World* (1996) and Michael Jacobs’ anthology on *Greening the Millenium?: The New Politics of the Environment* (1997). These studies, among others, are evidence of the wide variety of conceptions of social and human progress available in our time.

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<sup>5</sup> A more detailed analysis of the conceptions of progress developed by Condorcet, Smith and Marx is provided in Chapters Two, Three and Four of this study.

<sup>6</sup> For this purpose, I am borrowing the term from Kuhn's theory (see T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1970), to be used in the sense indicated above, and without an intention to engage in a discussion of the use of this term in other contexts.

<sup>7</sup> Some of the followers of this tradition of thought are Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Daniel Webster, and Langdon Winner.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the followers of Adam Smith's tradition are Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Robert Nozick.

<sup>9</sup> Some of Marx's followers in this respect are V.I. Lenin, A. Gramsci, G. Lukács, and N. Poulantzas.

<sup>10</sup> On this topic, see Lewis Mumford, *Art and Technics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952); H. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); J. Ellul, *The Technological Society* ([transl. by J. Wilkinson], London: J. Cape, 1965); J. Habermas, *Technik und Wissenschaft als Ideologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968); L. Winner, *Autonomous Technology: Technics-Out-Of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1977); R. Mayntz & T. P. Hughes (eds), *The Development of Large Technical Systems* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1988); T. P. Hughes *et al* (eds), *The Social Construction of Technological Systems* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> On this subject, see W. Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary* (as above); M. Rahnema and V. Bawtree (eds), *The Post-Development Reader* (New Jersey: Zed Books, 1996); R. Bronk, *Progress and the Invisible Hand: The Philosophy and Economics of Human Advance* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1998); S. White, *The Civic Minimum: On the Rights and Obligations of Economic Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> About the failures and abuses of communist regimes, see for example M. Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem* ([transl. by J. O'Neill], Boston: Beacon Press, 1969); J. R. Ozinga, *Communism: The Story of the Idea and Its Implementation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1987); Z. Baranyi and I. Volgyes, *The Legacies of Communism in Eastern Europe* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); R. Pipes, *Communism: A History* (New York: Random House, 2001).

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<sup>13</sup> See Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* ([transl. by J. Wilkinson], New York: Vintage Books, 1964), abbreviated here as Ellul, *TS*.

<sup>14</sup> See Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (London: Abacus, 1972), abbreviated here as Marcuse, *ODM*.

<sup>15</sup> L. Marx, 'Does Improved Technology Mean Progress?', in *Technology Review*, Jan 1987, v90, pp. 33–34.

<sup>16</sup> In F. A. Hayek, *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 267–269.

<sup>17</sup> See F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), pp. 39 – 53.

<sup>18</sup> For extensive analyses of the tenuous relationships between Hayek's ideas and Smith's, see A. Skinner and T. Wilson (eds), *Essays on Adam Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), and S. Copley and K. Sutherland (eds), *Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations: New Interdisciplinary Essays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> See E. Aarons, *Lenin's Theories on Revolution* (Sydney: D. B. Young Pty Ltd, 1970), pp. 68–69.

<sup>20</sup> See E. Aarons' comments in *op.cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>21</sup> Concerning the divergent features of Marx's and Lenin's doctrines, see S. E. Hanson, *Time and revolution: Marxism and the design of Soviet institutions* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1997); D. W. Lovell, *From Marx to Lenin: an evaluation of Marx's responsibility for Soviet authoritarianism* (Cambridge and Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1984); J. J. O'Rourke, *The problem of freedom in Marxist thought: An analysis of the treatment of human freedom by Marx, Engels, Lenin and contemporary Soviet philosophy* (Dordrecht and Boston: Reidel, 1974); and E. Fromm, 'The Falsification of Marx's Concepts' in *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1961).

<sup>22</sup> O'Hear depicts the conclusions of modern science in depressing terms: '...as a culture, we love the old gods no more. We have no comparable vision or hope. Science has destroyed these edifying and elevating beliefs. Physics and modern cosmology tell us that we live in a universe which is self-contained and self-sufficient, governed only by the impersonal operations of chance and causal law. In this vast universe we are no more than biological survival machines on an insignificant planet. We

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are dominated by the genetic imperatives to survive and reproduce, and the playthings of forces, biological and social, which we cannot fully understand, let alone control' (A. O'Hear, *AP*, p. 228).

<sup>23</sup> Well-documented analyses of the distinction between meta-ethical relativism and normative relativism can be found in W. T. Stace, *The Concept of Morals* (London: MacMillan, 1937), and in David Wong's section on 'Moral Relativism' in P. Singer (ed), *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 442–449.

<sup>24</sup> T. Honderich (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 758.

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# REFLECTIONS ON ‘PROGRESS’: STRUCTURE AND THEMES

## - Chapter One -

*Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;  
The proper study of mankind is Man.*

### **Introduction**

This chapter contains preliminary discussions of the conditions in which the concept of progress, with its general semantic features, can articulate with further specified premises to form a conception of progress. These formal considerations are then applied to social and human progress, in order to clarify both the concepts and the key issues involved in forming a more developed and explicit understanding, which we may call a conception of social or human progress. The themes revealed through this discussion are further employed to create a framework of analysis for the discussion of the conceptions of social and human progress promoted by Condorcet, Smith and Marx.

### **1. The concept of progress**

In *Progress* (1993), Raymond Gastil identifies at least four different uses of the term ‘progress’ in modern English. His brief analysis of these meanings is reasonably comprehensive and philosophically sensitive, as it sketches possible relationships between the two main semantic elements of ‘progress’: *change* and *value*.

Accordingly, these four meanings are: (a) progress<sub>(m)</sub>, or progress as movement in space, which is simply ‘the first, or original, concept’, of ‘forward motion’; (b) progress<sub>(e)</sub>, or progress as evolution, understood generally as synonymous with value-neutral change; (c) progress<sub>(i)</sub>, or progress as ideology, which implies that change is always, or ultimately, good; and (d) progress<sub>(d)</sub>, or progress as desirable,



which ‘restricts the meaning of progress to those situations in which a *desirable* change is thought to have taken place’<sup>1</sup>.

As suggested in most general English dictionaries, etymologically, the Romance noun ‘pro-gressus’ (movement forward, advance) evolved to mean ‘journey’ in medieval and later English. In this sense, it was used to refer to movement as excursion from A to B. But the presence of long lists of different, much broader and more abstract definitions and contextual illustrations of ‘progress’ in most dictionaries tends to obscure this original meaning, which remains of rather historical interest<sup>2</sup>.

For example, *The Oxford English Dictionary* lists as main literal meanings of progress:

‘1.a. The action of stepping or marching forward or onward; onward march; journeying, travelling, travel; a journey, an expedition. (...) 3.a. Onward movement in space; course, way. (...) 4.a. Forward movement in space (as opposed to rest or regress); going forward, advance.’

and as a main figurative meaning

‘[4] b.fig. ‘Going on to a further or higher stage, or to further or higher stages successively; advance, advancement; growth, development, continuous increase; usually in good sense, advance to better and better conditions, continuous improvement.’<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, which focuses on the most recent usage of terms, lists as the first meaning of progress ‘the process of getting better at doing something; or getting closer to finishing or achieving something’; the third meaning as ‘change towards a better society, because of developments in science or fairer methods of social organization’ and only the fifth meaning as ‘slow or difficult movement towards a place’<sup>4</sup>.

The difference in emphasis between the two dictionaries suggests that the meaning of progress as general (usually positive) change has gained considerable ground over the original meaning of progress as movement in space or journey.

However, as the *Longman* definitions above illustrate, dictionary entries do not necessarily provide a rigorous distinction between value-neutral and value-laden uses of the term ‘progress’. This term can indeed be used in everyday language to describe a process of change with no value implications, as in ‘an adolescent’s progress into adulthood’<sup>5</sup>. Progress<sub>(e)</sub> is thus entirely synonymous with *change* or *evolution*. For the purposes of the present study this concept is too limited to be of central interest.

Indeed, the term ‘progress’ clearly adds value within the history of philosophical ideas insofar as it refers to value-laden change. One may judge from Gastil’s description of the apparently value-neutral progress<sub>(e)</sub> that, among pressures from optimist and pessimist conceptions of evolution<sup>6</sup>, this concept is likely to have a precarious existence.

Among value-laden meanings of progress, progress<sub>(i)</sub> or progress as ideology is likely to find little room in philosophical discussions, as it contains an exceedingly strong assumption. Unless we found our metaphysics on a particular form of non-humanist, Stoic absolutism, the premise that change is always good can easily be refuted by a wide range of empirical evidence available. Having said this, although this concept of progress is inadequate for philosophy, it can occasionally find its way into philosophical discussions as it provides a label for a type of ideology. For example, Friedrich Hayek’s idea of a *progressive society*, sketched in his *Constitution of Liberty* (1960), describes a society driven by the ideology of infinite improvability under the imperative of competitive economic accumulation<sup>7</sup>. Hayek suggests that common belief in change as always good (desirable) may lead to better social results overall than more moderate evaluative judgements about change. Hayek does not imply that holding this belief is true, only that it may be socially useful. As the ideological meaning of progress can easily be exploited by existing power structures, it will not be further discussed in this study.

By far the most productive meaning of progress in the history of philosophical conceptions is progress<sub>(d)</sub>, that is *progress as desirable change*. According to Gastil,

a change is progressive<sub>(d)</sub> ‘only when the change as measured against specific and describable standards and sets of values can be shown to be beneficial in particular countries and epochs’<sup>8</sup>. It is in this sense only that the term ‘progress’ will be used in this thesis, unless otherwise specified.

In *The Development Dictionary* (1992), Gustavo Esteva emphasises the ‘amoeba-like’ character of the concept of development, its incapacity to acquire an independent meaning, as ‘it denotes nothing – while it... connotes the best of intentions’<sup>9</sup>. There would be, I believe, little hesitation among recent thinkers on the subject in agreeing that this feature may equally apply to the term ‘progress’.

As the concept of progress in its most abstract sense does not have clear terms of reference, it will not indicate anything in particular until we make these terms of reference explicit: in relation to what, according to what criteria or standards is this change desirable? The focus is thus not on the change itself, which is simply noticed and selected for discussion, but on the evaluation that accompanies it. Identifying progress involves, simultaneously, an empirical (descriptive) element and an evaluative (normative) element.

In identifying progress, distinguishing between empirical and normative controversies around progress is crucial. An empirical controversy, which involves determining whether a particular unquestioned goal has been achieved, often turns out to be not a philosophical issue but a technical one, of checking the facts with the instruments we have available. Most substantive philosophical questions about progress have revolved around the evaluative issues, i.e. determining the constitutive criteria and standards for progress, and on what basis these judgements can be justified.

Despite its lack of independent substance, in a vast majority of specific contexts the concept of progress is very useful. Invested with a normative function, if adequately defined it becomes a powerful intellectual instrument for apprehending the interaction between processes in the world and values in the observing subject. Thinking about progress means selecting aspects of ‘Reality’ according to certain

criteria, and comparing (even ranking) these aspects according to the criteria applied as co-ordinates or terms of reference. Thus, we can say that the concept of progress is, from an analytical point of view, a result of our efforts to ‘structure’ the world to facilitate our knowledge and understanding of it.

It is therefore important to analyse the further specifications required for the meaningful articulation of the general concept of progress into a particular conception.

## **2. Forming a conception of progress**

At least three further specifications are indispensable to the formation of a conception of progress: (1) the valued object (i.e. the entity undergoing the change or subject to change); (2) the valuing subject (i.e. the entity performing the evaluation of the change); and (3) the valuation criterion or criteria (i.e. the directions or co-ordinates according to which the evaluation is being made).

One can say that a conception of progress is *well-formed* if it provides sufficient information to empirically identify all three elements (valued object, valuing subject, and valuation criteria) and the relationships among these elements.

Let us consider the following examples:

- (1) ‘My coach thinks that my running speed has increased’.
- (2) ‘According to all measurements, this technology has progressed in power and precision’.
- (3) ‘Humankind has progressed towards perfect social organisation’.

The valued object (which is, in effect, the subject of change) is clearly indicated (i.e. *my running* in (1), *this technology* in (2) and *humankind* in (3)), although more abstract concepts like ‘humankind’, for instance, may require further clarification. The difficulty, however, lies in the complexities inherent in the concept itself, and not in lack of clarity in identifying the valued object.

Unlike the valued object, the valuing subject is sometimes more difficult to identify. While it is obvious in (1), for instance (*my coach*), it is implied in (2) as the reader or interpreter of the measurements, and altogether omitted in (3). To have a well-formed conception of progress in (3), we will need to receive a meaningful answer to the question: who is performing the evaluation of humankind? Whether stated or not, the valuing subject is implicit in the valuing act.

Awareness of the valuing subject is essential in accounting for any possible influences of features (background, circumstances) of the valuing subject upon the valuation process. These influences can themselves be sources of inadequacy or unsoundness, e.g. the subject's understanding of the nature of the valued object or valuation criteria is questionable. By clarifying the valuing subject's role in or contribution to the evaluation, as distinct from that of the valued object and the valuation criteria, we are increasing our chances of success in identifying correctly the possible weaknesses of a conception of progress, more exactly those areas of it that are subject to revision.

Unlike the valuing subject, the valuation criteria are usually more clearly identifiable in common language. In our examples, we have *speed* in (1), *power* and *precision* in (2) and *social organisation* in (3). However, making statements which omit to specify the valuation criteria causes difficulties that are directly proportional with the complexity of the valued object. Thus, saying that 'my running has progressed' is usually sufficient, as the 'speed' criterion is normally associated with the running activity (although jogging for fitness is a relatively popular criterion too). Similarly, saying that 'this technology has progressed' may also be sufficient, if I already know that the main outcomes expected from the performance of this technology are power and precision. But if I say that 'humankind has progressed considerably in the last five hundred years', I am unsure about the meaning of this statement unless I receive more specific information about what is being observed here. Unlike identifying the rationale of running or of a particular technology, establishing the rationale of humankind, or even any secondary criteria for the progress of humankind, is a complex philosophical endeavour. Hence, the more

difficult the valued object is, the less meaningful is the elliptic statement. Again, whether stated or not, the valuation criterion or criteria are implicit in the valuing act, and, as such, must be clearly identified in order to form a conception of progress.

The proper specification of valuation criteria may have associated issues. Simply naming the valuation criteria employed in a conception of progress is not sufficient to ensure that the respective conception is well-formed. How these criteria are supposed to work as an evaluative tool or instrument depends on three factors, which must also be clarified: (a) the *source(s)* of the valuation criteria (i.e. the entity according to whose developmental rationale or requirements these criteria are formed); (b) the degree of *complexity* of the evaluative instrument, or, in other words, the number of the criteria involved in the valuation, as well as the presence or absence of relations among the criteria, and (if present) the nature of these relations; and (c) the presence or absence of *limits* within which these criteria (as directions or dimensions) are envisaged to apply, and (if present) the nature of these limits.

Firstly, with respect to the sources of the valuation criteria, one can distinguish between criteria that are *intrinsic* to the valued object and criteria *extrinsic* to it. Accordingly, when the directions of progress considered are inherent in the development of the valued object, such directions or criteria can be said to be intrinsic to the valued object. On the other hand, when these criteria are given by a developmental rationale external to the valued object, then they are said to be extrinsic.

Let us have a closer look, for instance, at example (2) in Section 2 above: ‘According to all measurements, this technology has progressed in power and precision’. The ‘power and precision’ expected from the technology in question seem to be understood as attributes possessed by that technology and its processes (according to the developmental logic of that technology, as it has been designed). Hence, we can regard the criteria of power and precision as intrinsic to the valued object. On the other hand, in the case of developing a technology that facilitates an

increase in the democracy of society or the liberty of individuals, these criteria (which are set up to measure the progress of the technology) come from the developmental perspective of entities outside the technology itself, and refer to attributes to be possessed by (or properties to be developed by) entities other than the respective technology and its processes, in this case society or the human being.

The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic criteria of progress will gain particular relevance in discussing the humanist premise, and its key role in relating social and human progress, in Section 6 of this chapter.

Secondly, in the context of valuation criteria, the theme of complexity usually subsumes the following issues: (i) defining the simplest (non-reducible) units of analysis; (ii) establishing if the valued object is analysed in terms of one or more such (simple) units of analysis; and (iii) if a plurality of units of analysis is involved, establishing the relations among these units and the role of these relations in the development of the valued object as a whole.

I have previously suggested that criteria for progress are like dimensions or co-ordinates describing or measuring progress. In this sense, in evaluating a desirable change we may use one criterion (dimension), or several, depending on the level of complexity of the phenomenon observed, or of our evaluative instrument.

In the attempt to determine how a simple (non-reducible) unit of analysis should be defined, I would like to observe that any evaluation has two elementary aspects, namely quality and quantity. On the basis of this observation, I would like to define the concept of *dimension* of an entity (valued object or criterion) as a qualitative attribute or feature of that entity, whose variations can (or will) be expressed only quantitatively or comparatively. For example, if a person's progress is a matter of a particular quality (such as knowledge, or beauty, or kindness), then such progress will consist of a quantitative or comparative increase in this particular quality (expressed in *more* knowledge, or *more* beauty, or *more* kindness). Although we perceive the person's progress as a qualitative improvement (more knowledgeable, more beautiful, and kinder), the features thus distinguished are not divided into any

further units of analysis, and all changes at this fundamental level are apprehended quantitatively or comparatively.

Thus, for example, in measuring scientific progress as accumulation of knowledge, we could be using a uni-dimensional evaluative instrument, whereas in assessing the progress of society as a multitude of systems, or progress as human well-being, we are often using a number of criteria or dimensions, which may (or may not) interrelate to form a complex (multi-dimensional) evaluative instrument.

If more than one simple dimension is used in evaluating progress, there is the question of whether the evaluative instrument is represented by a list of simple criteria understood independently, or whether this instrument is rather like an aggregate, complex criterion, formed by the simple criteria *and* by certain relations established amongst them. If the latter is the case, then the nature of the relations amongst these criteria must also be revealed.

All these issues associated with the complexity of a conception of progress, as outlined above, will be elaborated further in the context of valuing social and human progress, in Sections 4 and 5 of this chapter.

Thirdly, the theme of limits, as applied to valuation criteria, has its roots in a general feature of the concept of progress as desirable change. The concept of progress thus defined is necessarily related to the concept of *better*, but only contingently (or optionally) related to the concept of *good*. Whereas good implies reaching a standard, better may relate to a particular standard either by approaching it from below or by surpassing it. Whether our idea of progress relies on standards or not, the key feature of progress remains that of moving in the desired direction.

In this context, it often becomes important to establish whether the valuation criteria employed in our conception of progress are imagined as infinite, open-ended coordinates, or whether they are considered to converge towards an ultimate or optimal standard or ideal. As will be further illustrated in the discussion of social and human progress in Sections 4 and 5 below, the nature of the valued object (or



the valuing subject's perspective on its nature) often determines whether it is more appropriate to conceive of the valuation criteria in terms of their *infinite improbability* or in terms of their *advancement towards an ideal*.

### **3. Social and human progress: some ambiguities**

Applying the remarks made above to the topic of this study, we are now in a position to deal with certain frequent ambiguities that occur in our language about social and human progress.

Let us consider, for instance, the use of the term 'progress' in short phrases (attribute-plus-noun syntagms<sup>10</sup>), without further propositional clarification, e.g. 'scientific progress', 'technological progress', 'economic progress', 'political progress'. These syntagms obscure the relationship between progress and the associated term: when we say 'technological progress', do we mean the progress of technology or the progress of something else according to criteria provided by technology? In other words, does the term 'technological' indicate the *valued object* or the *valuation criterion*? In some contexts, it may indicate the valued object. In this case, the progress we have in view is the development of technology as a social practice and institution, according to its intrinsic criteria (e.g. power, speed, precision). But in other contexts it may indicate the valuation criterion, such as in 'the technological progress of society (of humankind, or of human life)'. Here the valued object is society (or humankind, or human life), which are much broader phenomena than technology, but whose progress may nevertheless be assessed according to technological criteria.

The syntagm 'social progress' is problematic in a similar way. The term 'social' as a valuation criterion points to something quite specific, namely social relations, social behaviour, sociality, sociability. These are usually properties of some other entity, e.g. 'the social progress of this person' (as social maturity, social refinement, etc.). If the term 'social' indicates the valued object, then it means the progress of society as a whole, according to criteria that are yet to be specified.

By comparison, the phrase ‘human progress’ is hardly ever used to refer to the development of a non-human entity according to criteria specific to humanness – but it is not impossible to conceive of this kind of use. If I notice, for instance, that my dog’s behaviour has become more ‘human’ in its display of emotions, it may be unusual but not impossible to talk about the human progress of my dog.

A more serious problem we usually have with the syntagm ‘human progress’ is in correctly identifying the valued object solely from the attribute ‘human’. As common usage does not provide us with a clear option, we must further specify whether ‘human’ refers to (for instance) humankind, the human species, the human civilisation, human cultures, human communities, or human beings (individuals, persons).

The above mentioned difficulties in clarifying meanings of ‘social progress’ and ‘human progress’ can however be removed just by adding the required explanations. The more complex philosophical task lies in defining the more abstract and comprehensive concepts, of which the richest and most controversial are by far the concepts of ‘society’ and ‘humanness’. These are also *the* central concepts of our enquiry.

But the problems we may have with the ideas of social and human progress go beyond the limitations of our language. For example, in the philosophical literature on ‘progress’ there is a tendency to identify human progress with the progress of individuals, and social progress with the progress of the collection (group, community) of individuals forming a society. Thus, the distinction between human and social progress is nothing but a distinction between progress at the level of the individual and progress at the level of a collection of individuals.

This identification is misleading, because (as other contexts reveal, sometimes even within the same conception) social progress can point to something altogether different from the progress of people. For example, the progress of society is often called ‘social progress’ and understood to mean not the progress of the people (i.e.

progress of the collection of individuals forming the respective society) but the progress of the social institutions, systems and practices developed within that society. In this context, the distinction we have to make here is not between the individual and the collective (as levels of analysis) but between the progress of *people* and the progress of *systems*.

Although we like to think that social progress involves more than perfecting social systems, practices and institutions, more often than not the criteria employed for measuring social progress reveal a preoccupation with the performance of systems rather than with that of people. There is an underlying tendency to identify social progress with the progress of systems, and human progress with the progress of people. To clarify things, I propose that we make this identification explicit, and be consistent about it. In other words, for the purposes of this study I shall use the phrase ‘social progress’ to indicate the progress of systems, and the phrase ‘human progress’ to indicate the progress of people.

It is important to remark that, in this sense, social progress is the progress of those systems, institutions and practices resulting, after all, from human life and activity in society. These systems can be scientific-technological, economic, political, legal, etc. They are systems of rules and principles which may (or may not) aim at facilitating human progress. They may be set up to aim at creating a potential or scope for human progress but cannot represent a direct measure of the actual progress of people.

Human progress understood as the progress of people can be conceived of in relation to at least two levels of analysis: the progress of the individual, and the aggregate progress of a collection of individuals. The results at each level of analysis will be different, due to the different unit of analysis considered. Similarly, the progress of systems may also be conceived at two levels of analysis, i.e. an individual system, or an aggregate of systems. The criteria for measuring the progress of systems may be related (or not) to the criteria for measuring the progress of people.

In this study, human progress is understood to refer primarily to the progress of human beings (individuals, persons), with occasional references to the progress of collective categories (of which the most frequent are the overall concepts of humankind and human civilisation). Similarly, social progress as the progress of systems will refer primarily to systems considered individually, as aggregation issues (although important) are not of concern here. This does not mean that the two levels of analysis are identified, or that the aggregate scale is considered to be the simple sum of individual scales. It just means that the difference between the two levels of analysis (aggregate and individual) is not the main focus of the study, although this difference will be made wherever relevant.

#### **4. Social progress as the progress of systems**

For the purposes of this study, I have defined social progress as the progress of social systems, practices or institutions, and as distinct from the progress of people. This definition identifies the valued object with social systems.

I shall not attempt a theoretical definition of a social system as such here but simply illustrate it: large-scale technologies, economic structures or practices, and political institutions are some of the more familiar examples of such systems. Considered independently, these systems are technological, economic or political, but as structures operating within a society they can be more widely understood as social systems.

It is common for theorists on social progress, not only for technical specialists in various areas, to launch into detailed designs of social projects aimed at developing more or less sophisticated such systems. This is the case with the three authors discussed in the following chapters. The objectives of the three social projects will be briefly outlined in Section 7 below. The possible difficulties encountered in properly understanding various social systems and how they operate are important and must be addressed to ensure the success of any social project, but they do not fall within the scope of the present study.

Given the magnitude of such social projects and their impact on a large number of people, the valuing subject must be specified not only to ensure that the conception in question is well-formed, but also because it may legitimately attract the interest of the public, especially of those directly affected. In the case of the three conceptions discussed in this thesis, the features of the valuing subject are defined by the authors' cultural and intellectual traditions – with some original (personal) variations – clearly indicating context-dependent worldviews. The influences of these traditions upon the conceptions in question will be discussed wherever appropriate.

With respect to the valuation criteria, if these are intrinsic to the social systems in question, specialist or technical knowledge is usually required to assess the performance of the designed systems according to the relevant criteria (e.g. scientific-technological, economic, or political). Thus, the adequacy of scientific knowledge is the domain of the scientist, the achievement of power, speed and precision is the task of the engineer, material wealth increase the objective of the (capitalist) economist, and political organisation the aim of the political theorist and/or practitioner.

In a technical sense, as systems are designed to perform according to certain criteria intrinsic to their projected functioning, these criteria are not irreplaceable, for otherwise the systems could not operate. However, these criteria can be subordinated to (or limited or constrained by) extrinsic criteria, which point to desirable attributes of entities outside the systems in question. Such extrinsic criteria may be believed to have their source, for instance, with divinity, or in nature, or in human beings.

Thus, in the so-called *deist* perspective, society can be conceived to evolve according to goals set by God's plan or design, which may or may not envisage improvements in social systems. In the *naturalist* view, the co-ordinates of social progress will be considered to derive from the laws of nature or principles of natural evolution. Again, these criteria may not assume the necessary benefit of the social

systems. In Section 6 below I will take a closer look at the *humanist* view, which is of central importance to this study.

In relation to the complexity of the valuation criteria, uni-dimensionality may often be in order in assessing simpler, homogeneous systems. For instance, a technological system developed to deliver faster means of transport will ultimately require the single criterion of *speed* to be applied in measuring its progress. Thus, from an engineering (or technical) perspective, conceiving of one ultimate goal whose priority is universal is a meaningful possibility. On the other hand, if the concept of social progress is invested with all-encompassing significance (i.e. it must reflect the development of all types of systems at work in a society), then any serious philosophical answer to the question ‘What constitutes social progress?’ is necessarily multi-dimensional. If the evaluative instrument is a system of criteria rather than a simple list, then special attention must be paid to the integration of the partial premises of each subsystem into a holistic conception of society.

Regarding limits, it is quite common for one-dimensional criteria inherent in social systems to be conceived as open-ended, with the prospect of infinite improvability unquestioned. However, assuming infinite improvability according to an inter-related set of criteria is considerably more difficult, although not impossible, as will be illustrated (in the context of human progress) in Chapter Five of this thesis. More commonly though, the progress of a complex society is measured in relation to an ideal. The dream of the ideal society has engaged the imagination of the more complex theorists of social progress in modern times.

The progress of social systems according to valuation criteria inherent in the human being is of particular relevance for this study, given the nature of the theories analysed in Chapters Two, Three and Four. Accordingly, Section 6 below provides a brief discussion of the humanist perspective as a specific normative option, and of its account of how social and human progress should be related.

## 5. Human progress as the progress of people

What has been said about the valuing subject in relation to social progress holds true for human progress as well. Distinguishing the influence of the valuing subject on the valued object is of crucial importance in the case of a complex and controversial concept like human progress.

Furthermore, just as in the case of conceptions of social progress, human progress too can have valuation criteria intrinsic to human development or well-being, or external to it (e.g. in accordance with the divinity, nature, or social systems).

Focusing inwards, on the nature of 'humanness', what are those criteria intrinsic to human development or human well-being? Here lies a philosophical theme of considerable tradition, whose interest for the human intellect has hardly ever dwindled, and which (despite its crucial importance) has never appeared to get any closer to a definite answer.

Indeed, understanding the nature of the human being (here, as valued object) has been one of the most challenging tasks of philosophy, psychology, and a number of other disciplines. Whether the difficulties inherent in defining the human being, or more exactly humanness as the attribute of being human, will ever be resolved remains doubtful. But whether we are optimistic about the progress of our understanding or not, to hold a conception of human progress we must adopt a conception of humanness. Irrespective of the content of our assumptions about what constitutes humanness, a conception of humanness has a few general themes or ideas about which we must form an opinion of some kind.

Firstly, there is a given *human nature*, which we must explore and understand to some extent, in order to explain either self-development or enjoyment. Beliefs about human nature provide us with a particular understanding of the scope and limits of humanness, actual and potential. Thus, our ideas about human nature configure, in the broadest sense, the potential for progress inherent in human beings.

Secondly, the most pregnant and obvious expressions of our human nature are our natural *needs*, which require satisfaction outside ourselves. Needs perform two important functions: (1) they orient our interests, perceptions, knowledge and experience, internalising their content, and making them ‘human’; (2) as they determine the nature and character of most of our interactions with the outside world, they provide the most solid (constant) and coherent basis for our values and valuing processes – a basis that no other rival concepts (e.g. entitlements, rights, wants, desires, preferences) can provide.

Thirdly, as needs confer a (quasi)objective basis to what is desirable, they also guide us towards forming a conception about what constitutes *human worth* (or *human value*), as those attributes or criteria which ideally define humanness and human existence.

Fourthly, there is the idea of *desirable potential*. Although originating in the given nature of human beings, needs create (through the process of their satisfaction as interaction of the human self with the universe) a potential for new developments, which then generate new needs, which then create new developments, and so on. The evolution of needs and their satisfaction clearly indicates that not everything we can physically do is worth doing. In other words, needs guide us in selecting desirable possibilities from a wider scope of merely physical possibilities.

It may be remarked here that one may also select as ‘desirable’ things that are not necessarily related to one’s needs and their satisfaction. For instance, when something appears to us as a physical possibility, we may be so impressed with its exceptional quality as a physical possibility that we may conceive it as a desirable possibility for this very reason. It has often been said that, according to Edmund Hillary’s own account, he climbed Everest mainly ‘because it was there’. The same symbolic meaning dominated the first human landing on the moon in 1969. Nevertheless, the mere contemplation of physical possibility is seldom a sufficient reason for action, although it may constitute a necessary condition for action. For the purposes of this study, I propose to maintain the concept of desirable potential



within the horizon of needs rather than mere desires or wants (symbolic or otherwise).

Fifthly, there is the idea of *human fulfilment*, which frequently occupies a privileged position in the process of ascertaining human progress. As it calls for more specific opinions about what kinds of goods or values would lead to human fulfilment, it raises the question of defining the sense(s) in which one can consider a human being or a human life as accomplished.

Finally, all these five associated conceptions (of human nature, needs, human worth or value, desirable potential and human fulfilment) must integrate into a conception of human existence which informs and justifies the valuation criteria for human progress. As will be illustrated in Chapters Two, Three and Four, the works of Condorcet, Smith and Marx generally provide sufficient material to recover these underlying associated conceptions, and thus to reconstruct their implicit conceptions of human progress.

As mentioned in Section 4 above, in the case of a technological system considered independently, for its own sake, infinite improvability can be accepted as a meaningful possibility, especially when applied to *one* dimension (as defined in Section 2 above) of a system which is homogeneous and simple (uni-dimensional), rather than complex (plural, multi-dimensional).

However, one is very likely to have serious difficulties in finding the idea of infinite improvability easily applicable to humanness. Not only would one find it hard to make sense of any dimension of humanness progressing indefinitely, if it obscures its relationship with all the other dimensions of humanness that matter, but we seem to make little sense of improvement in humanness as a whole without a guiding picture which is necessarily multi-dimensional. The problematic nature of infinite improvability and uni-dimensionality when associated with humanness will be further discussed and illustrated in Chapter Five. There, it will become apparent that the only sense in which infinite improvability can have meaning and be desirable in complex entities (be they human beings or social systems) is if a certain universal

and fixed hierarchy is established among the dimensions of the system, culminating in one dimension taking universal priority.

In the absence of such strong assumptions as suggested above, the need for an ideal of humanness (at least as a regulative, rather than constitutive, limit<sup>11</sup>) appears crucial in a conception of human progress. The content of the ideal of humanness provides, in effect, the evaluative instrument for human progress. The dimensions (aspects, features, attributes) of humanness selected to form the ideal represent just as many criteria (directions, co-ordinates) for the evaluation of human progress.

Although it can be argued that approaching asymptotically an ideal believed to be unattainable may be contemplated as a form of infinite improvability, it is nevertheless one that must still relate to a pre-set limit, therefore it is not completely open ended. For the purposes of our discussion, in the following chapters, infinite improvability will refer strictly to a potential for open-ended quantitative or comparative progress, where no pre-set limits are involved. Thus, it is understood that assuming infinite improvability and adopting an ideal are mutually exclusive approaches.

In my analysis of the relationships among dimensions of humanness, as they appear in Condorcet, Smith and Marx, two concepts will become especially relevant. These are described briefly below.

Firstly, there is the concept of *universal means*. To put it simply, a universal means is a criterion of human progress whose presence or progress is conceived as an indispensable condition in all possible circumstances, with all other possible means having a more limited influence. Any exceptions to this principle would render an instrumental criterion (or a means) context-dependent. Belief in the existence of one particular uni-dimensional criterion of human progress as a universal means to the improvement of all others, and thus to human fulfilment as a whole, is important because it suggests that the simplest, most certain and efficient way to achieve human fulfilment would be to focus on the advancement of the universal means criterion<sup>12</sup>.

Secondly, in analysing an end-means relationship between dimensions of humanness (or criteria of human progress), another issue that requires clarification refers to the features of the possible beneficial relationships between the end and the means in question. Here, a recurrent idea in some conceptions of human progress is that of *endless benefit*. Let us consider, for example, material wealth as an instrument for facilitating health improvements. As a means to the end of human health, material wealth is said to be *beneficial* or *favourable* to human health in the sense that increases in material wealth will bring about increases in human health. Should this beneficial correspondence between the means and the end be considered to occur *ad infinitum*, or is it likely to be limited by certain circumstances? Or, more specifically, can we take it for granted that any improvement in this criterion will necessarily bring about improvements in the other criteria? This question becomes extremely important in the context of having to demonstrate the possibility of achieving a universal means to human progress. Moreover, one cannot justify the desirability of a universal means unless this means can be considered able to deliver (i.e. have beneficial effects in relation to the set goals) in all circumstances<sup>13</sup>.

Universal means and endless benefit premises are recurrent in the conceptions of human progress promoted by Condorcet, Smith and Marx, as will become clear in the following three chapters. These premises will be evaluated, in the context of the broader conceptions, in Chapter Five.

## **6. The humanist perspective and the relationship between social and human progress**

In Section 4 above I deferred the discussion of the progress of social systems according to criteria extrinsic to the social systems themselves but intrinsic to human life and human beings. Having elaborated on some general features of these criteria intrinsic to ‘humanness’ in Section 5 above, I am now in a better position to introduce humanism as the main normative perspective analysed in this study.

As a broad empirical and normative perspective, humanism has a long tradition in modern European history, starting with the Renaissance and its revolutionary

replacement of a cosmology dominated by God's design with a worldview structured by the intellect and sensibility of human beings. Especially in its empirical extrapolations, humanism has rightly been criticised from more integrative social-ecological perspectives<sup>14</sup> or from animal rights perspectives<sup>15</sup> as vulnerable to a dangerous sort of unreflective anthropocentrism, i.e. the assumption that the universe is structured to serve the purpose of human development and well-being, and that these structures thus perceived are objective and absolute rather than some projection of the limits of human understanding onto the world as it is.

For the purposes of this study, I employ the phrase 'humanist perspective' in a more restricted context, namely that of the relationship between the improvement of social systems and the progress of human beings. As human beings are in effect the creators of social systems, the humanist perspective discussed here is entirely normative, and involves founding the rationale of social systems on the requirements of human development and well-being.

Accordingly, a humanist perspective on social and human progress postulates that the legitimate criteria for ultimately evaluating social progress as the progress of systems will have to be extrinsic to the developmental logic of these systems and intrinsic to human development or well-being. In other words, any social project realisable through the design and implementation of certain social systems must deliver goods that facilitate the progress of people. On the other hand, the legitimate criteria for evaluating human progress will have to be intrinsic, that is inherent to human development or well-being.

In itself, the humanist perspective does not necessarily exclude the deist or naturalist perspective. One can hold a conception of social or human progress which harmonises the three categories of standards within a concentric conception, i.e. the deist perspective will include the naturalist perspective, which will in turn include the humanist perspective, without conceivable conflicts amongst the three perspectives, but these three perspectives can still be distinguished in principle. This is often the case of the rationalist conceptions of the European Renaissance and

Enlightenment periods, represented in this thesis by the theories of Condorcet and Smith.

In this study, humanism is understood to refer to the principle of considering human beings as an appropriate (legitimate) source of valuation criteria for both social and human progress, without excluding the possibility that we may also take an interest in other, non-human or non-human centred, perspectives. Applied to both the progress of systems and the progress of people, humanism establishes people as the *ends* of social progress, and systems as *means* to human progress. In other words, humanism defines the relationship between social and human progress as a general means-end relationship.

Accordingly, the opposite of the humanist perspective defined in this way is not necessarily naturalism or deism, but (as previously suggested) the *technocratic* perspective, namely the subordination of all goals of human development and well-being to goals dictated by the developmental ‘needs’ of social systems.

It can be noted that, within a humanist conception of social progress as the progress of social systems, given that the ultimate goals for the progress of the systems in question are modelled on the goals of human progress, it would be extremely difficult to argue for the uni-dimensionality of social systems as a meaningful solution for human progress. In Sections 4 and 5 above, I observed that, while it may make sense to conceive of certain social systems as uni-dimensional *and* infinitely improvable, it is considerably more difficult to conceive of humanness in similar terms. Not surprisingly, the treatment of social systems as uni-dimensional *and* infinitely improvable has invariably been found to associate with an ultimately non-humanist (technocratic), or even anti-humanist, perspective on social progress. Chapter Five contains more detailed illustrations of this historical fact.

## 7. Proposed framework of analysis

In response to certain claims<sup>16</sup> made about the origins of technological, economic and political thinking about social progress, in the next three chapters I propose to discuss Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and, respectively, a selected number of Karl Marx's works.

The foreground theoretical issue explicitly approached by these three authors is the design of a universal social project aimed at resolving all problems of society. Accordingly, Condorcet's project is the development and unification of all sciences and arts (including technologies) through a universal rational method and language. Smith's project is the creation of a perfect system of natural liberty in economic practices, as the optimal instrument for the achievement of national wealth increase. For Marx, the social project is the realisation of the communist social order, as the perfect system for the development of a just, non-exploitative and non-alienating society.

In stating the aims and rationale of their social projects, the authors also provide sufficient material to indicate that their normative perspective on the relationship between social and human progress is essentially humanist. Each social project is ultimately justified in terms of its capacity to deliver goods that are central to human development or well-being.

Thus, it becomes clear that, although the works in question do not mainly focus on elaborating conceptions of human progress, such conceptions are present in the background and inform the respective explicit conceptions of social progress. Since these underlying conceptions of human progress are not systematically presented, they must be reconstructed from elements indicating the authors' conceptions of human nature, human needs, human worth (value), human desirable potential and human fulfilment.

There is a wealth of ideas about these topics scattered throughout the works considered here, enough to enable us to infer, in each case, an ideal of humanness and (derived from this ideal of humanness) an ideal society, understood both as an aggregate of social systems, and as a collective of people. In many instances, the theories discussed in this study will have these two aspects confused. Although not explicit in these theories, one must keep in mind at all times that there may be two senses in which one can derive the ideal society from an ideal of humanness: (1) under the humanist perspective, because social systems are necessarily instruments for human well-being, it is the desirable humanness that determines the desirable social organisation; and (2) an ideal of humanness may cover a variety of levels of analysis, by inferring (according to certain premises) from the ideal human being as an individual, the ideal collectives of individuals, up to society or humankind as a whole. Accordingly, the explicit illustrations of the ideal society in each of these two senses constitute a valuable source, which informs and validates the reconstructed ideal of humanness.

Invariably, this reconstructed ideal of humanness will be expressed as a set of desirable dimensions of humanness (different in each theory), which provide just as many uni-dimensional criteria of human progress. But as humanness is conceived as integrated multi-dimensionality, certain relations develop among the plural criteria, thus forming a complex instrument for the overall evaluation of human progress.

In Chapters Two, Three and Four I shall attempt to infer and summarise the main underlying premises adopted by each conception about the possible relations among dimensions of humanness, and thus among criteria for human progress. In doing so, I will refer directly to the relevant primary texts, without extensive reliance on secondary sources. This approach is necessary for an accurate reconstruction of the conceptions of human fulfilment implicit in the works of Condorcet, Smith and Marx, as the readings (interpretations) I propose involve exegetic and thematic analyses for which secondary sources would be of limited value. These findings will then be brought together in an overall analysis in Chapter Five, with a view to evaluate the soundness of these underlying premises and (in Chapter Six) propose suggestions for improvement where their soundness appears questionable. The

framework of analysis proposed here will guide the present discussion throughout, including the evaluation undertaken in Chapter Five and the outline of a proposed alternative conception of human progress in Chapter Six.

As previously mentioned, evaluating the soundness of the social project as such (i.e. the capacity of the proposed system to deliver according to criteria of human fulfilment) falls outside the scope of this study. There are at least three reasons for this decision: (1) it is an extensive task, which deserves attention in a study of its own; (2) a considerable amount of research in this direction has already been carried out, whereas the direction I am taking is less explored; and (3) as in a humanist conception the progress of systems necessarily depends on the criteria used in evaluating human progress, it becomes crucial that we evaluate the soundness of the conception of human progress first.

Certainly, there are other levels of analysis which would require attention in explaining the failure or weaknesses of certain social projects (e.g. the soundness of premises about the intrinsic development of systems, about aggregation conditions from individuals to society, or about the ‘effects’ of social systems on human individuals). Nevertheless, the soundness of the underlying conception of humanness is one of the most basic requirements.

While the requirement is basic, the complexity of the topic itself is overwhelming, claiming a space far beyond the boundaries of the present study. Consequently, this study is limited to observing a number of important weaknesses, inconsistencies and inadequacies in the conceptions analysed, and to providing a (hopefully) improved alternative conception of human progress, which is also likely to improve our perspective on social projects, in ways that will be suggested in the conclusion of this thesis, entitled ‘A Future for “Progress”’.

## **Summary**

To develop into a conception, the concept of progress as desirable change requires further specifications with respect to the valued object, the valuing subject and the valuation criteria (including the sources, complexity and limits of the criteria).



In this context, the concepts of social and human progress present some difficulties. Certain ambiguities can be removed through a clarification of meanings in our language. It must also be remarked that the distinction between human progress as the progress of people and social progress as the progress of systems is not identical with the distinction between the progress of individuals and the progress of collectives of individuals, although in many theories these distinctions tend to be confused.

Some general observations are made about the valued object, valuing subject and valuation criteria in a conception of social progress, with emphasis on our ability to conceive of social systems as uni-dimensional, and of their infinite improvability as meaningful and desirable.

Similarly, the valued object, valuing subject and valuation criteria are discussed in the context of human progress, with emphasis on: (1) the need to relate a conception of humanness to a conception of human nature, human needs, human worth (value), desirable human potential and human fulfilment; (2) the necessary multi-dimensionality of humanness; and (3) the tendency to develop ideals of humanness (as opposed to embracing the idea of infinite improvability, which becomes problematic). The concepts of universal means and endless benefit are also briefly explained.

Special attention is paid to humanism as a normative perspective which structures the relationship between social progress (defined as the progress of systems) and human progress (defined as the progress of people) into a general means-end relationship. All the above considerations are then channelled to produce an integrated conceptual framework to be applied in the discussion and evaluation of the conceptions of human progress selected for this study. This framework contains the organising and/or discursive principles of the next three chapters, as follows: (1) the explicit project; (2) the ideal society; (3) the humanist premise; (4) the conception of human nature, needs, potential and fulfilment; (5) the ideal of humanness and its desirable dimensions; (6) the relations among these dimensions;

and (7) the conception of human progress at the collective (rather than individual) level.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> R. D. Gastil, *Progress: Critical Thinking About Historical Change* (Westport: Praeger, 1993), pp. 58–59.

<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding, the idea of ‘progress’ in the sense of motion or movement (which can even be associated with negative value) is still used in a very limited number of contexts today, e.g. ‘the cancer progressed’, or ‘her health became progressively worse’.

<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, Vol. XII (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 592–593.

<sup>4</sup> *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, Third Edition (Essex: Longman House, 1995), p.1130.

<sup>5</sup> The positive connotations of the term ‘progress’ are most often determined by the underlying culture. In Western culture, for example, while ‘maturing’ from adolescence to adulthood may be regarded as a positively valued process, one is less likely to interpret ‘progressing into old age’ as a positive phenomenon. The situation may be different in other (non-Western) cultural traditions where old age is generally revered.

<sup>6</sup> At p. 58, Gastil remarks that progress as evolution will tend to be valued positively by optimists and negatively by pessimists. Most of his remarks about this meaning of progress soon lead into a reference to value or valuing of some kind.

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), Chapter Three (‘The Common Sense of Progress’), pp. 42–53.

<sup>8</sup> R. Gastil, *op.cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>9</sup> G. Esteva, ‘Development’, in W. Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary* (London: Zed Books, 1992), p.6.

<sup>10</sup> Syntagms are short phrases with a particular syntactic structure.

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<sup>11</sup> By a *regulative* ideal I understand an ideal one aspires to, without necessarily believing that it will ever be attained; in this scenario, progress is any movement closer to the contemplated ideal. On the other hand, a *constitutive* ideal is one which requires attainment or fulfilment, such attainment or fulfilment being the only state of affairs that would count as progress.

<sup>12</sup> As an aside, the idea of universal means is also extremely relevant in some conceptions of social progress as the progress of systems. The tendency to generalise and centralise social institutions and systems (a tendency which is apparent in all modern societies) can be regarded as an aspiration to discover and to create *the* unique, universal social means to human development or well-being. As indirectly illustrated in the following three chapters, this doctrine of the systemic universal means cannot find more fertile ground for development than in the absolutist undertaking of social projects.

<sup>13</sup> To extrapolate, within conceptions of social progress, the combination of a universal means assumption and an endless benefit assumption appears sufficient to ensure the continuing identification of criteria for social progress with criteria for human progress, for there is now enough theoretical support to assume that the inherent features of a particular social system (valued for its efficiency in a particular context) will always bear the same beneficial relationship with the goals of human fulfilment.

<sup>14</sup> For seminal work from the social-ecological perspective, see Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy* ([transl. by D. Rothenberg], Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1990); Theodore Roszak et al (eds), *Ecopscychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing The Mind* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995); Henryk Skolimowski, *Living Philosophy: Eco-Philosophy as a Tree of Life* (London and New York: Arkana, 1992); Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> For a foundation of animal rights on a critique of speciesist humanism, see Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Random House, 1975) and *The Expanding Circle : Ethics and Sociobiology* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981).

<sup>16</sup> See the discussion of the genealogy of the three dominant paradigms, in Section 5 of the General Introduction.

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# CONDORCET: WHAT PROGRESS FOR THE HUMAN MIND?

## - Chapter Two -

*See him from nature rising slow to art!*

### **Introduction**

I have noted in the General Introduction the frequent association made by historians between Condorcet's work and the interpretation of social progress as essentially scientific and technological. Before we launch into a more detailed analysis of Condorcet's work, let us take a brief look at the person behind the work.

In 1793–1794, Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794), wrote *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (referred to below as the *Sketch*)<sup>1</sup>. The essay, considered by the author himself to be just a plan or summary of a much more comprehensive project, was written in haste and the project it announced was never undertaken, as Condorcet died shortly after the essay was completed.

His commitment to his political ideals is not confined to his writings but reflected in his own life and actions. As an elected member of the Commune of Paris in 1789, Condorcet was an enthusiastic promoter of equal natural rights for all, an energetic journalist and a remarkable thinker in matters of public education. In 1793 he spoke up against the use of violence in achieving the goals of the Revolution, against the execution of the royal family, and against the adoption of the Jacobin Constitution through intimidation and terror. For this uncompromising courage he paid with his life, after being arrested and imprisoned in April 1794. Condorcet's mysterious death only one day after his imprisonment can be considered tragic for at least two reasons: firstly, the cruel, disheartening denial of reason within the muddled politics of the Revolution; secondly, the abrupt end of a spectacular attempt to build a coherent conception of progress.

This chapter will focus on outlining Condorcet's explicit social project and ideal society, as well on his humanism and underlying conception of human progress, as contained in the *Sketch*. To reconstruct this conception of human progress, I shall explore the foundation of the author's ideal of humanness (namely, his conception of human nature, needs, potential and fulfilment), and the structure of this ideal (the dimensions of humanness emphasised as desirable, and the nature of the relationships among these dimensions).

The purpose of this exploration is to provide all necessary elements for an evaluation of Condorcet's model of human progress in Chapter Five of this thesis.

### **1. The explicit social project: progress of the sciences and the arts**

As the title of Condorcet's essay announces, the object of study is the progress<sup>2</sup> of the human mind<sup>3</sup>.

What framework is proposed for the evaluation of this progress? Here is Condorcet's own explanation of his methodology:

'If one confines oneself to the study and observation of general facts and laws about the development of these faculties [*e.g. feeling and thinking – my note*], considering only what is common to all human beings, this science is called metaphysics. But if one studies this development as it manifests itself in the inhabitants of a certain area at a certain period of time and then traces it on from generation to generation, one has the picture of the progress of the human mind. This progress is subject to the same general laws that can be observed in the development of the faculties of the individual, and it is indeed no more than the sum of that development realized in a large number of individuals joined together in society. What happens at any particular moment is the result of what has happened at all previous moments, and itself has an influence on what will happen in the future. (p. 4)

Here Condorcet appears to place his analysis of progress at level of the individual. This level will re-appear into focus in his description of the last chronological stage

of human development (the so-called 'Tenth Stage') but will be obscured, in all the other chapters of the *Sketch*, by analyses of the collective performances of humankind as a whole.

Furthermore, this assumption that progress of the human mind is governed by the same laws at the level of the individual and at the level of humankind enables Condorcet to evaluate the advances of the human mind in terms of their consequences for the material outcomes of human civilisation.

Thus, Condorcet divides human history into ten stages, and discusses each stage mainly in terms of achievements of human civilisation (across a multitude of disciplines) rather than in terms of the improvement of reasoning processes.

The ten stages are clearly stated in the titles of the ten chapters that, together with a brief introduction, constitute the *Sketch*: 'The First Stage: Men are united in tribes'; 'The Second Stage: Pastoral peoples: the transition from this stage to that of agricultural peoples'; 'The Third Stage: The progress of agricultural peoples up to the invention of the alphabet'; 'The Fourth Stage: The progress of the human mind in Greece up to the division of the sciences about the time of Alexander the Great'; 'The Fifth Stage: The progress of the sciences from their division to their decline'; 'The Sixth Stage: The decadence of knowledge to its restoration about the time of the crusades'; 'The Seventh Stage: The early progress of science from its revival in the West to the invention of printing'; 'The Eighth Stage: From the invention of printing to the time when philosophy and the sciences shook off the yoke of authority'; 'The Ninth Stage: From Descartes to the foundation of the French Republic'; and 'The Tenth Stage: The future progress of the human mind'.

The criteria employed by Condorcet in selecting the historical facts for his essay are at times inconsistent and obscure, but we can discern a sense of subsistence-economic determinism in the way the developments of human society are described in the first three stages. In the subsequent stages, the discussion of historical events is a mixture of social and political analyses of scientific and technological

achievements, with an underlying preoccupation for human well-being becoming prominent only in the final, projective ‘Tenth Stage’.

In the *Sketch* (intended as a plan for a more comprehensive treatise), Condorcet does not discuss discoveries and inventions in detail, and only seldom reflects on the purely intellectual value of each achievement. The extent to which a certain historical phenomenon is evaluated as advancing or hindering the general progress of knowledge is (unsystematically) intertwined with moral considerations such as the legitimacy of universal natural human rights and natural equality, the desirability of unoppressive and democratic social and political institutions, and the need for a profound (at least material, but also educational) improvement of human life.

At a superficial level, Condorcet’s selective history of humankind appears as an account of successive enlargements of the horizons of knowledge through the sciences, which then lead to improvements in the arts – the material proof of what has been acquired by the cumulative intellect of humankind through its journey in time. Accordingly, the different stages of the history of human civilisation, with their material achievements, are seen as links forming ‘an uninterrupted chain between the beginning of historical time and the century in which we live’ (p. 8).

What interests us here, however, is situated beyond this apparent materialism. The question to ask ourselves is: what does Condorcet’s discussion of the outcomes reveal to us regarding his assumptions about the process? More exactly, what does Condorcet’s account of human history tell us about how (he believes) progress of the human mind occurs?

For example, in discussing the achievements of social enquiry and political economy of his own time, Condorcet makes an enlightening general remark: ‘all errors in politics and morals are based on philosophical errors and these in turn are connected with scientific errors’ (p. 163). It is through apparently disjointed remarks like this, scattered throughout the essay, that we are offered glimpses of

Condorcet's conception of how the various disciplines of human enquiry relate as activities of the human mind.

In this conception, at the forefront of any progress of the human mind are the sciences – that is, all the disciplines and activities set up for the pursuit of truth. But human beings do not only contemplate the universe. They also have needs inherent in their human nature<sup>4</sup>. It is in response to these needs, and under the imperative of utility, that humans have developed the arts – the 'mechanical arts'<sup>5</sup> as the archetype of today's notion of technology, as well as the fine arts<sup>6</sup>. The role of mediator between truth and utility is performed by philosophy, which is thus set apart from both the sciences and the arts. It results from here that, in order to achieve appropriateness in anything of utility to human beings, one has to first establish the truth of nature, and then derive from it (through philosophical reflection) its utility and relevance for human beings. Thus, utility is nothing but truth applied, or further specified, in contexts of human benefit<sup>7</sup>. It is important to observe here that Condorcet is unequivocal about the absolute priority conferred to truth in relation to utility. This priority becomes apparent in his rejection of the doctrine of the political utility of religion (p. 104) on the grounds that nothing relevant to utility can occur in the absence of truth. This position clearly reflects Condorcet's belief that knowledge has absolute priority in relation to any other dimension of humanness. As I shall further illustrate later in this chapter, and in Chapter Five, this belief is the bedrock of Condorcet's conception of human progress.

What are the sciences, in Condorcet's perspective? His more elaborate discussion of the physical and mathematical sciences, due to his greater familiarity with these subjects, may suggest that he favours a view of science in general as identifiable with the so-called natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology) against other disciplines, such as the social, political or ethical areas of human enquiry. But Condorcet's view of what can constitute a science extends to all existing and possible areas of human enquiry, provided that the methodology employed in each case is one of a precision and transparency comparable with those required for the



natural sciences. Accordingly, the moral, political and social studies are as entitled as the natural studies to aspire to the status of ‘science’:

‘The sole foundation for belief in the natural sciences is this idea, that the general laws directing the phenomena of the universe, known or unknown, are necessary and constant. Why should this principle be any less true for the development of the intellectual and moral faculties of man than for other operations of nature?’ (p. 173)

In support of this deterministic idea, Condorcet remarks on the contribution of Aristotle in having introduced a philosophical method which can be applied to all areas of knowledge, thus allowing for an accurate classification of all sciences. The premise emphasised through this comment is that ‘human intelligence, always using the same faculties, must be subject to the same laws’ (p. 55).

Similarly, Condorcet believes that the arts can be improved in the same way as the sciences, by applying the same methods of conforming with the general truths revealed to us by nature. For instance, in the ‘Eighth Stage’, he notes More’s and Hobbes’ endeavours to work out a system of social order out of general principles of nature (p. 112)<sup>8</sup>.

What stays in the way of our progress towards true knowledge? According to Condorcet, there are three obstacles: firstly, the incorrect application of the arts, due to an inadequate interpretation of the relation between generality and specificity; secondly, the imprecision of scientific methods; and thirdly, the imprecision of our language.

How can the arts be incorrectly applied?

‘...In all the arts, truths of theory are necessarily modified in practice; ... there exist certain genuinely inevitable inexactitudes whose effects we should attempt to render nugatory without entertaining any illusory hopes of avoiding them altogether; ... a great number of conditions, relating to needs, methods, time, expense, which are necessarily neglected in theory, must enter into the problem when it is a question of a real or immediate practical

application; and if we consider these conditions with the true skill of practical genius, we can at once go beyond the narrow limits within which prejudice against theory threatens to constrain the arts, and also avoid the mistakes into which a clumsy application of theory might lead us.’ (p. 159)

Thus, it is revealed that the task of the human mind is to attain perfection by understanding nature not only in its universal, absolute principles, but also in the relation of these principles with specific circumstances.

How are the actual sciences imperfect? They are so as long as their methods lack mathematical precision. This accounts for the different degree of advancement that can be noticed in the natural sciences (physics, chemistry) as opposed to the social, political and moral sciences. In the ‘Tenth Stage’, Condorcet predicts the application of the ‘calculus of combinations and probabilities’ for the achievement of objectives like an adequate distribution of social opportunity and social justice, and for the democratic distribution of political power (p. 190). He considers that the generalisation of mathematical methods to all areas of enquiry is the key to the perfection of human knowledge (p. 197).<sup>9</sup>

In what sense are the actual languages understood to be imperfect? They are so because they are vague, obscure and imprecise (p. 191). Condorcet assumes that there are universal principles governing how all human beings perceive objects in the world, and from there how they form universal concepts (which are the same in all languages). He models this idea of a universal language on the terminology of naturalists:

‘Naturalists have learnt to classify individuals methodically according to determined characteristics which are easy to grasp, the only method of distinction possible with this innumerable multitude of different beings. These methods are a kind of real language in which every object is designated by some of its more constant qualities and by means of which, knowing these qualities, we may find the name of the object in the conventional language. These same languages, when they are well constructed, also tell us what are, for each class of natural beings, the really

essential qualities whose conjunction implies a more or less complete resemblance in the remaining properties.’ (p. 154)

When discussing the application of Descartes’ and Locke’s methods of breaking down concepts to the simplest ideas, Condorcet remarks that we (humans) have very few precise, accurate and unambiguous ideas, and he explains this through the insufficient development of our language, which must be perfected to absolute transparency (p. 198).

Thus, ultimately, universal truths can be firmly expressed in a universal language, whose rigour and precision in signifying the world is mathematical:

‘A universal language is that which expresses by signs either real objects themselves, or well-defined collections composed of simple and general ideas, which are found to be the same or may arise in a similar form in the minds of all men, or the general relations holding between these ideas, the operations of the human mind, or the operations peculiar of the individual sciences, or the procedures of the arts. So people who become acquainted with these signs, the ways to combine them and the rules for forming them will understand what is written in this language and will be able to read it as easily as their own language. It is obvious that this language might be used to set out the theory of a science or the rules of an art, to describe a new observation or experiment, the invention of a procedure, the discovery of a truth or a method; and that, as in algebra, when one has to make use of a new sign, those already known provide the means of explaining its import.’ (pp. 197–198)

Through this language, truth will become progressively accessible to more feeble intellects and error will become ‘almost impossible’ (p. 199).

Condorcet’s flamboyant rhetoric often erupts into an attack on what he regards as the main enemies of humanity: error, prejudice and superstition. Even in a relatively short, projective essay like the *Sketch*, he is prepared to analyse an error of reason to its last consequences and show how a social practice caused by an entrenched prejudice (such as the stereotyping of women’s skills and abilities, for example) can

negatively affect aspects of human happiness like family life and the encouragement of education, not only for isolated individuals but for the whole society (p. 193). Similarly, he warns that ‘slavery of the mind’ is the most profound form of oppression that can be exercised upon the natural abilities and potential of human beings, and with the most entrenched effects on human progress (p. 97).

How is knowledge acquired? The short answer to this question is: through reason, the only faculty of the human mind which allows human beings to gain access to the general truths of nature and to act in accordance with nature. We find this idea clearly expressed in Condorcet’s discussion of the contribution of 18<sup>th</sup> Century European philosophy to human progress: ‘At last man could proclaim aloud his right, which for so long had been ignored, to submit all opinions to his own reason and to use in search for truth the only instrument for its recognition that he has been given.’ (p. 136)

In interpreting reason as accordance with nature, Condorcet aligns his conception of human wisdom with the Stoic tradition, of which he had a thorough understanding and a high esteem<sup>10</sup>. He seems to model his conception of perfect universal human reason, and his ideal of human perfection in general on the Stoic ideas that (1) perfecting knowledge by aspiring to universal reason leads to the expansion of self-interest towards a sense of justice, and (2) the twin path of knowledge and virtue can only augment happiness<sup>11</sup>. But an important substitution has occurred here, in all the relevant categories: while the Stoics contemplated universality from the perspective of divine<sup>12</sup> reason, virtue and happiness, for Condorcet the realm is entirely *human*, without the requirement for human nature to purify itself into something entirely godlike. This becomes particularly clear in Condorcet’s view of the human passions, where he does not share the Stoics’ pursuit of virtue for its own sake. If nature’s laws have made human beings equal in rights and liberty, it is (in a purely humanist sense) for the purpose of human happiness and human fulfilment, rich in virtuous passions rather than purged of any passions whatsoever. There is a constant preoccupation in the *Sketch* (made apparent especially in its last, future-projective chapter) to keep the issue of happiness within the realm of human sentiments and values.

Consequently, it remains ambiguous whether Condorcet indeed shares the common Stoic belief that the whole universe is governed by the universal benevolence of divine reason (an idea explicitly embraced by Adam Smith, for example, as it will be illustrated in Chapter Three of this thesis). Condorcet's confidence in the capacity of humankind in modern times to expand its reason to bring about a better world seems to be more the result of humankind accumulating true knowledge and gathering momentum towards an irreversible production of happiness and virtue, rather than evidence of the existence of an inherently benevolent universal force.

Importantly, in the equally legitimate processes of feeling and thinking, with Condorcet the human will to act in accordance with nature is performed by reason through rigorous thinking methods founded on Cartesianism, thus bearing little resemblance to the Stoic idea of a more intuitive (rather than analytical) wisdom.

But what is reason in Condorcet's conception? Among other things, reason refers to a category of universal, transparent methods to ascertain truth. This explains the frequent identification he makes between reason, science and knowledge. Importantly, Condorcet also provides vivid accounts of what reason is not: imagination and faith are two activities clearly regarded by him as having no function to perform in relation to reason, either within reason or complementarily.

On the basis of the natural universal transparency of principles of reason, Condorcet constructs his doctrines of natural human rights and natural equality (both will be discussed later in this chapter). For example, when commenting on the ancient division of human society into teachers and followers, Condorcet remarks that this state of affairs is unnatural, both because it places the leading authority above reason (that is, beyond criticism or judgement) and because it places the ruled class below reason (in that they cannot exercise their own judgement). We can infer from here that, for reason to be exercised adequately by an individual, it must be independent of external authority, free to judge others and open to be judged by others<sup>13</sup>.

For the purpose of establishing the nature and content of the universal methods of reason, Condorcet points to Descartes. He eulogises Descartes for successfully applying his method of rational enquiry to dioptrics, mechanics and mathematics, and for planning to ‘extend his method to all the subjects of human thought; God, man and the universe...’(p. 122). In Condorcet’s opinion, it is only because of the imperfections of knowledge in Descartes’ time that he made errors in his other applications; but the intention is realistic and in accordance with the universality of reason. Reason, the sole producer of ‘simple truths and infallible methods’ (p. 178), is waiting for the human mind to take possession.

In addition, Condorcet welcomes Locke’s method of analysing complex concepts into the simplest original ideas supported by physical sensations. He praises the potential of this method to be applied to moral science, politics and social economy. Accordingly, he gives us clear indications as to what we should do with all hypotheses presented to our judgement. Through the correct application of rational methods of observation and demonstration, we should ‘admit only proven truths, ...separate these truths from whatever as yet remained doubtful or uncertain, and... ignore whatever is and always will be impossible to know’(p. 133). We deduce from here that, in Condorcet’s view, our understanding may be limited and imperfect, but truth, once properly acquired, cannot change or be subject to revision<sup>14</sup>. Thus, truth can only be considered to be such in an absolute sense. Accordingly, there is only one universal method of truth acceptance, and that is through reason (more specifically, analytical reasoning) as described above.

For Condorcet, reason is a universal instrument for humans to acquire any kind of knowledge, be it of the physical world, or of social, political and moral truths. Thus, reason is not exclusive to the natural sciences but applies to our thinking about general human, social and political goods, and to our thinking about virtues and feelings. This is apparent in the way he insists on the application of the Cartesian method of enquiry to domains other than the natural sciences. We infer from here (although it is never clearly explained or illustrated in the *Sketch*) that Condorcet’s conception of moral knowledge is based on the idea of natural law. In Condorcet’s view, laws of morality are similar to any other laws of nature and are derived from

the moral constitution of human beings, which is part of human nature. This idea is further elaborated and illustrated in Section 4 of this chapter.

To summarise the elements of Condorcet's project, as outlined in the *Sketch*: the progress of the human mind (mainly treated as a collective process), is a matter of acquiring and perfecting the accumulated human knowledge of the truths of nature, and of applying this knowledge to the benefit of human beings. Systemically, at the level of society, the acquisition of knowledge is done through the sciences and its application is achieved through the arts.

Accordingly, all spheres of truth are entitled to (and should aspire to) the status of sciences, and all areas of utility are entitled to (and should aspire to) the status of arts. Although the progress of various disciplines indicates that some sciences (such as the natural sciences) may be more advanced than are others (e.g. the social, political, moral sciences), Condorcet envisages a future in which a universal mathematical method and a universal language could be employed in all areas of knowledge and in all its applications, thus ensuring a perfectly rational methodological status for all the sciences and the arts. Consequently, the perfection of reason as accordance with nature is the universal means by which social systems can facilitate human progress.

The improvement of social systems proposed includes the perfection of the social and political arts. As illustrated in Section 2 below, this is aimed at achieving an ideal society governed by an ideal constitution, based on universal principles which guarantee natural human rights and natural equality.

## **2. The ideal society: the universal guarantor of natural rights**

There is no distinction made in the *Sketch* between society as an aggregate of systems and society as a collective of people, but both meanings are present, blended in the rhetoric of the essay.

With respect to the systemic perspective, as suggested throughout the *Sketch*, it is the task of society to organise the accumulation and expansion of human knowledge and the development of the arts. Consequently, by applying reason in accordance with nature, human beings will be able to attain perfect social organisation, which is natural and universal. For example, a natural social order is inherently good because such an order is bound to ensure equality of access to the realisation of one's needs<sup>15</sup> and because inequalities that can be allowed to persist in such a society cannot possibly entail poverty, humiliation and dependence (p. 174). A natural social order is also highly conducive to liberty, in that it allows individuals to seek their own fulfilment in an environment free from oppression. Thus, it is imperative that 'the actions of public institutions, or governments, or individuals' should not add 'new pains to those that are natural and inevitable' (p. 141). Importantly, the natural social order is not only the most legitimate, it is also within anyone's reach: all one has to do is follow the precepts of nature.

However, there are instances where the ideal society is clearly understood as a collective of individuals or nations. In the last chapter of his essay, Condorcet launches into a number of prophecies about the future of humankind. One such prophecy is the achievement of a global social and political culture. By perfecting reason through universal analytical methods and a universal language, any distinctions that fragment the universal categories become irrelevant. Thus, Condorcet asks rhetorically: 'Is there on the face of the earth a nation whose inhabitants have been debarred by nature herself from the enjoyment of freedom and the exercise of reason?' (p. 174).

In sum, the ideal society of humankind is a global society which, according to principles of universal reason, guarantees the natural rights, including equality and liberty, of all individuals and nations. All nations should therefore adopt constitutions based on these enlightened principles, enjoy sovereignty equally, and practise secular democracy and religious tolerance. Condorcet's perspective on the progress of collective categories (such as nations and humankind) will be further discussed in Section 4 of this chapter.



### **3. The implicit humanist imperative: the subordination of society's projects to human fulfilment**

Condorcet's humanism has already become apparent in our discussion of the coordinates of his social project, as they are presented in Section 1 above (especially in the comparative analysis of his concept of reason in relation to the Stoic principle of accordance with nature).

Although in designing the ideal society Condorcet displays certain systemic preoccupations and ambitions, we must not forget that, after all, it is the progress of the human mind that he describes, with knowledge and reason as attributes of human beings<sup>16</sup>.

Furthermore, Condorcet clearly extends his ambitions for this project from strictly intellectual relevance to a broader aim of human fulfilment:

'We observe that the labours of recent ages have done much for the progress of the human mind, but little for the perfection of the human race; that they have done much for the honour of man, something for his liberty, but so far almost nothing for his happiness.'(p. 169)

The recognition of access to knowledge as both an absolute possibility and a natural right founds a whole set of related principles. Firstly, it forms a solid foundation for Condorcet's thesis that the upholding of natural human rights is the only *raison d'être* of any social and political system: 'social art is the art of guaranteeing the preservation of these rights and their distribution in the most equal fashion over the largest area' (p. 128). Secondly, it gives significant weight to the principle that the manner in which these rights are guaranteed is subject to common rules decided upon by the majority (pp. 128–129). Thirdly, it fuels Condorcet's optimism that social calculations can provide practical solutions for the satisfaction of the greatest number of needs for the greatest number of people<sup>17</sup>. Of particular importance for our discussion at this point is Condorcet's overall appreciation that 'the state's true power and wealth' should be related to 'the well-being of the individual and a respect for his rights' (p. 139).

Concerning human needs and human potential, the instrumental role of society, as Condorcet sees it, is a facilitating (rather than engineering) one. If individuals are allowed to use their abilities according to nature and to their true potential, then they can independently realise their own needs. What is required from social systems is not distributive methods and solutions, but the guarantee of individual autonomy: ‘men ... should be able to use their faculties, dispose of their wealth and provide for their needs in complete freedom’ (p. 131)<sup>18</sup>.

It is important to note here that Condorcet’s humanism is evident not only in his ultimate justification of all social systems in terms of their success in facilitating human fulfilment, but also in his assumption that there is a direct correspondence (or congruence) between the desirable attributes of systems and the desirable attributes of people, of which the latter are more fundamental than the former.

Several points made earlier, in Sections 1 and 2 of this chapter, illustrate his humanism as consisting in the ultimate appraisal of social systems by criteria of human fulfilment. For example, although measuring the progress of the human mind through the material results of human civilisation may suggest an evaluation of the performance of systems rather than of the progress of people, Condorcet seldom describes these systems in terms of their inherent qualities. As a theoretical program for a much more extensive study, the *Sketch* sets up the objectives of this study in a manner that consistently links improvements in the systems with the impact of these improvements on human life. Thus, the relevance of the systemic progress of the sciences and the arts (to be elaborated in detail in this projected study) is announced in the *Sketch* mainly in terms of knowledge as empowerment of the individual, and of control and efficiency achieved through the arts as responsiveness to human needs. In other words, power and control are derived from knowledge through the mediation of the arts (technology).

If we take a closer look at Condorcet’s criteria for appraising social progress (in particular knowledge as empowerment and control, material wealth and liberty), it is clearly implied that the recipients of these qualities or goods, the subjects of these attributes, are the people. The only criteria which may acquire the meaning of

attributes of systems are knowledge and control, exactly those considered by Condorcet universal enough to form the objectives of a social project and thus justify the development of social systems promoting knowledge and control.

However, Condorcet's ideal of a political order that guarantees the individual's natural rights, including maximum liberty and equality (p. 130) indicates that, in his conception, knowledge and control as attributes of systems would have no relevance if they were not, at the same time, attributes of people. It is the people who value and aspire to virtue and happiness, therefore knowledge (the quality that brings about virtue and happiness) must be mainly experienced by people and not confined to some impersonal mechanisms.

Through his recurrent suggestion that ignorance is slavery and that any form of domination is most effective through the oppression of the mind (e.g., pp. 22, 77, 97), Condorcet clearly indicates that the main locus of knowledge must be the individual. It is through acquiring knowledge directly, without the mediation of any external authority, that individuals can best understand and act in their own interests (p. 120), exercise their rights (p. 182) and use their own reason as the supreme authority for the validation of their beliefs (pp. 136, 179). Direct possession of knowledge is the key to the individuals' power to improve their condition and liberate themselves from oppression, dogma (especially religious), superstition, prejudice and error.

Indeed, Condorcet does provide, for instance, more detailed explanations of the rational (Cartesian) method for identifying truth and achieving true knowledge (pp. 122, 133), and these ideas may well guide the development of systems. But there is no doubt that, in his view, reason (in both theory and practice) remains essentially a quality possessed by people and an activity performed by people, more exactly by each individual directly in relation to his or her specific circumstances.

In Condorcet's discourse, all these criteria of human progress, understood as constitutive of human fulfilment, provide the ultimate reasons for most practical recommendations, in particular for the development of the sciences and the arts in a

politically liberal and egalitarian society. The justification of the objectives of the social project is never pushed any further to reasons beyond human well-being. We have seen how utility (as an attribute of the arts) is defined strictly as response to human needs, while knowledge itself is conceived in human terms. If the universe contains truths that cannot possibly be known by the human intellect, then there is no sense in which such truths can become relevant to human existence and therefore they should be ignored (p. 133).

However, this emphasis on the ultimate authority of the individual's exercise of reason, and on human well-being as ultimate justification of any social efforts, is not (as it may seem) the result of an unreflective anthropocentrism. It must be pointed out here that Condorcet's humanism is clearly naturalist, in that human well-being can only be achieved in accordance with nature. Thus, whatever is achieved for the *true* benefit of human beings must be for the benefit of nature (or at least not contrary to its benefit), as the *true* benefit of human beings cannot be defined or understood in any other way. He does not seem to pay attention to the possibility of a tension, or conflict, or contradiction between the two types of benefit. If, at times, he does perceive such tensions, he takes them as an indication that the human mind has not become enlightened enough to understand the true benefits for humankind in accordance with the laws of nature. Such benefits for humankind may cover 'the true principles of the social order' (p. 111), the satisfaction of human needs and the attainment of individual happiness (p. 120), and the true rights of individuals (p. 182).

In this context, it is true that human beings have rights and interests, but these rights and interests are not identifiable with subjective wants and desires; they are universally dictated by nature, and only an enlightened mind, aware of the *real* rights and interests as postulated by nature, can support action conducive to the *real* progress of humankind. Condorcet strongly believes that the enlightenment of all members of humankind by the universal truths of nature is only a matter of time (pp. 168–169).

The acknowledged fact that new knowledge may lead to new classifications, new structuring of information, new instruments and methods, and new generalisations and simplifications is not proof that universal truths do not exist, only that we are still to perfect our ability to apprehend them correctly. For those truths that fall within the limited scope of human understanding, human nature has the potential to apprehend them fully, in the absolute.

Importantly, when Condorcet predicts that ‘the time will therefore come when the sun will shine only on free men who know no other master but their reason’ (p. 179), he does not entertain the possibility that *their* reason could be any different, at any moment, from universal human reason. Condorcet does understand that the reasoning processes of individuals may be, in actual instances, imperfect and lead to imperfect results. However, he also believes that, because ‘universal rules of reason and of Nature... are true for all languages and all peoples’ (p. 166) and because through a process of cumulative enlightenment humankind can access these truths unequivocally, free human beings will be able to align their own reason with an absolute, omniscient reason. Condorcet’s absolutism will be further evaluated in Chapter Five.

All the examples discussed above clearly indicate that behind the social projects proposed by Condorcet there is a conception of human benefit. The author’s humanism has several key features: (1) the pure rationale of social systems is to empower people and facilitate their fulfilment; (2) the attributes of social progress are qualities ultimately possessed by people; (3) conversely, people have a universal responsibility to self-fulfil in an absolute sense (by understanding their *real* needs and interests, and by exercising *true* reason); and (4) this humanism is harmoniously embraced by naturalism (as human action is guided by accordance with nature as a governing principle).

Even more specifically, this conception of human benefit is clearly pitched at the level of individual human life<sup>19</sup>. It is on this basis that we can explore Condorcet’s explicit project and read into it, with reasonable precision, his underlying ideal of humanness and conception of human progress.

#### **4. From the nature of humanness to an ideal of humanness**

What conception of humanness informs Condorcet's understanding of human progress? In relation to this issue, the author appears to attach a central importance to knowledge of human nature.

##### **4.1 Human nature: perfection as achievable potential**

As part of the wider concept of nature, human nature is the key, or the given script, for both the actual and human condition and its potential for further development. Through a sound understanding of human nature we can both explain the actual and obtain proper guidance or direction towards the potential.

The *Sketch* opens with the statement that 'man is born with the ability to receive sensations...' and continues, over four paragraphs, with a description of universal natural human faculties such as feeling and thinking, and the developmental relationship between sensations, feelings, communication, moral ideas and intellectual concepts (p. 3). The purpose of this exposition is to lay the foundation for any interest in the progress of society on the human being's universal natural potential for progress. Thus, feeling and thinking, as universal and natural human faculties, indicate possible criteria for the evaluation of human progress understood as realisation of human potential.

Condorcet believes that, by breaking down judgements about human nature to the simplest ideas or concepts, we will obtain some pure, universal, a-social principle. The unique principle he identifies as forming the basis for all human nature (with its limits and potential) is one that relies on the constitutive ability of human beings to apprehend the world through the physical senses, to reflect on their own experiences and conceptualise them, and to make value judgements by placing or viewing himself or herself in relations with the world: 'There is one single truth about human nature: man is a sentient being, capable of reasoning and of acquiring moral ideas'(p. 128).

Condorcet adopts, without further elaboration, Locke's theory that the universal human ability to feel pleasure and pain leads to universal moral ideas. From this he infers (although he does not explain how he does so) that 'those general truths... determine the necessary and immutable laws of justice and injustice, and, finally, the motives that we have for conforming with them, motives which spring from the very nature of our sensibility, from what might be called our moral constitution' (p. 134).

This moral constitution, he says, 'gives us the foundations of his [*man's* – *my note*] duties and the origins of his ideas of justice and virtue' (p. 64). As this moral nature of human beings is immutable, a science of morality can be established<sup>20</sup>.

Although Condorcet is optimistic in believing that perfection of reason (and, through it, the progress of society) is inevitable in the long run, he discusses certain universal natural features of humans which are bound to stay in the way of this progress: '... according to the general laws of the development of our faculties, certain prejudices have necessarily come into being at each stage of our progress' (p. 11). The *Sketch* contains many examples of such prejudices, for instance superstitious beliefs long maintained from childhood, or errors of reason consolidated by people's fear of political and religious authority. Among the most pernicious prejudices he ranks the doctrine of human powerlessness in the face of divine omnipotence (p. 142) and the social subordination of women to men (p. 193).

The two theses (the natural progress of reason, and the natural occurrence of prejudice) are not incompatible: according to Condorcet, human beings are not born perfect; they are only born with the potential to achieve perfection, to employ their mind, will and conscience to mould what was given to them by nature into the best (i.e. the most harmonised with nature) they can be. This idea is very important for distinguishing between an actual state of humanness and an ideal of humanness.

The *Sketch* contains a number of comments on *artificial* obstacles to the progress of reason. These references are sometimes obscure, a fact which may ultimately create confusion about what constitutes a natural obstacle as well. On the one hand, he

remarks that prejudices ‘have extended their seductions or their empire long beyond their due season, because men retain the prejudices of their childhood, their country and their age, long after they have discovered all the truths necessary to destroy them’(p. 11). This makes such prejudices appear as aspects of human nature. They are fostered, however, by rulers who choose to keep us in ignorance, a fact which – Condorcet suggests – constitutes an artificial obstacle. And yet he describes the division of humankind into two classes, such as the knowers and the listeners, or (in other words), the A and the B, or the C and the D, as a natural phenomenon throughout human history (p. 17).

Elaborating on the conceptual tools provided by Condorcet, the tension between reason and prejudice may be partly resolved as follows: if it is also in human nature to find an interest in perpetuating superstitions, then ideally this narrow self-interest must be enlightened through reason. Condorcet believes that the problem lies not with self-interest itself (which is, in principle, naturally and socially healthy<sup>21</sup>) but with a narrow (too self-centred, too self-limited) understanding of it. A self-limited understanding is also self-limiting because it leads to errors affecting humankind as a whole, thus implicitly affecting its each and every member. Both elitism in the dissemination of knowledge and class interests in the appropriation of knowledge are, in Condorcet’s opinion, instances of such narrow understanding of self-interest (pp. 17–18).

It must be remarked here that, for enlightened self-interest to be preferred to narrow self-interest, it is not sufficient for me to understand that the action recommended in enlightened point of view is overall more valuable but also that it is *better for me* than the action recommended by the narrow point of view. This is a necessary condition for a however expanded self-interest to remain self-interest rather than become a more general or abstract type of interest. Condorcet does not provide any details as to how awareness of better cosmic circumstances would translate into better personal circumstances. This confidence in the enlightened self-interest seems to contradict the Stoic view that universal beneficence may well appear, at times, to translate into partial evils.



There is a further apparent contradiction here: both narrow self-interest and enlightened self-interest are natural (although at times Condorcet does label certain constraints derived from narrow self-interest as artificial). The author seems to resolve this contradiction by suggesting that the resolution of this tension, through progress by enlightenment, is also natural, therefore inevitable. In other words, there is the suggestion that human beings are destined to seek and obtain enlightenment in order to realise their true potential.

How does Condorcet see this as happening? In his view, human history is a continuous struggle between reason and error (and/or prejudice), between knowledge and ignorance. He does recognise, for example, that ignorance has a 'natural aversion... to anything that is new and strange' (p. 24). In another section of his essay, however, he suggests that human beings naturally seek new ideas and new sensations (p. 32)<sup>22</sup>. Then, he triumphantly concludes that, with the Renaissance, the balance seems to start inclining towards reason and knowledge, and away from ignorance and superstition<sup>23</sup>.

In studying the history of humanity, Condorcet concludes that 'the progress of virtue has always gone hand in hand with that of enlightenment, just as the progress of corruption has always followed, or heralded, its decadence' (p. 54). His descriptions of the epoch of the crusades (p. 77) and of the religious conflicts that shook Europe before the appearance of the printing press (p. 98) strengthen his conviction that ignorance is bound to foster vice and oppression. Conversely, true knowledge inevitably brings about moral decency and freedom.

Trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together, we obtain the picture of the history of humankind as a continuous struggle between the two forces, with a critical point *above* which an increase in reason and knowledge will bring about a natural tendency (in both individuals and societies) to favour reason and knowledge, and *below* which an increase in ignorance and superstition will fuel a natural tendency to favour ignorance and superstition. Condorcet develops from this the idea of a natural link between all absolute goods, of an 'unbreakable chain' – as he sees it – between truth, virtue and happiness (p. 193). This virtuous chain, which launches

humankind in an upward direction, *can* be diverted and replaced by a vicious chain (of ignorance, vice and suffering), which at crucial times in history seems to have pushed humankind downwards.

Condorcet seems to suggest (e.g. pp. 168–169) that humankind will eventually manage to maintain itself above this critical point. There is insufficient information in the *Sketch* to clarify the foundation of this belief, apart from the suggestion that the achievements of the European Enlightenment, witnessed in his own time, are evidence of humankind having accumulated sufficient true knowledge and momentum to engage in the virtuous direction, very likely irreversibly. Condorcet's position on the nature of this momentum is ambiguous. On the one hand, there is the expectation that an increasing number of people should become enlightened and thus engage the progress of humankind on a firm route. On the other hand, there is the suggestion that the actual number of enlightened people in his own time is still very small:

‘But although everything tells us that the human race will never relapse into its former state of barbarism, although everything combines to reassure us against that corrupt and cowardly political theory which would condemn it to oscillate forever between truth and error, liberty and servitude, nevertheless we still see the forces of enlightenment in possession of no more than a very small portion of the globe, and the truly enlightened vastly outnumbered by the great mass of men who are still given over to ignorance and prejudice’. (p. 169)

Hence, Condorcet suggests that the momentum of the virtuous chain may be owed not to enlightenment having become a popular occurrence but to the premise that absolute truth, once accessed by human beings, is somehow locked in, never to be lost again. This premise fuels Condorcet's radical confidence in the righteousness of the enlightened path, and classifies all apparently contrary evidence, irrespective of its quantity, as work to be done or as problems whose resolution is only a matter of time.

The tremendous work lying ahead of the enlightenment project, as Condorcet sees it, is supported by another important premise about human nature, namely that human beings are essentially good, not corrupt, and can only be corrupted by

artificial and coercive social practices. The origins of crime, for example, are to be found in imperfect legislation, institutions and customs, not in the individuals themselves (p. 193). Furthermore, as poverty, suffering and crime appear to be, in this perspective, the outcome of ignorance, it results that knowledge will always be bound to produce virtue. In Condorcet's own words, moral and political truths should naturally 'incline mankind to humanity, benevolence and justice' (p. 193).

Finally, a central issue in Condorcet's conception of human nature is the issue of limits. When discussing the perfectibility of humankind, he entertains the possibility that human nature itself may be subject to change in time<sup>24</sup>. But he does not explain how this idea of a changeable human nature is to articulate with his tendency to treat any universal truth about human nature as immutable.

To summarise, human beings are naturally endowed with plural and non-reducible faculties such as perception, conceptualisation and valuing. They are also capable of self-interest, reason and a sense of justice. Any ills affecting the human condition come from narrow self-interest or the oppression of reason through prejudices and ignorance. The ultimate, universal remedy for all these ills is the acquisition of true knowledge, which would enlighten the human understanding of self-interest and lead reason to perfection. Human beings can depart from the vicious chain of ignorance, vice and suffering and engage with the virtuous chain of truth, virtue and happiness if they channel all their natural faculties towards the acquisition of true knowledge. This acquisition of true knowledge is entirely within the power of human beings.

#### **4.2 Basic, universal needs as guides to desirable potential**

In the context of human progress as fulfilment of human potential, it is useful to have a brief look at what Condorcet has to say about human needs.

In the *Sketch*, human needs appear on stage mainly as the ultimate natural justification for the existence of a variety of arts and sciences. The distinction between the sciences and the arts, between theory and practice, is basically one

between values related to absolute truths and values related to human needs. Within this framework, different kinds of science are relevant to different kinds of art satisfying different kinds of needs. For example, while natural sciences contribute to the improvement of arts that satisfy physical needs, moral and political sciences will form the foundation of arts responding to emotional and moral needs:

‘Just as the mathematical and physical sciences tend to improve the arts that we use to satisfy our simplest needs, is it not also part of the necessary order of nature that the moral and political sciences should exercise a similar influence upon the motives that direct our feelings and our actions?’(p. 192)

Condorcet also appears aware that needs may vary in significance. Occasionally, we can distinguish rudimentary elements of a needs hierarchy. For instance, in the ‘First Stage’, he attributes the early, tribal prejudice of excluding women from political decisions to the fact that the imperatives of subsistence and security were mainly satisfied by men, and that these imperatives enjoyed a general priority (p. 15). In the ‘Second Stage’, he argues that, as soon as people could enjoy an abundance of food and a safer environment, there was more time for the development of the mind (p. 19)<sup>25</sup>.

But his main focus is on basic, universal needs, such as the need for humans ‘to preserve their freedom, to live without fear of injustice and to defend themselves against any external threat to their independence’ (p. 50). He explains the rationale of society and of any legislating activity in terms of meeting these universal needs. As certain needs and interests are essentially the same for all human beings, it means that there is such a thing as human essence, which can be specified through these needs and their fulfilment.

Moreover, universal needs are natural and absolute. As discussed in Section 3 above, the authenticity of one’s needs, interests and fulfilment is verifiable by accordance with nature. This makes universal natural needs objective and enduring, as they are dictated by human nature, and not subject to contingent, ephemeral desires. This assumption underpins Condorcet’s belief in a universal blueprint for the ideal human being, ideal human fulfilment and the ideal society. This central

feature of Condorcet's conceptions of human and social progress will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

### **4.3 Human fulfilment: a task for empowered individuals**

Condorcet adopts Rousseau's doctrine that, while having needs, human beings also possess 'certain faculties with which to satisfy them' (p. 130). In this context, the social project proposed in the *Sketch* is a unifying method of facilitating the capacity of all individuals to realise their own needs.

Central to Condorcet's conception of human fulfilment is the underlying idea that self-realisation is not limited to happiness (occasionally referred to but never explained), but involves the satisfaction of one's own needs and pursuit of one's own true interests through the proper application of principles of universal reason to one's particular circumstances. Consequently, the true human wealth (or value) consists in possessing the knowledge of one's true needs and of the means by which to satisfy these needs.

To achieve this, the social project focuses on the universal application of reason in the sciences and the arts. Among the arts, which are often developed to form social systems that efficiently satisfy needs collectively (e.g. the arts satisfying economic and security needs), there is also one art to whose development Condorcet pays particular attention: political art. By perfecting a political art which involves the universal recognition of natural human rights, society empowers the individuals and enhances their capacity to look after their own development.

In sum, Condorcet's notion of human fulfilment has an absolute and universal meaning: the satisfaction of one's true needs by correctly applying the principles of universal reason to one's particular circumstances. In this context, political art empowers individuals to equally and freely pursue their own fulfilment. Consequently, the real (ultimate) wealth for every human being is knowledge as a form of power and freedom.

The substantive co-ordinates of human fulfilment, as suggested by Condorcet, point to desirable dimensions of humanness which together form an ideal of humanness. This ideal of humanness will be elaborated below.

## **5. Desirable dimensions of humanness, universal needs and the foundation of natural human rights**

From the examples of historical events discussed in the *Sketch*, we can extract a short list of goods discussed, in the context of ideal human fulfilment, as desirable dimensions of humanness: knowledge, virtue, material well-being, liberty and (more relevant in a collective sense) equality. The desirable dimensions of humanness outlined above can be inferred from Condorcet's illustrations of both his conception of universal human needs and his doctrine of natural human rights.

In relation to knowledge, Condorcet projects that individuals should use reason to understand their own true interests, needs and rights (p. 192), and that a system of universal education should teach the sciences and the universal language for absolute truths in a democratic spirit (p. 198).

With respect to virtue and well-being, he envisages that all human beings should exercise humanity, that is 'compassion for the misfortunes afflicting the human race' (p. 141). In this context, the preoccupation for human well-being and the alleviation of suffering and poverty is constant throughout the *Sketch*, and made clear in the political program outlined in 'The Ninth Stage' as follows:

'...An understanding of the natural rights of man, the belief that these rights are inalienable and indefeasible, a strongly expressed desire for liberty of thought and letters, of trade and industry, and for the alleviation of the people's suffering, for the proscription of all penal laws against religious dissenters and the abolition of torture and barbarous punishments, the desire for a milder system of criminal legislation and jurisprudence which should give complete security to the innocent, and for a simpler civil code, more in conformance with reason and nature, indifference in all matters of religion which now were

relegated to the status of superstitions and political impostures, a hatred of hypocrisy and fanaticism, a contempt for prejudice, zeal for the propagation of enlightenment...’ (p. 140)

From this program we can deduce the elements of an ideal human state in which knowledge, virtue, equality and liberty (understood especially as autonomy of thought, expression and action) create happiness and eliminate suffering.

Consistently, liberty - recognised as an ‘inalienable good’ (p. 111) – is defined as freedom from any forms of authority (such as social, political, national or cultural authority) apart from reason and nature (p. 113). By connecting rights and equality at the level of universal humanity, Condorcet develops a concept of liberty anticipating J. S. Mill and John Rawls:

‘Men, therefore, should be able to use their faculties, dispose of their wealth and provide for their needs in complete freedom. The common interest of any society, far from demanding that they should restrain such activity, on the contrary, forbids any interference with it; and as far as this aspect of public order is concerned, the guaranteeing to each man his natural rights is at once the whole of social utility, the sole duty of the social power, the only right that the general will can legitimately exercise over the individual.’(pp. 130–131)

One can read into this discussion of society as facilitator of individual goals the imperative of individual autonomy as a natural universal human right, and also a Smith-like assumption of an ‘invisible hand’ (as will be discussed in Chapter Three).

Regarding equality, it is relevant that Condorcet recognises as ‘true morality’ only what can be derived from the ‘natural equality’ of human beings (p. 109). Justice itself is nothing but a consequence of the universal equality of human beings (p. 172). Furthermore, in the spirit of Rawlsian justice *avant-la-lettre*, Condorcet postulates that ‘the only kind of inequality to persist should be that which is in the interests of all’ (p. 174).

It would be trivial to assume that, in emphasising natural equality, Condorcet ignores natural inequalities. He acknowledges that natural inequalities of ability, wealth and status do in fact exist, and that these could not be removed without causing even more disruptive, unnatural inequality and injustice. But he believes that, by understanding nature properly, through impeccable methods of reason, we can diminish these inequalities (p. 179) and not magnify them into forms of social oppression (p. 183).

In this context, certain inequalities seem to be better off corrected spontaneously, without conscious human intervention: a more equal distribution of wealth can be achieved, for example, through freedom of trade (p. 180). However, how we are to distinguish the natural from the artificial remains unclear.

Furthermore, the distinction between what is natural and what is artificial is altogether different from the distinction between cases when human intervention is justified and cases when it is not. This is apparent in the way he insists that certain natural inequalities can be improved upon through human intervention. For instance, natural inequality in abilities can be adjusted by a good educational system, while natural inequality in means of subsistence can be rectified by a good legal system (p. 184).

Condorcet's universalist perspective on knowledge, virtue, well-being, liberty and equality, which somehow confuses desirable humanness with empirically defined humanness, provides the foundation for his conception of natural human rights. For example, because reason is universal and accessible to all human beings, all individuals have natural rights in virtue of being human: 'The rights of man were written in the book of nature' (p. 97). These natural rights make all individuals equal in these respects, and freedom (of any kind) is regulated by this equality. In other words, universal reason leads to universal rights, including universal equality and universal liberties.

Natural rights are intertwined with principles of equality, for example in the argument that where people have the equal right to be rewarded for their skills and



efforts (without interference from preferential fiscal laws), ‘wealth has a natural tendency to equality’, thus promoting well-being and reducing poverty (p. 180). The same principles of natural rights and equality are invoked when adding to the wish list that all the knowledge discovered by humankind should be accessible to each and every individual (p. 12).

Condorcet’s emphasis on the primacy of natural rights over any other reasons for valuing (e.g. interests) becomes more evident when he criticises a traditional political doctrine like the ‘principle of the identity of interests’ as being too limited in scope (though it may appear valid up to a certain point). Accordingly, Condorcet rejects the theory that societies and political orders should be founded on this principle. He does not clarify what this principle consists in but we may infer from his comments that historically human beings grouped together to create cities on the basis of common interests. These interests ensured consensus within the city walls and defence against the enemy outside these walls. Instead, he argues, society-forming principles should be based on universal laws of nature, in respect to which all individuals, as human beings, are equal. He then extrapolates this natural equality principle from individuals to cultures and nations<sup>26</sup>. The primacy of natural rights is justified on the ground that, if natural rights are denied, basic inequalities resulting from this denial will end up undermining the foundation of any identity of interests:

‘We shall demonstrate not only that this principle of the identity of interests, once made the basis for political rights, is a violation of the rights of those who are thereby debarred from a complete exercise of them, but also that this identity ceases to exist once it gives rise to genuine inequality.’ (p. 145)

Although Condorcet does not clarify how identity of interests gets eroded by genuine inequality<sup>27</sup>, he makes it sufficiently clear that the principle of natural rights is for him a more basic principle, which necessarily subsumes the principle of identity of interests.

To summarise, Condorcet’s conception of desirable dimensions of humanness (knowledge, virtue, material well-being, liberty and equality) is based on the selection of certain potent goods for the satisfaction of certain universal human needs. In this context, Condorcet’s doctrine of universal human needs has a double

function: (1) it provides the co-ordinates of a universal ideal of humanness; and (2) it provides a natural law foundation for Condorcet's political doctrine of universal human rights.

## **6. Inter-dimensional relations: a pattern of universal benefit**

How are knowledge, virtue, material well-being, liberty, and equality understood to relate to one another in an ideal of humanness?

Condorcet's metaphor of the 'unbreakable chain' of 'truth, happiness and virtue' (p. 193) is recurrent throughout the *Sketch*. Although frequent, this idea is not elaborated upon, and no comments are provided about how the desirable dimensions of humanness (e.g. knowledge, virtue, material well-being, liberty, equality) are supposed to interact in practice.

Let us reflect for a moment on the possible articulations between social and human progress in Condorcet's conception. The social order recommended by Condorcet is, in effect, not a uni-dimensional system but a complex aggregate of systems, covering as many sciences as there can be areas of enquiry, and as many arts as there can be areas of human need.

However, his awareness of a wide diversity of human enquiry and need does not distract him for a moment from the unifying objective of his project. As illustrated in Section 1, all sciences, no matter how diverse, should converge towards a universal method and a universal symbolic language (pp. 197–199). Moreover, although the vocation of the arts is to mediate between the generality of scientific truths and the specificity of human circumstances, this mediation is also achieved as an application of general laws of nature, through a concept of needs as natural and universal (p. 112). The recommended political order similarly relies on universal principles of natural rights.

The social project is a combination of truth discovered through (physical, political, moral) sciences and utility achieved through (physical, political, moral) arts. The single ultimate principle that unifies these two elements is human needs-sensitive reason.

On the other hand, the plurality of Condorcet's criteria for human progress is reducible, in effect, to knowledge as the driving force of the 'unbreakable chain'. When talking about 'how nature has joined together indissolubly the progress of knowledge and that of liberty, virtue and respect for the natural rights of man' (p. 10), it is clear that each of these four values is perceived as distinct from the others. But the four criteria are not valued equally, for amongst them knowledge has a privileged status, in that it is assumed to drive forward, and pull all the other dimensions of humanness behind it, on the road of progress. According to Condorcet, 'the path of truth, virtue and happiness' (p. 201) is only one: the path of knowledge acquired through reason.

One can conclude from here that Condorcet's acknowledgement of the multi-dimensionality of human progress does not guarantee an equal, non-reducible plurality of the criteria for this progress.

As previously suggested, in the virtuous chain, knowledge appears to have a privileged position: not only does it come first, it is also the driving force for the progress of all others.

In support of this conclusion, examples of how knowledge is envisaged to bring about virtue, happiness, liberty (e.g. as individual autonomy), equality, adequate satisfaction of one's needs or proper exercise of one's rights abound throughout the *Sketch*. There is, however, hardly any discussion of how these other goods may be able to improve knowledge. In other words, knowledge – the driving link of the virtuous chain – appears to be the only factor that can initiate the process. As nothing relevant to utility can occur in the absence of truth (p. 104), it seems that knowledge is the only good indispensable to all others. In conclusion, knowledge is the universal means to all other criteria for human progress.

Furthermore, knowledge (as the only indispensable universal good) cannot be limited and cannot disappoint. For example, as described in Subsection 4.1 of this chapter, Condorcet's discussion of the virtuous chain of knowledge and morality in contrast with the vicious chain of ignorance and immorality illustrates how, as both chains are presumed to be universal, knowledge will invariably bring about virtue, while ignorance is always bound to produce immorality. Thus, the two ideal dimensions of humanness (knowledge and virtue) can never diverge.

Condorcet warns against what he calls 'absolute Pyrrhonism' as the most powerful enemy of the idea of infinite perfectibility of humankind. Although his explanation of the doctrine he is attacking is too vague and rhetorical, and it is not clear how his analysis of it is related to the traditional understanding of Pyrrhonism as a sceptical doctrine, we can still discern from the clouded negative passion of his phrase that his attack is mainly directed against the following ideas: (1) human nature has given (set) limits which are immutable; (2) vain attempts to overcome these limits through knowledge are a dangerous source of unnecessary misfortune; and (3) virtue and common sense should be submitted to a higher authority than human reason (p. 142).

Condorcet's reply to the promoters of this sort of humble wisdom is this:

'We shall find in the experience of the past, in the observation of the progress that the sciences and civilization have already made, in the analysis of the progress of the human mind and of the development of its faculties, the strongest reasons for believing that nature has set no limit to the realization of our hopes.'(p. 175)

This reply does not clarify whether the goals or projections entailed by our hopes are taken to be fixed, related to the absolute and immutable truths of nature, or whether they can change with new experiences. As discussed before, Condorcet envisages the possibility for humans to conceive through reason a natural social order (p. 180) – and similarly, one could continue, a natural political order, moral order, economic order, etc. Consequently, *there is* a limit, namely the limit set by nature and its immutable laws. In this sense, imagination and speculation,

unsupported by nature, are a wasteful deviation from human destiny. But within the framework set by nature, Condorcet believes, there are no further limits imposed on the human being. Thus, humankind is, potentially, no more limited than nature itself, and there is no realm of nature to which humankind is *a priori* refused access.

Condorcet's attack on 'absolute Pyrrhonism' as humble acceptance of pre-set limits has two strong implications. Firstly, there is no amount of knowledge that could be too much, so when it comes to knowledge one could not possibly overdo it. Secondly, it makes no sense for other considerations of human progress to impose limits on the pursuit of knowledge. As we have seen, Condorcet is fiercely critical of virtues (like humility) if used as reasons for the limitation of knowledge. In his view, knowledge is so much a pre-condition of everything else that no other goods can accomplish their true vocation if they constrain knowledge. Thus, humility limiting knowledge is no real virtue, ignorant happiness is no real happiness, while ignorance of liberty and equality makes these ineffectual.

An example of this is his criticism of Asian cultures, which, contrary to natural reason, chose the path of domination instead of enlightenment of the masses. Condorcet argues that the consequence of this choice was stagnation through an unnecessary limitation of possibilities for further knowledge – an outcome which in the long term affected all other aspects of progress in those cultures (p. 34).

The issue of limits in Condorcet's conception presents us with a series of ambiguities, which I shall briefly explore here. At this point, one must carefully distinguish between limits to overall human progress and limits of each dimension of humanness understood as a criterion of human progress. Although most of the ideas about limits presented in the *Sketch* refer to overall human progress (more precisely, to the progress of humankind), it will become clear from the examples discussed here that the points he makes about possible limits to the progress of humankind reveal his understanding of limits in relation to certain dimensions of humanness, in particular to knowledge.

Condorcet himself acknowledges that he owes the thesis of the infinite perfectibility of humanity to other thinkers, such as Turgot, Price and Priestley (p. 142). This doctrine is commonly identified with the idea that there are no naturally set limits to human progress.

Let us take a closer look at how Condorcet elaborates on this idea, whose demonstration is announced by the author as the main objective of his project:

‘Such is the aim of the work that I have undertaken, and its result will be to show by appeal to reason and fact that nature has set no term to the perfection of human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is truly indefinite; and that the progress of this perfectibility, from now onwards independent of any power that might wish to halt it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has cast us. This progress will doubtless vary in speed, but it will never be reversed as long as the earth occupies its present place in the system of the universe, and as long as the general laws of this system produce neither a general cataclysm nor such changes as will deprive the human race of its present faculties and its present resources.’(p. 4)

Condorcet’s discussion of limits is more complex and refined than is usually believed. He is aware, for example, of a sense in which it can be said that the human intellect is limited: it can only comprehend a certain quantity of facts. But this does not mean that the human mind is a receptacle that, once filled to capacity, cannot receive any more knowledge and cannot progress any further. He describes the inter-conditional and inter-supportive relationship between combining and generalising ideas, between complexity and simplicity, as follows: as soon as new combinations of ideas have increased to an extent that does not allow the human mind to deal with them through the old methods, the mind will produce a new method, placed at a new level of generalisation (synthesis), which will enable it to explore further complexities past this new level (p. 185)<sup>28</sup>.

Another important example of Condorcet’s awareness of the problems involving limits is his discussion of Physiocratic economic ideas. Indeed, one can identify a

pattern in the natural balancing tendency between human population and resources. As soon as population increase puts pressure on resources, certain phenomena occur which cause a decrease in population to a more manageable level. But Condorcet is not readily prepared to accept that this is all there is to the physical limits imposed on humankind by nature. He observes the continuous progress made by human beings in finding more efficient ways to satisfy their needs. He also suspects that 'the art of converting the elements to the use of man' may be infinitely improvable (p. 188).

Interestingly, Condorcet is not certain whether any limits of human progress can be predicted. All he says is that the level of knowledge possessed by humankind in his time is not sufficient to answer this question one way or another. Faithful to his optimistic disposition, Condorcet decides that the absence of a definite answer on limits is a sufficient reason for stipulating a universal duty of human beings to 'promote the general welfare of the human race'. However, he includes in this responsibility the happiness of the 'not yet born' (p. 189), which is in itself a process of setting up limits to human desire not only among generations, but also in the relationship of humanity with nature.

Condorcet remarks that, in the first instance, human reason can only apprehend absolute truths in their absolute generality. As such, these truths do not yet relate to utility because no proper relationship between generality and specificity (or between principle and context) has been established. Consequently, he launches the following question:

'Are we yet in possession of any precise rules for selecting out of the almost infinite variety of possible systems in which the general principles of equality and natural rights are respected, those which will best secure the preservation of these rights, which will afford the freest scope for their exercise and their enjoyment, and which will moreover insure [*sic*] the leisure and welfare of individuals and the strength, prosperity and peace of nations?'(p. 190)

Condorcet's enthusiastic rhetoric implies that, even if the answer to this question is 'no', this is only an accident of time. He suggests that humankind is destined to

discover these ‘precise rules’. What he does not clarify is whether these rules are themselves universal or specific (that is, context-dependent). Given Condorcet’s obvious tendency to associate precision with universality and immutability, the reader is left to suspect the former.

Condorcet also comments on the impact made by advances in food, housing, medicines and lifestyle practices on human health and longevity. Here is where Condorcet’s concept of limit appears clearer. It is certain that death will not be eradicated and human beings will not become immortal. However, he notes, as death will only be due to accidents or the ‘decay of the vital forces’ (a tautological phrase that achieves very little by way of explanation), ‘ultimately the average span between birth and decay will have no assignable value’ (p. 200).

At this point Condorcet takes the opportunity to reflect on two distinct meanings of the term ‘indefinite’: (1) as asymptotic progression (i.e. which ‘may grow in conformity... with a law such that it continually approaches a limitless length<sup>29</sup> but without ever reaching it’); and (2) as in principle able to exceed any given point (i.e. progressing according to ‘a law such that through the centuries it reaches a length greater than any determinate quantity we may assign to it as its limit’ (p. 200)). He does not take this reflection any further, and does not attempt to provide any answer as to the sense in which the progress of humankind can be said to be indefinite.

Considering all the examples discussed above, one can infer that Condorcet’s conception of human progress contains two important premises about limits: (1) there may be no set natural limits to human progress as a whole; and (2) knowledge as access to natural truth through reason is clearly unlimited.

These premises, together with the assumption that knowledge has absolute evaluative priority over all other dimensions of humanness, form the picture of a pyramidal set of relationships, in which all other dimensions of humanness are limited by knowledge and subordinated to it in a fixed hierarchy, while knowledge itself is potentially unlimited. This pyramidal model of relationships among dimensions of humanness is illustrated in *Fig. 1a* of the Appendix.



Finally, the idea that within the realm of enlightened reason there cannot possibly be divergence between the progress of knowledge and that of virtue, material well-being, etc., leads to the principle of *harmony* (or absence of tensions) as the ultimate test for the achievement of absolute truth or accordance with nature.

In Condorcet's discussion of Asian cultures, for instance, the apparent tension between the progress of knowledge and the tendency of those who first acquire that knowledge to use it as an instrument of domination of the others (thus producing non-progressive political structures and social relations) is eventually resolved by excluding this phenomenon from the realm of reason, as it is not constitutive of reason as accordance with nature (p. 34). Condorcet elaborates on this point later, as he concludes that all cultures acting against natural reason (and even those that fall behind the global pace of enlightenment) are doomed<sup>30</sup>.

To summarise, it is implicit in Condorcet's view that, once we engage on the (unique, absolute, natural, universal) path of enlightenment forged by knowledge, all the other dimensions of our humanness (virtue, material well-being, equality, liberty) will support one another in perfect certainty and harmony, in an indestructible unity of eternally beneficial relationships.

## **7. Human progress on a broader scale: from individuals to collective categories**

Clearly, in Condorcet's discourse, nations and humankind are personalised entities, 'enjoying', in perfect reflection, the same goods and rights as the individuals. Based on this premise, the systemic recommendations to be made appear more obvious.

According to another prophecy contained in the *Sketch*, all constitutions will progress towards adopting the same political principles. As human beings, individuals of any nation are entitled to be free to shape their own future, equal in their freedom and other universal attributes (therefore hold equal political rights),

and siblings in the wider family of natural beings. Following the example of the revolutionary French constitution, these principles must be made explicit in the written constitution of any state. We are hereby provided with perhaps the most enlightened interpretation of the principles of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*.

In recognising what unites them rather than dwelling on what sets them apart, human beings should therefore converge their efforts towards creating a social order which recognises universal human attributes and strives for universally desirable goods, for the benefit of humankind as a whole, as well as for the benefit of its each and every member. As mentioned in our previous discussion of Condorcet's humanism, the 'social art' involves guaranteeing natural human rights and distributing them equally over the largest area' (p. 128).

By analogy with the universal attributes of individuals, the universal attributes of nations should form the basis for an ideal world order. In Condorcet's predictions, the principles of the French constitution are bound to spread and liberate the existing colonies, violence will subside and respect among nations will reign (pp. 175–177). As true democracy at home cannot coexist with tyranny abroad, he is convinced that the contemporary colonial empires will not last, and that the future belongs to independent, sovereign and equal nations, whose social and political organisation will mirror the ideas of the French Commune and of the young 'North American Republics' (p. 178).

We have now gathered sufficient elements to help us infer that, in Condorcet's conception of human progress, the valued object oscillates between the individual and the whole of humankind, while the author displays no concern about possible tensions caused by differences of scale. As suggested in Condorcet's description of reason, although the individual is the ultimate authority for the exercise of reason, true reason as accordance with nature is objective and universal. Similarly, Condorcet maintains that there is no true individual self-interest which does not harmoniously articulate with the interests of all. In addition, we can conclude that, in this conception, the valuing subject is clearly the human being, albeit an abstract

and idealised one, exigently pictured in perfect control in the application of the principles of universal reason to human needs.

One can observe that, in Condorcet's theory, the same desirable dimensions of humanness (knowledge, virtue, material well-being, liberty and equality) inform, both the ideal human being and, through their expression as natural rights, the ideal society, and that no major issues are raised regarding differences of scale. In his cosmopolitan political art, the same principles of natural rights, liberty and equality that apply to individuals also apply to nations, and once absolute truth is revealed to an enlightened humankind populated by enlightened individuals, no tension is perceived between human progress at the level of individuals and human progress at collective levels.

### **Summary**

The explicit social project proposed by the *Sketch* is humankind's perfection of the sciences and the arts through a universal mathematical method and a universal language, which will result in the creation of a global ideal society able to guarantee the natural rights, liberty and equality of all individuals and all nations, and thus to resolve (through the rational agency of individuals and nations) all the problems of the human condition.

As illustrated by Condorcet's humanism, this project is underpinned by a complex conception of human progress, founded on: (1) belief in a universal human nature which is inherently good, has access to absolute truth and contains an indefinite potential for human progress, which is destined to be realised; (2) the assumption of a set of universal basic needs, which lay out the justificatory foundation for certain desirable dimensions of humanness and for a political theory of natural human rights; and (3) a perspective on human fulfilment which entails the realisation of human needs and potential through the proper exercise of reason in accordance with nature.

The criteria promoted by this conception of human progress are indicative of an ideal of humanness which integrates in perfect harmony knowledge, virtue, material

well-being, liberty and equality. These criteria are intrinsic to human fulfilment and clearly distinct. However, they are organised in a fixed hierarchy, in which knowledge has the privileged status of universal means or absolute necessary condition, of endless benefit to all others. In this pyramidal structure, human progress is unlimited as long as the advancement of knowledge is unlimited, whereas improvements in all the other criteria are necessarily limited by the state of knowledge.

In Condorcet's analysis, there is no tension between the principles of human progress applying to individuals and those applying to nations and humankind as collective categories. As enlightened reason is practised in accordance with nature, such differences of scale have little relevance.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The English translation used here for quoting purposes is *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* ([transl. by J. Barraclough], London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1955). All page references provided in the text of the chapter without any further specifications are made according to this edition. The 1968 French edition of Condorcet, *Oeuvres* (vols. III and VI, Stuttgart: F.F. Verlag, 1968) was also used for background reading. The translated version is abbreviated as *Sketch*, while the original French text is referred to as *Esquisse*.

<sup>2</sup> The French original uses the phrase 'des progrès', which is literally translatable into 'of the progresses' (plural), thus suggesting plural historical stages, plural outcomes, plural achievements.

<sup>3</sup> The English translation of the phrase 'esprit humain' (literally, the human spirit) into 'the human mind' can be regarded as unproblematic only on the assumption of a comprehensive rationalism, in which anything to do with the human spirit is largely identifiable with reason as the main faculty of the human intellect.

<sup>4</sup> More about Condorcet's conception of human needs will be discussed in Section 3 of this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, at p. 59, the description of the Hellenistic and Roman periods as the time when 'the mechanical arts came to be connected with the sciences'.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, a brief mention of the development of the fine arts in ancient Greece at p. 53.

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<sup>7</sup> I shall discuss in Section 3 of this chapter how, in Condorcet's view, through a proper understanding of utility in accordance with nature, no conflict can arise between human benefit and the benefit of nature.

<sup>8</sup> Importantly, Condorcet systematically refers to social studies as 'the social art' (this happens especially in 'The Ninth Stage' and 'The Tenth Stage'). In doing so he emphasises the applied and instrumental role of social structures and, more generally, the idea that social truths are human-utility functions derived practically from natural truths obtained contemplatively.

<sup>9</sup> Here Condorcet refers to these methods as 'technical methods', that is 'the art of arranging a large number of subjects in a system so that we may straightaway grasp their relations, quickly perceive their combinations, and readily form new combinations out of them.'

<sup>10</sup> Here is Condorcet's summary interpretation of Stoic philosophy: 'The Stoics saw virtue and happiness as consisting in the possession of a soul that was equally insensible to joy and pain, that was freed from every passion, that was superior to all fears and weaknesses and that knew no true good but virtue and no real evil but remorse. They believed that Man had the power to raise himself to this height if he had a strong and inflexible will to do so, and that then, independent of fate, always master of himself, he would be equally impervious to vice and misery. One spirit animates the world and is everywhere present – if indeed it be not all things itself, if anything at all exist apart from it. Human souls are emanations of it. The soul of the wise man, which has not sullied its original purity, is, at the moment of death, reunited with this universal spirit. Death would thus be good, were it not that the wise man who follows nature, who is hardened against all that the vulgar call evils, finds even greater dignity in regarding it as something indifferent.' (p. 63)

<sup>11</sup> For a summary of the central tenets of Stoic moral philosophy, I have mainly referred to *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 879–881.

<sup>12</sup> A further distinction that must be made at this point between traditional Stoicism and the French Enlightenment is that the Stoic idea of the divine was pantheist rather than rationalist.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Condorcet opposes the concept of 'reason' to that of 'error' (p. 17), and he translates the term 'philosophers' as meaning 'friends of science and knowledge' (p. 42).

<sup>14</sup> It can be argued that Condorcet's conception of truth relies on overly strong assumptions. Obviously, the belief that truth, once found, is locked in, once and for all, may lead to unjustified complacency. It is perhaps more reasonable and prudent to assume that, even after truth has been

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accessed, the human conscience should remain vigilant and continue to submit all beliefs to certain tests of empirical validation.

<sup>15</sup> At p. 181, Condorcet discusses the possible application of probability calculus to create, at the level of national governments, pension insurance systems for the continued support of elderly people, widows and orphans.

<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding, these attributes are selectively presented (in his history of human civilisation) according to athletic criteria, as the most advanced performances of humankind. This seamless transition from individuals to collective categories is elaborated upon in Section 7 of this chapter.

<sup>17</sup> Condorcet also mentions the criteria of least labour and expenditure (in modern terms, efficiency), but he treats them as subordinated criteria, not as trade-offs against need satisfaction (p. 187).

<sup>18</sup> This ideal condition is also described on p. 174: ‘will men approach a condition in which everyone will have the knowledge necessary to conduct himself in the ordinary affairs of life, according to the light of his own reason, to preserve his mind free from prejudice, to understand his rights and to exercise them in accordance with his conscience and his creed; in which everyone will become able, through the development of his faculties, to find the means of providing for his need (...)?’

<sup>19</sup> Having said this, one cannot ignore that Condorcet’s discussion of benefits for human beings is founded on a strong naturalism. It is beyond doubt, in his view, that the whole universe (including human beings as an integrated part) is subject to laws of nature. Importantly, however, his naturalism seems divorced from any form of deism. In the *Sketch*, this distinction becomes evident in the way Condorcet criticises the priests of Gaul and Jewish cultures for monopolising access to divine truth and for imposing their conclusions on the social order. He is not only revolted by the uncritical submission of one’s own judgement to the arbitrary authority of priests who ‘decided which human laws their god allowed them to obey’ (p. 70) but also convinced that nothing of relevance to human destiny is hidden from (or inaccessible to) human reason. His naturalism seems devoid of any religious belief, and he turns vehemently against all religions when he states that ‘there is not a religious system nor a supernatural extravagance that is not founded on ignorance of the laws of nature’ (p. 163).

<sup>20</sup> In discussing the state of moral thought at the times of More and Hobbes, Condorcet implies that ‘moralists’ (as moral philosophers or moral scientists) should be ‘inquiring into the human heart or analysing man’s faculties and sentiments with the aim of discovering the nature, origin, rule and sanction of his duties’ (p. 113).

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<sup>21</sup> At p. 130, Condorcet writes that ‘by a universal moral law, the efforts made by each individual on his own behalf minister to the welfare of all’. Consequently, ‘the interests of society demand that everyone should understand where his own interests lie, and should be able to follow them without hindrance’.

<sup>22</sup> Also, at p. 163, Condorcet suggests that humans have a natural inclination to invest more trust in opinions when they are founded on reasons rather than when they are not.

<sup>23</sup> At p. 117, Condorcet writes: ‘Everywhere during this stage we see reason and authority fighting for supremacy, a battle which prepared and anticipated the triumph of reason.’

<sup>24</sup> At p. 199, Condorcet writes: ‘ Meanwhile we have considered [man] as possessing the natural faculties and organization that he has at present. How much greater would be the certainty, how much vaster the scheme of our hopes if we could believe that these natural faculties themselves and this organization could also be improved? This is the last question that remains for us to ask ourselves.’

<sup>25</sup> Condorcet also states, at p. 66, that the development of arts and philosophy in the Roman Empire was due to an increase in wealth and ‘idleness’ (understood as leisure time).

<sup>26</sup> See Condorcet’s connection of the goals of humankind with ‘the abolition of inequality between nations’ and ‘the progress of equality within each nation’ (p. 173).

<sup>27</sup> Condorcet does not illustrate this claim but an interpretation of his ambiguous contention may be as follows: Assuming that identity of interests can be perfectly obtained in any community of individuals, beyond certain immediate security interests, comes in conflict with the reality that individuals are diverse and their interests may vary widely. No market exchanges could ever occur, for example, if identity of interests obtained in all areas of human activity. Thus, identity of interests socially superimposed on the natural inequality of individual interests is bound to create a ‘genuine inequality’ now reflected in social differences. Such social differences (of rank, status, privileges, etc.), unsupported by principles of natural equality, cannot possibly maintain an identity of social and political interests for all categories and groups of the respective community.

<sup>28</sup> In Condorcet’s own words, ‘...as the number of new facts increases, the human mind learns how to classify them and to subsume them under more general facts, and, at the same time, the instruments and methods employed in their observation and their exact measurement acquire a new precision; ... as more relations between various objects become known, man is able to reduce them to more general relations, to express them more simply... If the methods which have led to these

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new combinations of ideas are ever exhausted, if their application to hitherto unsolved questions should demand exertions greater than either the time or the capacity of the learned would permit, some method of a greater generality or simplicity will be found...'

<sup>29</sup> The original phrase 'étendue illimitée' (Condorcet, *Esquisse*, in *Oeuvres*, p. 274) can also be translated as *unlimited extension* or *unlimited length*. While the precise meaning of this phrase remains unclear, we can reasonably assume that Condorcet describes here an asymptotic limit.

<sup>30</sup> At p. 177, Condorcet briefly discusses less developed areas of the globe where 'large tribes... need only assistance from us to become civilized, ... wait only to find brothers among the European nations to become their friends and pupils'. He estimates that, in a not too distant future, savage tribes and communities living by laws of force, 'reduced in number as they are driven back by civilized nations, ... will finally disappear imperceptibly before them or merge into them'.

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# ADAM SMITH: THE WEALTH OF VIRTUE OR THE VIRTUE OF WEALTH?

## - Chapter Three -

*Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,  
A being darkly wise, and rudely great...*

### **Introduction**

As observed in the **General Introduction**, Adam Smith (1723–1790), the ‘father’ of political economy, has often been regarded as one of the main initiators of a dominant trend in social progress thought, namely that of associating social progress with the primacy of material wealth increase.

Contrary to any superficial expectations, Smith’s secluded and intensely academic biography resembles the life and inclinations of a monk rather than those of an enterprising economic agent. There is little material of epic interest in Smith’s life story. He never married or had any children. He devoted his time to teaching logic, moral philosophy, jurisprudence (law), political and economic theory at the University of Glasgow between 1752 and 1764, to travelling in France (as tutor to the young Earl of Buccleugh) between 1764 and 1766, and to participating in Dr Johnson’s literary circle in London from 1776. His first version of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was published in 1759, while the first edition of *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations* (usually referred to as *The Wealth of Nations*) appeared in 1776.

In this chapter, I shall: (1) outline Adam Smith’s explicit social project and conception of the ideal society, as presented in *The Wealth of Nations*; (2) illustrate the subordination of the goals of social progress to general human progress (the humanist premise); (3) reconstruct two ideals of humanness as informed by Smith’s conceptions of human nature, needs, potential and fulfilment; (4) discuss each of the valued dimensions of humanness emphasised by Smith as elements or features of this ideal; and (5) infer the pattern of relationships among these desirable dimensions of humanness.

For this purpose, an exploration of *The Wealth of Nations* (as the traditional model of an economic view of human progress) is not sufficient. Crucial insights into Smith's ideas about human nature, human needs and possibilities of human fulfilment (projected into an implied ideal of humanness) can only be obtained by reference to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In this chapter, I shall rely on both works<sup>1</sup>, assuming that they complement (rather than contradict) each other in shaping a unitary conception of human progress<sup>2</sup>.

### **1. The explicit social project: national wealth increase**

As made plain in its full title, the objective of *The Wealth of Nations* is to establish what constitutes and what causes national material wealth, more exactly by what criteria a country may be regarded as rich or affluent ('opulent') and what sources or factors can contribute to the increase, stagnation or decrease of such affluence.

Evidently, the mere choice of subject for such a thorough and complex study must rely on the assumption that there is something profoundly desirable about acquiring wealth or opulence. Indicative of a broader perspective on national material wealth is the fact that Smith often associates prosperity with civilisation, and poverty with barbarism (*WN*, I, p. 265). For instance, the relative price of necessary commodities and the improvement of land for the purposes of increased productivity of food are, for Smith, measures of civilisation:

'...From the high or low money price of some sorts of goods in proportion with that of others, we can infer, with a degree of probability that approaches almost to certainty, that it was rich or poor, that the greater part of its lands were improved or unimproved, and that it was either in a more or less barbarous state, or in a more or less civilized one.' (*WN*, I, p. 266)

Nevertheless, beyond this occasional rhetoric, the parallel between wealth and civilisation is not drawn any further. Instead, there are other elements in Smith's text which seem to indicate, on the contrary, a distinction between economic productivity and social utility. Thus, when discussing productive and unproductive

labour, the author mentions the contribution of soldiers, public servants, priests, lawyers, writers and artists as ‘necessary, honourable and useful’, although clearly not meeting the conditions of being ‘productive’ (*WN*, I, p. 352). However, according to Smith, it remains an uncontested empirical reality that productive labour is a necessary condition of unproductive labour (*WN*, I, pp. 352–353). It is in this context that his assumption of material wealth as a universal precondition of the general progress of society must be understood.

The central element in furthering the social project of national wealth increase is, in Smith’s view, division of labour. As he illustrates at length in the first two chapters of *Book I* of the *Wealth of Nations*, division of labour is by far preferable to self-sufficiency. The superior efficiencies obtained through division of labour recommend it as the best means to increase wealth in society, and as the best contribution life in society can bring to human beings as individuals<sup>3</sup>.

Smith’s inquiry, however, goes significantly beyond material wealth as such: it is not the state of wealth that is ultimately desirable but a dynamic economy resulting in a continuing increase of national wealth: ‘The progressive state is in reality the cheerful and the hearty state to all the different orders of the society. The stationary is dull; the declining melancholy’ (*WN*, I, pp. 90–91).

This is not just a stylish and inspirational metaphor but the illustration of an economic principle. Smith demonstrates in detail why only an advancing economy is likely to deliver general wealth among a nation’s population. Accordingly, he shows how the material situation of the nation’s wage-earners faithfully measure the state of an economy:

‘The liberal reward of labour, therefore, as it is the necessary effect, so it is the natural symptom of increasing national wealth. The scanty maintenance of the labouring poor, on the other hand, is the natural symptom that things are at a stand, and their starving condition that they are going fast backwards.’ (*WN*, I, p.82)

Further, he explains that the material improvement of the disadvantaged is in the interest of society as a whole because it naturally leads to more opportunities and motivation for wealth acquisition at all levels, which will then compound into the greatest pool of resources for the creation of national wealth (*WN*, I, p. 90).

Finally, Smith is especially preoccupied with establishing where the real wealth of a nation lies, showing (among other things<sup>4</sup>) that the profit-making imperative is not always in the public interest. This idea is emphasised in his description of merchants as a socio-economic class distinct from that of landlords and wage-earners mainly in respect of their potential to find their interests in conflict with those of society as a whole (*WN*, I, pp. 277–278). Accordingly, Smith tends to take a wider view of means of wealth increase, a perspective which does not simplistically identify these means (at the level of government and legislation) with the profit-making imperative.

On the basis of illustrating the progressive state of an economy as the most desirable for what turn out to be universal humanist reasons, does Smith actually propose a social project? Many followers of Smith's doctrine (see our discussion of Hayek in Chapter Five) seem to have embraced the imperative of economic growth as a natural offspring of this doctrine.

Smith's conception of the 'stationary' state should certainly moderate this enthusiasm. There is sufficient evidence in *The Wealth of Nations* to suggest that Smith did not regard the progressive state of an economy as endlessly possible, in a linear continuum. Indeed, the natural course of a developing economy, according to Smith, is to advance, through increased cultivation of land, from agriculture to manufacturing, and then to trade with increasingly remote areas (*WN*, I, pp. 401–406). However, in his description of a fixed natural sequence of several stages of developing capital in terms of labour wages (*WN*, I, pp. 72–97) and stock profits (*WN*, I, pp. 98–110), Smith clearly suggests that one should expect a natural limit to the progressive state of an economy. Moreover, the opportunities created through the progressive state generate the factors that would later lead to stagnation. Wage increases bring about well-being, which leads to population growth, which results in

lowering wage levels. Similarly, opportunities for profit increase competition, which eventually diminishes profit rates.

Having outlined the above, it is not absolutely clear that Smith would have considered, like the French Physiocrats, that there are natural limits to economic growth which are given once and for all. Rather, it would be fairer to conclude that he leaves this issue somewhat open to the possibility that both natural and social conditions may have an impact on opening new horizons of economic development.

It is not the purpose of this thesis to settle this controversy here. What is important for our topic is the conclusion that Smith does undoubtedly recommend that nations should make the most of their natural opportunities for increasing their material wealth. The idea that opportunities for wealth increase should always be taken advantage of as a matter of utmost priority is recurrent in Smith's work, as will be illustrated in 4.1. Importantly, this is based on two considerations: (1) material productivity is the universal prerequisite for the development of all other (non-material) goods, and (2) the progressive state of the national economy is the only condition that improves the material condition of the poor and disadvantaged members of society.

## **2. The ideal society: natural liberty and the efficient conversion of private vices into public virtues**

Just as in Condorcet's case, Smith's idea of society as a totality of systems often converges with that of society as a collective of individuals, and no distinction is made between the two ideas.

In relation to the systemic meaning of society, one must observe that all of Smith's analytical efforts in *The Wealth of Nations* converge towards recommending, at the level of the national economy, a perfect system of natural liberty, i.e. a system which allows individuals to act (as economic agents) in accordance with their own interests, unhindered by external pressures such as taxes and regulations. For example, individuals should be allowed to change their trade or profession

according to their skills and profit-making abilities (*WN*, I, p. 63), no restrictions should be imposed on anyone wishing to enter a market or industry, corporation privileges and monopolies should be eliminated (*WN*, I, p. 69), the prices of any commodities (including land and necessities) should not be regulated (*WN*, I, p. 70), and wage fixing should be abolished (*WN*, I, p. 77)<sup>5</sup>. The treatise abounds in detailed illustrations of the pernicious effects of regulation in these areas (e.g. *WN*, I, p. 265 and p. 269).

Through the removal of state intervention in economic activities, the perfect system of natural liberty delivers invaluable benefits, such as fair distribution of wealth, equality and justice. Elaborate explanations of how this would happen can be found in *The Wealth of Nations* (I) (at p. 111 and p. 136).

Smith is confident that a perfect system of natural liberty (at the social level) is most likely to produce what people need, because a transparency is established between the free expression of needs and interests by each individual and the opportunities available for society to respond to these needs and interests<sup>6</sup>. One can remark that the principles of natural liberty are promoted for humanist reasons, founded on the imperative of need satisfaction.

As a social system, an economy governed by principles of natural liberty appears, in Smith's conception, as the best method to bring about improvements for both individuals and what he envisages as the 'public good'. Let us consider, for example, Smith's view of the manner in which each individual's pursuit of self-interest, compounded, will result in public benefit, according to the well-known principle of the 'invisible hand'. According to this principle, in an economic system of natural liberty, a natural law somehow obscured from human understanding ensures that private vices are transformed to produce public virtues (*WN*, I, pp. 477–478). It is in terms of the invisible hand that Smith discusses private prodigality and frugality, and their impact on a nation's economy (*WN*, I, p. 360). A more colourful description of the effects of the invisible hand can be found in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

‘The produce of the soil maintains at all times nearly that number of inhabitants which it is capable of maintaining. The rich only select from the heap what is most precious and agreeable. They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity, though they mean only their own conveniency, though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species.’ (*TMS*, pp. 184–185)

The author’s doctrine of the invisible hand is also relevant for an understanding of his assumption of possibilities of human progress at supra-individual (collective) levels. This topic will be expanded upon in Section 7 below.

Smith’s theory of natural liberty in political economy is dominated by detailed analyses of what the state should abstain from doing (regulating) and why. However, this constant emphasis on what the state should *not* do is, also constantly, underpinned by an implicit view of what the individuals *should* do. In other words, Smith’s perspective suggests that perfect liberty as facilitated by social systems occurs if and only if certain qualities displayed by society as a whole articulate harmoniously with certain qualities in the individuals as economic agents and citizens. While *The Wealth of Nations* deals with the former, the latter are the subject of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Nevertheless, the doctrine is consistently presented in both works, the only difference being in the levels of analysis proposed.

Accordingly, if society should not interfere with the individuals’ opportunities to express, pursue and obtain the objects of their self-interest, the individuals themselves are expected to be able to effectively exercise the virtue of prudence, namely the ability to convert their self-love into proper care for the furthering of their own condition. This proper care refers not only to the basic skills involved in

looking after oneself but also in being courageous (*WN*, II, p. 296), well-informed (*WN*, II, p. 282), well-educated (*WN*, II, p. 305), enterprising (*WN*, I, p. 301) and frugal (*WN*, I, p. 363).

For example, when demonstrating that free competition establishes the prices of necessaries more accurately than any regulation (*WN*, I, p. 159), Smith regards accuracy as fair opportunity for any economic agent to command and obtain goods valued according to their genuine importance for the agent's needs, without the interference of any distorting factors. But for the natural system of perfect liberty to work, the agents themselves have to be able to convert such fair opportunity into those improvements of their own condition recommended by the proper pursuit of their interests.

In sum, for perfect liberty to reap its natural rewards, the social system must properly channel any private excesses of passion into public benefit, while individuals must properly exercise their self-love. It is interesting to note here that, generally speaking, Smith does not found his ideal society on the assumption and/or requirement that individuals should be fully developed morally, and capable of exercising all the complexities of justice and benevolence in an enlightened manner. On the contrary, he seems to suggest that the safest arrangement is one which assumes that self-love should be sufficient, and that the perfect system of natural liberty, correctly implemented, should then be able to compound the self-centred pursuits of self-improvement undertaken by all individuals into the public goods that can enhance these pursuits fairly and equally for all.

Accordingly, when criticising the callousness and rapacity employed in those private companies administering the affairs of the colonies (America and the East Indies) in his time, Smith emphasises his concern not so much with the selfishness of the individuals involved (for, in acting selfishly, they behave in accordance with their natural inclinations) as with the incapacity of the social systems to convert these private vices into public goods (*WN*, II, p. 158).

On the other hand, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith emphasises the moral relevance of individuals being able to play their social and economic roles



appropriately. A prince with no military ambitions, a 'private gentleman' who does not strive to gain a better estate or office when the opportunity presents itself by fair means, a member of parliament who does not take an interest in their own election, and a tradesman who does not take advantage of business opportunities are labelled as 'mean-spirited' and are bound to attract from others only disapproval and contempt. On the contrary, ambition exercised within the bounds of prudence and justice, leads to the proper exercise of one's social rights and duties, and can only be approved of and admired (*TMS*, p.173).

According to Smith, individuals are not only responsible for furthering their own interests adequately, they also have a duty to act in accordance with nature. This includes the avoidance of producing, through the social institutions they create, effects that are contrary to nature. Smith criticises the practice of boarding schools for young children, for instance, pointing out how important family ties are for each individual's proper development of natural affections and moral judgement – a lesson which can only be learnt through life in one's own family, and which no public school, no matter how good, can deliver: 'Domestic education is the institution of nature; public education, the contrivance of man. It is surely unnecessary to say, which is likely to be the wisest' (*TMS*, p. 222).

Similarly, following the natural social principle that 'kindness is the parent of kindness' (*TMS*, p. 225), each individual has a duty to look after those entities naturally assigned to their direct care (their own family, their own business, their own neighbourhood, their own country) but do so by means that do not injure the right and duty of others to do the same. Thus, patriotism should not imply hatred of other countries (*TMS*, p. 228). Such principles as the laws of nations and the laws of faction and partisanship (*TMS*, pp. 154–155) are nothing but prejudices, artificial precepts which corrupt our ability to act in accordance with nature.

Smith does not clearly enunciate what those laws of nations or laws of faction are but he does discuss at some length the actions condoned when such principles are invoked, e.g. the justification of plundering, torturing and murdering the population of an enemy country in war, or the justification of diminishing by any means the

actions of an opposite party. These laws appear very similar to the political principle of identity of interests discussed by Condorcet in *Esquisse*, which assumes that the rationale for the existence of any *polis* is unification of its citizens' similar interests in security and protection from outside enemies. Like Condorcet, Smith also adopts the Stoic perspective of 'citizen of the world' as that of enlightened, natural reason. However, as I shall illustrate in Section 3 below, Smith's interpretation of the practice of justice at the level of the individual is empirical, grounded in natural inclinations (such as sympathy for the vulnerable) rather than in reason.

In this context, although rooted in Stoic philosophy, Smith's perspective on nature's way to create social order has an original twist. According to the Stoics, nature has endowed us with certain inclinations, the rationale of which we can partially hope to see, and the most elevated activity we can aspire to is to contemplate the greatest design, the overall benevolent intentions of the divinity. However, Smith departs from classical Stoicism when he suggests that this contemplation is only a consolation against apparent injustices or evils, not the real occupation of our lives. Thus, the proper activity for human beings is not a complete purge of all passions, as is recommended in Stoic philosophy, but a channelling of those passions towards bettering our condition in this world, in society (*TMS*, p. 293).

How can we obtain the best possible social order? Smith's answer is: by following our natural inclinations. Through sympathy, we admire the rich and powerful because we aspire to be like them. This admiration commands from us a form of respect which ensures that social order is created and maintained (*TMS*, p. 52, pp. 61–62, p. 226, p. 253). It is not an accident that the proper function of sympathy relies on 'social passions', that is on those feelings that are more likely to draw people together in a form of communication and cooperation, rather than on discordant feelings of hatred and resentment<sup>7</sup>, which Smith calls the 'unsocial passions' (*TMS*, pp.34–39). He interprets this phenomenon as a result of the 'intention' or plan of nature to create human society according to the principle of sympathy and the principle of the impartial spectator, which will be elaborated upon in Section 4 below.

In conclusion, according to Smith, an ideal social system is one that allows individuals to better their own condition by protecting their liberty to administer their wealth according to their own interests. This system should naturally be able to convert private vices into public goods. While the ideal social system should facilitate the exercise of natural liberty by all individuals fairly and equally, no social system (no matter how perfect) can compensate for the individuals' failure to exercise prudence appropriately, for their own benefit, or to exercise those individual virtues required by the social role they occupy. The ultimate guide, both for the appropriate individual behaviour and for achieving the perfect, natural social order, consists in a general principle of accordance with nature. In Smith's view, this accordance with nature is performed through natural inclinations rather than through reason, an idea which will be further illustrated in the discussion of the impartial spectator in Section 4 below. These natural individual responses translate into an emulation of the social passions, which leads to the natural formation of society.

### **3. Adam Smith's humanism: natural liberty against 'men of system'**

Despite the apparent technical nature of the objectives of *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith's humanism is transparent from the start. This is how the author himself defines the object of political economy, in the *Introduction to Book IV*:

'Political oeconomy, considered as a branch of the science of a statesman or legislator, proposes...first, to provide a plentiful revenue or subsistence for the people, or more properly to enable them to provide such a revenue or subsistence for themselves...' (WN, I, p. 449)

There is here, in the association of the concepts of 'revenue' and 'subsistence', the implication that material wealth is a precondition of human fulfilment, at least at a very basic level.

Resuming an idea discussed in the previous section, Smith's explanation that the well-being of those at the bottom of the social ladder is in the general interest of

society is made from a humanist perspective. After all, a progressive economy is preferable to a stagnant or declining one because it produces an increase in population (*WN*, I, p. 90)<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, a progressing economy is ultimately desirable because it improves the condition of the non-privileged, who form the majority of the nation's population:

‘It deserves to be remarked, perhaps, that it is in the progressive state, while the society is advancing to further acquisition, rather than when it has acquired its full complement of riches, that the condition of the labouring poor, of the great body of the people, seems to be the happiest and the most comfortable’. (*WN*, I, pp. 90–91)

The connection between social and human well-being is made clear in Smith's frequently quoted statement that ‘no society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable’ (*WN*, I, p. 88). Accordingly, he recommends that the prosperity of a nation should be measured according to the state of the more vulnerable categories of the population.

On the other hand, in his description of the destructive effects of the division of labour on the development of individuals, Smith provides at least one example of possible tensions between the economic progress of society and the human development of its citizens:

‘The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur... His dexterity at his own particular trade seems, in this manner, to be acquired at the expence [*sic*] of his intellectual, social, and martial virtues. But in every improved and civilized society this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it.’ (*WN*, II, pp. 302–305)

Here, as the founding principle of *The Wealth of Nations* is the principle of ‘expediency’ rather than that of ‘justice’<sup>9</sup>, Smith's proposal for an active role of the government in public education, to compensate for the shortcomings of division of

labour, still suggests that the imperative of increased productivity through division of labour has more fundamental importance than the imperative of superior human development through intellectual stimulation. But it becomes clear in other parts of the treatise that the ultimate, underlying reason why the former imperative may override the latter in certain circumstances is that the former relates directly to a more immediate human need than the latter, namely nourishing as opposed to education, subsistence versus further development. In other words, division of labour is, after all, preferred for humanist reasons, anchored in Smith's conception of human needs and their satisfaction. Hence, there is no rationale for a social imperative altogether independent of the imperatives of human well-being.

In the same humanist spirit, when postulating that wages should not fall below a subsistence level that can cover the labourer himself and his family, Smith does not justify this opinion strictly by the utilitarian consideration that society should ensure the replacement of the labouring force with each generation. He does not purport to determine what the minimum acceptable wages should be but he defines the subsistence level as 'the lowest which is consistent with common humanity' (*WN*, I, p.77).

This double rationale (technical or systemic, versus humanist) is also maintained in other analyses of economic issues, for example in the recommendation that the number of daily hours of labour should be limited. Again, beside the remark that moderate daily work is in the long run more efficient than great exertions, there is clearly the recognition that human beings require a balance between work and relaxation and that, to find that balance, employers (rather than rely on some efficiency-driven calculations) would only have to 'listen to the dictates of reason and humanity' (*WN*, I, p. 92). Similarly, Smith carefully studies the effects of taxation on the poor, showing that the aim of raising more taxes should be subordinated to the aim of allowing the labouring class to raise good families. This latter aim is primarily in the interest of the people concerned, and it naturally happens to converge with the interests of the national economic system (*WN*, II, pp. 401–402).

In other instances, the criterion of greater utility is altogether abandoned in favour of common humanity. Thus, Smith recommends that transition to freedom of trade should be made gradually, to diminish to bearable levels the impact it may have on wage earners at risk of losing their jobs (*WN*, I, p. 491). Similarly, the main argument used by Smith in support of the idea that free trade can help wealth distribution better than the tariff protectionism practised in some manufactures is the level of distress caused to the poor by economic regulations (*WN*, I, p. 269). All these examples indicate an underlying consideration for all human beings, a constant preoccupation to alleviate the disadvantaged to an extent compatible with a minimum standard of well-being. One can conclude from here that humanist considerations are generally favoured over systemic priorities.

But perhaps the most significant instance of humanism is apparent in Smith's discussion of the three economic classes that exist in any society: landlords, merchants, and wage earners. Here Smith shows in detail why the wage earners are the most disadvantaged and vulnerable of the three socio-economic groups, while their utility for society is unquestionable: (1) they suffer most from general economic decline; and (2) they have the least time, education and information to act in their own interests; while (3) their interests (as a social category) are necessarily the interests of society as a whole (*WN*, I, pp. 276–277).

Furthermore (as illustrated in Section 2 above), he sees it as the responsibility of the statesperson and the legislator to ensure that the social and economic orders give everyone (and especially those at the bottom of the ladder) the opportunity to exert their skills and secure in dignity their own means of subsistence. At this point, it suffices to observe that, according to Smith, the main rationale and objective of any legislation is to protect the liberty of individuals to 'better their condition', and the central role of government is to allow individuals to administer their own wealth according to their own interests (*WN*, I, p. 367). Hence, like in Condorcet, we note in Smith's non-interventionist doctrine a humanist perspective where, beside the subordination of all socio-technical objectives to human fulfilment, there is also an emphasis on individual, private (rather than institutional) achievements.

Interestingly, this liberty does not extend to the great profit-makers without constraints, because – as Smith concludes – their investment decisions have the potential to disagree with the public interest (*WN*, I, p. 396). Smith believes that a system of natural liberty is the best means by which the balance of economic power can be justly maintained to offer satisfactory protection and opportunity to the small operator against much more powerful economic agents. Smith’s concern for the small individual (be it the small labourer, the small artisan, the small business person, the small consumer, the small manufacturer, the small landlord<sup>10</sup>) is recurrent throughout his work. Furthermore, he seems to assume that there is a natural limit to the growth of economic agents and that, left to its own devices, the system of natural liberty should ensure a proper balance which prevents abuse and domination from abnormally large and/or powerful economic agents. One can say, therefore, that Smith’s political economy is dominated by a human-scale conception of economic agency.

Moreover, when considering the benchmark interest to be the interest of society (a preoccupation which is specific to the nature of the inquiry in *The Wealth of Nations*), Smith identifies this interest with the interest of the public, of people as consumers or citizens (*WN*, II, p. 30). Thus, public interest is regarded as equivalent to the interest of most people in their common humanity, and it constitutes, in this sense, an approximation to universal human interest.

In this context, Smith displays a profound distrust in the thinking of ‘men of system’ (*TMS*, pp. 233–234), and he describes the main weakness of the technocratic spirit as a regrettable distortion of the main purpose of statecraft. He stipulates that ‘all constitutions of government... are valued only in proportion as they tend to promote the happiness of those who live under them. This is their sole use and end’ (*TMS*, p. 185).

Smith rejects the assumptions of ‘men of system’ about ideal policy and law:

‘Some general, and even systematical, idea of the perfection of policy and law, may no doubt be necessary for directing the views of the statesman. But to

insist upon establishing, and upon establishing all at once, and in spite of all opposition, every thing which that idea may seem to require, must often be the highest degree of arrogance'. (*TMS*, p. 234)

Beside this unfounded presumption of omniscience, Smith attributes to technocrats a lack of humanism, evident in that they tend to 'consider the state as made for themselves, not themselves for the state' (*TMS*, 234).

Smith's argument in favour of the system of natural liberty as the ultimate goal of political economy is essentially run as follows: as natural liberty and security naturally produce wealth, a state striving to give people wealth would not be able to provide precisely those things each individual would require for their fulfilment; however, a state striving to protect natural liberty and security equally for all individuals would be much more successful in bringing about human fulfilment generally. In other words, the key to the progress of society is (in a clearly humanist approach) the non-interventionist, non-paternalist empowerment of individuals to act upon and achieve their own fulfilment.

Furthermore, in reformulating the role of the state and of the statesperson, Smith opts for human scale (that is, small) government as the most natural social order:

'The great object of [state] reformation... is to remove... obstructions; to reduce the authority of the nobility; to take away the privileges of cities and provinces, and to render both the greatest individuals and the greatest orders of the state... as the weakest and most insignificant.' (*TMS*, p. 234)

Accordingly, 'men of system' should not regulate those areas of human activity which are best decided upon by individuals pursuing their own interests. However, this does not mean that pursuit of individual interest becomes an entirely private matter. In the spirit of *responsible* humanism, Smith is careful to emphasise that the right to exercise one's natural liberty attracts responsibilities. In Smith's view, individual citizens' rights to autonomy must be balanced, in a system of natural liberty, by a responsibility to further their own interests adequately and to acquire the competencies needed to perform this task. As shown in Section 2 above, a system of natural liberty can produce the beneficial outcomes Smith expects of it if



and only if the great majority of individuals are able to further their own interests, having the motivation, time, knowledge and skills necessary for this purpose.

For the success of the economic doctrine presented in *The Wealth of Nations* it is essential that the great majority of citizens practise a particular set of virtues, such as frugality, as a form of prudence (*WN*, I, pp. 360–362), practical intelligence and zest for knowledge, at least in matters directly concerning them (*WN*, II, p. 282). It is only provided that these conditions are met, that it becomes preferable for the state to leave the task of furthering the interests of citizens in the hands of the citizens themselves. If cowardice, ignorance and stupidity become entrenched in the great majority of the population, it is the responsibility of government to take educational measures to combat these vices of individuals as some of the most dangerous social evils (*WN*, II, pp. 308–309).

Accordingly, Chapter I of Book V of *The Wealth of Nations*, entitled ‘Of the Expences of the Sovereign or Commonwealth’, contains in excess of 220 pages of instructions on government intervention to educate for the purposes of national defence (*WN*, II, pp. 212–231), administration of justice (*WN*, II, pp. 231–244), or simply the education of people of all ages for the purposes of good citizenship (*WN*, II, pp. 282–340). But Smith is very clear about when and how the government should intervene to regulate (more exactly, on the areas or issues that naturally lend themselves to government regulation as opposed to those that do not). He deems the support of the state to be absolutely necessary in financing public education institutions to attract good teachers, to enable poor but gifted students to attend, and to encourage high-quality general education for men and women of all ages. However, he also points out that students should be free to choose the apprenticeships, subjects and teachers they want (*WN*, II, pp. 285–286). Similarly, he proposes that the education of young people of rank and fortune can be safely left to the devices of their own family, whereas the government should insist on the compulsory basic education of the children of the labouring poor and the regulation of trade standards for anyone wanting to practise a trade (*WN*, II, pp. 305–306). This basic education involves, reading, writing and arithmetic, as areas of knowledge indispensable to individuals for the satisfaction of their own needs, but

does not necessarily involve the teaching of religion or the liberal arts, as these should remain areas of personal preference (*WN*, II, pp. 309–312).

The technocratic perspective (the opposite of the humanist perspective as defined in this study) is not entirely alien to Smith, as it can be observed in his statement that sometimes we like to promote public welfare from a kind of architectural perspective, because we want to see the system function well. Smith connects this tendency with a kind of aesthetic pleasure, a love for the intrinsic perfection and beauty of a system of social institutions:

‘From a certain spirit of system, however, from a certain love of art and contrivance, we sometimes seem to value the means more than the end, and to be eager to promote the happiness of our fellow-creatures, rather from a view to perfect and improve a certain beautiful and orderly system, than from an immediate sense or feeling of what they either suffer or enjoy.’ (*TMS*, p. 185)

There can be no doubt about which of the two perspectives is considered by Smith to be appropriate. Clearly, human happiness cannot adequately be promoted under the guidance of systemic criteria such as this.

Consequently, for the co-ordinates of human fulfilment one must look among desirable dimensions of humanness as qualities or goods directly enjoyed by people, not as the attributes of some abstract, impersonal systems. Material wealth makes no exception. Although discussed at national level, and analysed as the product of an economic system, material wealth is ultimately conceived as a good to be experienced by each individual as an economic agent. The system of natural liberty ensures that wealth is fairly distributed among all agents in an economy.

Similarly, as will become clear in Section 7 of this chapter, liberty and security are constantly described, in Smith’s ideal society, as (ultimately and fundamentally) attributes of people, of individuals.

Without direct possession of these goods (wealth, liberty and security, governed by virtue), individuals would not have the power to satisfy their own needs and achieve their own fulfilment as human beings. Smith seriously doubts the compensatory

capacity and efficiency of any social systems that do not enjoy the support of empowered and enlightened citizens:

‘What institution of government could tend so much to promote the happiness of mankind as the general prevalence of wisdom and virtue? All government is but an imperfect remedy for the deficiency of these. Whatever beauty, therefore, can belong to civil government upon account of its utility, must in a far superior degree belong to these. On the contrary, what civil policy can be so ruinous and destructive as the vices of men? The fatal effects of bad government arise from nothing, but that it does not sufficiently guard against the mischiefs which human wickedness gives occasion to.’ (*TMS*, p. 187)

Like Condorcet’s, Smith’s humanism is grounded in a naturalist perspective. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he points out that, although nature seems to distribute reward and punishment according to a ‘logic’ that differs from that of human sensibility, the outcomes are the same because ‘both are calculated to promote the same great end, the order of the world, and the perfection and happiness of human nature’ (*TMS*, p. 168). In conclusion, universal order and human perfection are, in Smith’s metaphysics, two aspects of one single end.

From Smith’s discussion of the responsibilities of individuals towards their own fulfilment, it becomes clear that understanding one’s own true interests is a matter of knowledge, of acting in accordance with nature. Moreover, if people are ignorant of their true interests, society itself cannot progress in accordance with nature. Just as Condorcet’s idea of human fulfilment is based on a principle of accordance with nature, Smith too projects on the human being, on all individuals, certain requirements imposed by universal principles. In Smith’s case, however, such principles are not so much dictated by universal reason (although his worldview is not exclusive of this idea) as they are guided by universal virtue. The proper exercise of self-love and of other virtues required for the furthering of one’s *real* interests are not matters subject to the discretion or judgement of individuals. They are attributes of universal human nature, and as such they dictate universal rules. Only those individuals whose behaviour is aligned with *true* virtue, in this universal

sense, can be considered truly capable of satisfying their needs and achieving fulfilment.

In conclusion, Smith's humanist perspective on the desirable means-end relationship between the progress of systems and the progress of people is similar to Condorcet's in at least three respects: (1) it is a kind of responsible humanism, in which the recommendations for society's facilitation of the natural order through non-interventionism and empowerment of the individuals combine with recommendations to individuals regarding the development of certain virtues that would enable them to achieve their fulfilment; (2) it assumes that the desirable attributes expected from the ideal social system should be ultimately attributes enjoyed or possessed by people, not confined to the system; and (3) it reflects a humanism embraced by a broader naturalism, in that no conflict or tension is perceived between the natural order and the imperative of human fulfilment, as the true needs and interests of individuals are dictated (in an absolute and universal sense) by accordance with nature.

#### **4. The underlying conception of human progress: the scope and substance of humanness**

Having sketched Smith's key ideas on national wealth increase as a universal social project, as well as his humanist perspective on the development of a national economy, let us now reconstruct his underlying ideal of humanness, informed by considerations about human nature, needs, desirable potential and fulfilment as they appear in *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

##### **4.1 Human nature: natural human instinct as sparkle of universal wisdom**

For the purposes of *The Wealth of Nations* and its economic policy objectives, the most recurrent contention made by the author in this work in relation to human

nature, as a foundation for principles of economic behaviour, refers to self-interest as a dominant natural feature shared by all human beings.

The place of self-interest (or more exactly, self-love) in Smith's explanation of human motivation for economic action is well-known<sup>11</sup>. There has also been a tendency (among various analysts of Smith's work<sup>12</sup>) to conclude that *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* rely on different theories of human nature, namely an egoistic theory in the former case, and an altruistic theory in the latter.

A careful reading of both works should reveal, however, that Smith espoused a unitary theory of human nature, and that there is ultimately no contradiction between the values and principles relied upon in *The Wealth of Nations* and those expressed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. This coherence may be obscured at times by the different emphases placed on different features of human nature in the two works, due to the different objectives of these works: e.g. social utility and expediency versus justice and benevolence, or reason in economic behaviour versus reason in moral judgement. However, while different human qualities are emphasised differently in the two studies, the fundamental principles of human nature (in the most general sense, unaffected by specific contexts) remain unchanged.

The assumption that self-love and self-interest precede any affection for or interest in another becomes especially important in an inquiry like *The Wealth of Nations*, as it provides a safer and more efficient approach to inter-personal action in pursuit of economic objectives:

‘It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.’ (*WN*, I, p. 18)

Despite Smith's reference to an ‘invisible hand’ and to the deception of nature<sup>13</sup> as a process of transforming private vices into greater goods, he does not contend that

self-interest and self-love are necessarily bad. On the contrary, they form the basis of frugality (*WN*, I, pp. 360–362) and prudence (*TMS*, p. 189), which are virtues indispensable to social prosperity and, respectively, human fulfilment.

According to Smith, it is a given fact of nature that humans are destined to seek their own progress: the ‘great purpose of human life’ is ‘bettering our condition’ (*TMS*, p. 50). But in his view this desire to better our condition is derived (in most people) not from some absolute imperative to satisfy basic needs but from a desire to be admired and to be superior:

‘To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation, are all the advantages we can propose to derive from it. It is the vanity, not the ease, or the pleasure, which interests us.’ (*TMS*, p.50)

In this sense, the desire to better our condition is permanent, endless and relative to the status of others, which condemns us as individuals to a demanding pursuit destined to never be entirely satisfied.

Smith notices that most people tend to sympathise with the rich and powerful because most people desire to be rich and powerful in that basic sense and because they imagine that being rich and powerful is a perfect and happy state. While justifying this questionable belief as nature’s way of creating social order (*TMS*, p. 52), Smith does not hesitate to show in what ways this belief is indeed contrary to enlightened reason: it secures from others more admiration than the recipients of this admiration may be entitled to on account of their personal virtues and qualities; and it turns these recipients into mere slaves of a very uncertain status, not only difficult to secure and maintain but also impossible to control as it does not form any consistent relationship with personal merit. ‘Are you in earnest resolved’, Smith asks, ‘never to barter your liberty for the lordly servitude of a court, but to live free, fearless, and independent? There seems to be one way to continue in that virtuous resolution; and perhaps but one. Never enter the place from whence so few have been able to return; never come within the circle of ambition; nor ever bring yourself into comparison with those masters of the earth who have already engrossed the attention of half mankind before you’ (*TMS*, p. 57).

This issue is not discussed in *The Wealth of Nations*, but *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* provides a fertile continuation of it, indispensable to an adequate understanding of Smith's theory of individual interest and of its social articulations. According to this theory, individuals are naturally best endowed for furthering their own interests because self-love is a natural and universal human instinct, and self-preservation is a natural and universal aim of human activity (*TMS*, p. 58). Importantly, in relation to one's own interest, one is in the unique position of being aware of all of one's particular circumstances.

However, as the universal inclination of humans to better their condition is repeatedly stated in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (*TMS*, p. 50, p. 79, p. 212), it becomes clear that no assumption is made that this universal inclination is the only or the strongest inclination of human nature: it is simply a remark about this tendency being present rather than absent, or about *this* tendency being present rather than its opposite.

In essence, the desire for improvement appears as a potentially unlimited extension of the natural instinct for self-preservation. Just as any desire for self-destruction is unnatural (*TMS*, p. 287), any failure to exploit opportunities available for further improvement, irrespective of the progress already achieved, is also out of order. This idea, placed in the context of material wealth increase, is apparent, for example, in Smith's explanation that it does not make sense to have stock surplus and not turn it into fixed or circulating capital to increase material wealth, and that a person who fails to apply natural reason in this instance would be 'perfectly crazy' (*WN*, I, p. 301).

An individual deficient in this elementary instinct and ability to look after himself or herself, and to use every opportunity for improvement available to him or her, is deprived of the best and most natural means to attend to his or her needs, or to attain fulfilment<sup>14</sup>. Smith strongly believes that no social intervention or support can compensate for this loss.

Furthermore, it is from this basic and central sense of self that an individual can then build relationships with entities outside himself or herself, progressively forming attachments to smaller and closer groups at first (e.g. family members, neighbours, the homeland)<sup>15</sup>, and then being able to develop a more complex understanding of broader or more remote entities, all the way to the exercise of universal benevolence (*TMS*, p. 235). Awareness of another must relate back to a sense of self, in order to produce two other important natural instincts: (1) the wish for superiority over others (*TMS*, p. 57), and (2) the predisposition for sympathy with another's feelings (*TMS*, p.9).

Of crucial importance for understanding Smith's conception of the source of altruism is the fact that he finds all moral judgements<sup>16</sup> in our senses and feelings, ultimately in the primacy of pleasure and pain in our affections and motivations. Without a degree of self-love, love for another would not be possible. For Smith, this is an issue of empathy as self-knowledge: when we form an opinion about the feelings experienced by another, we use ourselves, our own feelings and reactions, as measures or criteria for evaluation, simply because it is the only method available to us (*TMS*, pp. 18–19).

Smith distinguishes, within his moral theory, between qualities that most benefit ourselves (e.g. superior reason and understanding, enhanced by self-command, lead to prudence – *TMS*, p. 189) and qualities that most benefit others (e.g. humanity, justice, generosity, public spirit – *TMS*, p. 190). But he insists that, when we display these qualities, we do not produce them through reason, through calculated considerations of utility, but rather due to a contemplative activity: these virtues have an aesthetic quality, and we find them admirable in themselves (*TMS*, p. 189).

The secondary role of reason and utility, and the primacy of feelings in the formation of moral judgement, are the key ingredients of Smith's explanation of the moral point of view, so brilliantly exposed through the metaphor of the impartial spectator, or 'the man within the breast' (*TMS*, p. 69, p. 82, p. 148).

Put simply, the impartial spectator represents the standpoint we must adopt when judging a situation in a detached and anonymous manner, as a spectator rather than as an agent or experiencing subject. It involves the ability to look upon our own



actions from the perspective of another, indifferent to our own interests. We learn to adopt and practise this standpoint through socialisation (*TMS*, pp. 110–111) but, importantly, it is also the product of feelings and natural instincts (sympathy, approbation) rather than reason. This is why ‘the man within the breast’ is, in Smith’s opinion, the most intransigent judge of our actions: there is nowhere to hide from our conscience, there is no way we can distort the facts in front of this tribunal (*TMS*, p. 227). This is also why, in Smith’s view, no principle (not even that of utility) appears to be more efficient in guiding human passions towards wider, beneficial ends than the contemplative principle of the impartial spectator (*TMS*, p. 263, p. 292). The instinctive application of moral judgement from the standpoint of an impartial spectator thus forms Smith’s creative answer to the danger of having the proper exercise of reason in one’s own interest distorted by selfish passions.

The importance of moral values and moral judgement in both works must be emphasised here. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith clearly indicates that moral values have a systemic function, because our moral faculties have naturally been instilled in us to govern all our other faculties and to be their only judge or evaluator (*TMS*, p. 165).

To summarise, human nature contains a wide range of capacities, from self-love (self-interest) to interest in others, to the development of an instinctive capacity to sympathise with the condition of others, to the formation of a sense of justice and of a more general sense of benevolence. Appeal to self-interest may be more evident and useful in economic practices, which are by their very nature demanding of individuals’ capacity to look after their own needs and interests; but appeal to self-interest is by no means the only, defining manner in which humans can relate to each other and to the world around them. Whether human motivation is egoistic or altruistic, the basic principles at work here refer to the application of certain natural instincts or feelings, and not to the application of reason. Accordingly, the impartial spectator standpoint is a function of natural empathy, not of some rational consideration of a higher order. Despite the most common expectations, appeal to natural sympathy occasionally makes its way in *The Wealth of Nations*, in contexts where more rationalistic explanations would have been available. Importantly,

human nature contains not only the physical potential for improvement, but also the instinct to seek continuous, unlimited improvement.

#### **4.2 Human needs and desirable potential: limited needs versus the need for continuous progress**

Human needs form another topic not purposefully analysed in *The Wealth of Nations*. However, assumptions about human needs can be identified in relation to several central issues discussed in the book, e.g. the source of the division of labour, the economic value of certain goods, and the rent of land.

At first sight, when stating that the division of labour is the result of a natural propensity of human beings to ‘truck, barter and exchange’ (WN, I, p. 17), Smith does not appear to make any connection between this propensity and human needs. However, as he further develops his theory of the three stages of universal and natural economic development (farming, manufactures and foreign trade – WN, I, pp. 385–388), it becomes clear that a certain hierarchy of human needs must play an important part in shaping this particular evolution of economic activities. Thus, farming adds greater value to the annual wealth of the country ultimately because food production responds to a more basic human need than manufacturing and commerce.

Similarly, in his description of the cultivation of land as a natural human inclination (‘the original destination of man’ – WN, I, p. 403), Smith combines the idea of the intrinsic pleasures spontaneously produced in human beings by life in the country (beauty, peace of mind) with considerations of security and autonomy as basic and universal human needs. It is mainly the prospect of these valued attributes that makes human beings choose farming and country life over other economic activities in conditions of natural liberty. As will be illustrated in Section 4 of this chapter, according to Smith, a system of natural liberty in economic activities is as close as one can possibly get to a market responsive to the needs of all its agents.

The fundamental importance of human needs in economic life is reflected not only in market demand left to its natural course, but also in some basic principles of ‘natural’ economics, such as the value of land being affected by its capacity to produce goods that satisfy needs rather than conveniences (*WN*, I, p. 194). In fact, there is a clear correspondence between the value of land and the basal nature of the needs that can be satisfied by its produce. The needs hierarchy apparent here is: nourishment, clothing, shelter, then other (less imperative) considerations.

A more elaborate needs hierarchy, but essentially similar to the one above, can be found in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in Smith’s discussion of prudence as the key virtue in attaining human fulfilment:

‘The care of the health, of the fortune, of the rank and reputation of the individual, the objects upon which his comfort and happiness in this life are supposed principally to depend, is considered as the proper business of that virtue which is commonly called Prudence.’ (*TMS*, p. 213)

Accordingly, the needs of the body are related to ‘the appetites of hunger and thirst, the agreeable or disagreeable sensations of pleasure and pain, of heat and cold’, and they are the first and most immediate needs humans are called to attend to. The second needs category in line is referred to as ‘external fortune’, that is material resources and conveniences accumulated to increase comfort beyond a basic level of bodily satisfaction. After these needs, our attention is directed towards the category of ‘credit and rank in the society we live in’, and finally towards the ‘confidence, esteem and good-will’ one would like to obtain from others (*TMS*, p. 212–213).

There is one assumption about human needs which is more prominent in Smith’s economic theory, namely that basic human needs are always limited (in fact, the more basic a need is, the easier it is to satisfy due to its limitations). From here Smith concludes that market demand for the necessities of life is also limited, and (in a relatively steady population of any country) constant. This enables Smith to explain why, for example, the prices of luxuries are naturally lower in poorer countries, where most people are still struggling to acquire the necessities, than in

wealthier countries, where more people can enjoy an above-subsistence condition and have more material capacity to secure luxuries (*WN*, I, pp. 194–195).

While most material needs are limited, the natural inclination of humans to seek unlimited improvement ensures that considerations of human progress are pushed beyond mere needs satisfaction. As will become clear in the discussion of Smith's ideal of humanness in Section 5 below, he does not consider that pursuit of unlimited progress is inappropriate; he only questions the most common choice of unlimited progress in material wealth as the best choice an individual can make in his or her life. Nevertheless, in Smith's opinion, unlimited human progress is not only possible, it is also highly desirable (in the form of wisdom and virtue, preferred by Smith to the form of wealth).

To conclude, human needs are important reasons for valuing desirable human potential, though they are assigned relatively different values and command different priorities in human life. Most human needs are limited but there is also the natural instinct for the pursuit of unlimited progress, which enriches our notion of human fulfilment and our ideal of humanness.

### **4.3 Human fulfilment: from needs satisfaction to tranquillity and enjoyment**

Smith's awareness that basic human needs are limited has a special significance in his conception of human fulfilment. He observes, mainly in relation to physical appetites, that the object of passion becomes disagreeable after satisfaction (*TMS*, p.28), and concludes that the needs to be realised in the life of an individual by progressive accumulation of material wealth will inevitably change. He also remarks on the effect impressed by material progress on the minds and feelings of most people. While not much happiness is added by material gain, considerable distress can be caused by (even slighter) material loss:

‘What can be added to the happiness of the man who is in health, who is out of debt, and has a clear conscience? To one in this situation, all accessions of fortune may properly be said to be superfluous... But though little can be added

to this state, much may be taken from it. Though between this condition and the highest pitch of human prosperity, the interval is but a trifle; between it and the lowest depth of misery the distance is immense and prodigious. Adversity, on this account, necessarily depresses the mind of the sufferer much more below its natural state, than prosperity can elevate him above it.' (*TMS*, p.45)

We infer from here that, in Smith's view, material wealth is an aspect of humanness with a few distinguishing features: (1) its increase (at the level of individuals) is not directly proportional to that of human happiness; (2) there is a limit to the extent of which it can contribute to human happiness; and (3) it has a constant presence in the panorama of human fulfilment. As I shall further elaborate in Section 6 of this chapter, all these universal features seem to recommend material wealth as a universal instrumental criterion for both social and human progress.

The instrumental value of material wealth for most people is, in Smith's opinion, in meeting their need for security and admiration from peers. The benevolence, esteem and approbation of others are also human needs indispensable for our fulfilment (*TMS*, p. 46). However, Smith believes that, while material wealth can provide security in the more basic sense of resources for subsistence and even comfort, it cannot ensure to the same degree the security of constant benevolence and esteem from others. In other words, material wealth can secure admiration and envy from others but not the genuine moral approbation of our actions.

Smith does not cease to praise nature for its perfect design of human society. He observes that, while indifference to wealth pursued for the social rank and pre-eminence it attracts are the domain of the exceptionally wise and virtuous, ambition in the greatest number of people is in fact moderated by other factors. As the middle and lower classes are expected to have better morals than the higher classes (*TMS*, p.63)<sup>17</sup>, and as virtues tend to satisfy the one who practises them better than vices (*TMS*, p.65), the vast majority of people will benefit from both the reality and the realisation that the socio-economic order does not identify with a moral order and with each individual's opportunities to attain happiness and fulfilment. Here is Smith's warning that there may be a limit beyond which a trade-off of personal

liberty and security for the sake of greater wealth may not be the best way of securing happiness:

‘...The pleasures from which we propose to derive our real happiness, are almost always the same with those which, in our actual, though humble station, we have at all times at hand, and in our power. Except the frivolous pleasures of vanity and superiority, we may find, in the most humble station, where there is only personal liberty, every other which the most exalted can afford; and the pleasures of vanity and superiority are seldom consistent with perfect tranquillity, the principle and foundation of all real and satisfactory enjoyment. Neither is it always certain that, in the splendid situation which we aim at, those real and satisfactory pleasures can be enjoyed with the same security as in the humble one which we are so very eager to abandon.’ (*TMS*, p. 150)

Obviously, Smith does not recommend ambition as the driving motive in the pursuit of material wealth. But this does not exclude the activity of continuous wealth acquisition as an important dimension of humanness, and wealth itself as an important value and criterion for human progress. In Section 6 below I shall discuss the specific manner in which Smith regards material wealth (devoid of its usual association with ambition, admiration and superiority) as being of universal benefit to other dimensions of human progress.

In illustrating the natural capacity of humans to evolve from self-love to sympathy for others, Smith also reveals the importance of both propensities for human fulfilment. Firstly, nothing can better realise an individual’s needs, well-being and development than that individual, empowered by direct knowledge of their own circumstances and adequately motivated by self-love.

Secondly, sympathy and virtue can have, among other things, a fulfilling effect on the person who exercises them. Thus, although directed to another and of benefit to them, sympathy relies on the individual’s need to reassure and validate one’s feelings by harmonising those feelings with the feelings of another person in relation to a common situation (*TMS*, p. 13). The therapeutic function of sympathy, as described by Smith, appears to occur not only with respect to the recipient

(object) but also with the subject of sympathy (*TMS*, p. 15). Considerations of pleasure and pain are also central in Smith's discussion of virtues and vices. Human beings feel happier when virtuous: vice is whimsical and discordant, virtue is regular and harmonious (*TMS*, p. 225). This is why, Smith believes, we tend to reject immoral actions instinctively (*TMS*, p. 89), and it is also why virtuous means to a goal are better recommended by our natural instincts (as more secure and enjoyable) than vicious means (*TMS*, p. 65).

Finally, I must point out Smith's view that human fulfilment involves more than just needs satisfaction. Throughout his discussion of virtues in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, there is the sense that attaining human perfection involves two kinds of good: first, the more basic condition of avoiding harm (a negative kind of good); secondly, the condition of adding value to that balance (a positive kind of good). For example, justice is indispensable and benevolence only desirable, but the real moral progress occurs by moving from justice to benevolence (*TMS*, p. 79). Similarly, a recurrent assumption (in both *The Wealth of Nations*<sup>18</sup> and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*<sup>19</sup>) is that appeal to proactive self-interest is always more efficient than appeal to reactive feelings of fear. The idea of a need for both negative and positive good is consolidated in Smith's definition of happiness as a combination of 'tranquillity and enjoyment' (*TMS*, p. 149).

In sum, Smith envisages human fulfilment as something more complex than satisfaction of needs (although the latter clearly is the basis of any human fulfilment). The development of an unlimited desirable potential, together with the preferred experience of tranquillity and enjoyment, forms an idea of human fulfilment which is crucial in understanding Smith's implicit ideal(s) of humanness<sup>20</sup>.

## **5. Two ideals of humanness: wealth and greatness, versus wisdom and virtue**

In a metaphysics of Stoic origin, presented in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith's perspective on the relationship of human beings with the universe goes somewhat like this: We naturally have affections, interests and abilities focused

towards ourselves, then to those closer to us, then to more remote entities. ‘The man within the breast’ provides a standpoint which keeps in check the excesses of our passions and guards against potentially destructive impulses. Both passions and moral judgement are universal natural inclinations of human beings, and together they aim at creating society as a superior form of organisation which enables individuals to capitalise on cooperation and accumulation of experience. Just as society in its natural state tends to convert the vices of individuals into greater goods (as illustrated in Section 4 above), all partial evils that may occur in nature (of which a deviant society may be one) tend to ultimately be distilled into the supreme, benevolent design of the divinity. While the divinity’s proper role is to contemplate the great design, human beings — mortals dependent on the realisation of their own needs – have a different role, namely acting according to their own nature to realise these needs and improve their condition. If human beings ever consider contemplating the great design, they should do so while accepting that, if evils sometimes do occur in the universe, these must be part of a greater benevolent intention, perhaps not open to human understanding.

Elaborating on an idea mentioned in Subsection 4.3 above, Smith points out that the greater aims of nature (such as the progress of the species) have not been left to our reason but to our instincts, as a safer and more efficient means to achieve these aims. This means is safer because instincts do not require knowledge, while our knowledge can only be partial and imperfect. It is also more efficient because it does not require deliberation:

‘...Self-preservation, and the propagation of the species, are the great ends which Nature seems to have proposed in the formation of all animals. Mankind are endowed with a desire of those ends, and an aversion to the contrary; with a love of life, and a dread of dissolution; with a desire of the continuance and perpetuity of the species, and with an aversion to the thoughts of its intire [*sic*] extinction. But though we are in this manner endowed with a very strong desire of those ends, it has not been intrusted [*sic*] to the slow and uncertain determinations of our reason, to find out the proper means of bringing them about. Nature has directed us to the greater part of these by original and immediate instincts. Hunger, thirst, the passion which unites the two sexes, the



love of pleasure, and the dread of pain, prompt us to apply those means for their own sakes, and without any consideration of their tendency to those beneficent ends which the great Director of nature intended to produce by them.’ (*TMS*, pp. 77–78)

Accordingly, justice – a principle indispensable to human beings and their life in society – is not the product of human reason but a natural inclination which is nothing but a projection of one’s own (basic and universal) need for security. This idea is brilliantly presented by Smith as follows:

‘In order to enforce the observation of justice... Nature has implanted in the human breast that consciousness of ill-desert, those terrors of merited punishment which attend upon its violation, as the great safe-guards of the association of mankind, to protect the weak, to curb the violent, and to chastise the guilty. Men, though naturally sympathetic, feel so little for another, with whom they have no particular connexion, in comparison of what they feel for themselves; the misery of one, who is merely their fellow-creature, is of so little importance to them in comparison even of a small conveniency of their own; they have it so much in their power to hurt him, and may have so many temptations to do so, that if this principle did not stand up within them in his defence, and overawe them into a respect for his innocence, they would, like wild beasts, be at all times ready to fly upon him; and a man would enter an assembly of men as he enters a den of lions.’ (*TMS*, p. 86)

In support of the idea that we do not always understand the proper causes and effects of our actions within greater designs, Smith employs the Aristotelian distinction between the *efficient* cause and the *final* cause of things. He explains this distinction by analogy with the possible meanings of the movements of a watch:

‘The wheels of the watch are all admirably adjusted to the end for which it was made, the pointing of the hour. All their various motions conspire in the nicest manner to produce this effect. If they were endowed with a desire and intention to produce it, they could not do it better. Yet we never ascribe any such desire or intention to them, but to the watch-maker, and we know that they are put into motion by a spring, which intends the effect it produces as little as they do...

When by natural principles we are led to advance those ends, which a refined and enlightened reason would recommend to us, we are very apt to impute to that reason, as to their efficient cause, the sentiments and actions by which we advance those ends, and to imagine that to be the wisdom of man, which in reality is the wisdom of God. Upon a superficial view, this cause seems sufficient to produce the effects which are ascribed to it; and the system of human nature seems to be more simple and agreeable when all its different operations are in this manner deduced from a single principle.’ (*TMS*, p. 87)

One of the most remarkable ideas in the passage above (an idea suggested in a few other key places in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*) is the assumption that, were we to possess the absolute reason of the divinity, we would make the same choices as our natural inclinations prompt us to make. This idea also has its source in Stoic philosophy, more specifically in Epictetus<sup>21</sup>. Accordingly, following nature in everything we do is the best way to partake in the governing principle of the universe, namely in ‘the idea of that divine Being, whose benevolence and wisdom have, from all eternity, contrived and conducted the immense machine of the universe, so as at all times to produce the greatest possible quantity of happiness’ (*TMS*, p. 236).

What are the main recommendations given by Smith with regard to human behaviour? In this he is, of course, considerably influenced by Stoic philosophy, of which he gives the following account:

‘Man, according to the Stoics, ought to regard himself, not as something separated and detached, but as a citizen of the world, a member of the vast commonwealth of nature. To the interest of this great community, he ought at all times to be willing that his own little interest should be sacrificed. Whatever concerns himself, ought to affect him no more than whatever concerns any other equally important part of this immense system. We should view ourselves, not in the light in which our own selfish passions are apt to place us, but in the light in which any other citizen of the world would view us. What befalls ourselves we should regard as what befalls our neighbour, or, what comes to the same thing, as our neighbour regards what befalls us.’ (*TMS*, pp. 140–141)

From this perspective Smith adopts a significant part, especially in his original construction of the impartial spectator as the indispensable standpoint of wisdom, the ‘guardian’ of our ‘innocence and tranquillity’ (*TMS*, p. 132), the judgement of indifference and adversity brought home (*TMS*, pp. 128–129).

But Smith also significantly departs from the Stoic ideal of humanness, by allowing in his system two different levels wherefrom we can view an ideal: an absolute level (congruent with the Stoic model), and a (so-called) relative (or relational) one. This distinction is best illustrated in Smith’s discussion of praise and praiseworthiness, blame and blameworthiness (*TMS*, p. 114), being ‘respected’ and being ‘respectable’ (*TMS*, p.62). There is, indeed, the perspective of absolute truth, in which (Smith believes) we participate through the judgements of the impartial spectator. This perspective provides an independent, superior validation test, which cannot be provided by the fallible opinions of others when they convey praise or blame on somebody’s actions.

The two levels are also present in Smith’s description of two distinct approaches we can take to the goal of greatness: one which compares our performance with that of an absolute standard, and one where the relative outperformance of other human beings may be sufficient (*TMS*, p. 50 and pp. 247–248).

On the other hand, Smith observes that, in each of the two ways of ‘bettering our condition’ (the absolute and the relative), there are two different paths: one, ‘by the study of wisdom and the practice of virtue’ through modesty and justice; the other, ‘by the acquisition of wealth and greatness’ through ambition and avidity (*TMS*, p. 62). While wisdom and virtue are more likely to mould themselves around absolute ideals, and wealth and power against relative ideals, Smith does not exclude the possibility of treating virtue relatively (as in being satisfied with standards of virtue agreed upon within a community of people) and wealth absolutely (as in pursuing wealth independently, not relative to the wealth of others). The distinction between an absolute and a relative ideal is quite separate from the distinction between the path of wealth and the path of wisdom.

The crucial point Smith makes about the two paths is that the choice between them is necessary, radical and uncompromising, because the rewards associated with each path are so very different:

‘What is the reward most proper for encouraging industry, prudence, and circumspection? Success in every sort of business. And is it possible that in the whole of life these virtues should fail of attaining it? Wealth and external honours are their proper recompense, and the recompense which they can seldom fail of acquiring. What reward is most proper for promoting the practice of truth, justice, and humanity? The confidence, esteem, and love of those we live with. Humanity does not desire to be great, but to be beloved. It is not in being rich that truth and justice would rejoice, but in being trusted and believed, recompenses which those virtues must almost always acquire.’ (*TMS*, pp. 166–167).

Although Smith purports to leave the subject of which path one should choose open to the reader’s preference, we cannot help inferring from his apparently detached observations which path is preferred by the author himself. Thus, Smith remarks that, while the goal of wealth and greatness is more likely to be noticed, understood and desired by more people, the rewards of wisdom and virtue are likely to be more profound and enduring (*TMS*, p. 62).

Importantly, irrespective of which path one may choose, Smith believes that the virtues required for one path are very similar to those required for the other, and the difference is only one of emphasis, not of essential quality. For example, although the goal of earthly ambitions may recommend prudence more strongly than benevolence, no true wealth (in the sense of enduring, safely secured wealth) can be acquired without combining prudence with benevolence, and both with justice, under the guidance of self-command. The requirement of acting in accordance with nature is never to be abandoned: ‘every end should be acquired by those means only which Nature has established for acquiring it’ (*TMS*, p. 169). This precept applies equally to the issue of pursuit of virtue (dominant in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*) and to that of pursuit of wealth (more prominent in *The Wealth of Nations*).

To complete the picture of the ideal human being (ideal for both wealth and wisdom), I shall quote here Smith's prescription of a model behaviour in which selfish feelings are moderated by other-centred feelings:

'[Our behaviour] must be plain, open, and direct; determined without positiveness, and elevated without insolence; not only free from petulance and low scurrility, but generous, candid, and full of all proper regards, even for the person who has offended us. It must appear, in short, from our whole manner, without our labouring affectedly to express it, that passion has not extinguished our humanity; and that if we yield to the dictates of revenge, it is with reluctance, from necessity, and in consequence of great and repeated provocations. When resentment is guarded and qualified in this manner, it may be admitted to be even generous and noble.' (*TMS*, p.38)

Also relevant at this point are Smith's conclusions about which feelings should inform reward and punishment. Accordingly, gratitude should come from benevolent feelings tempered by the sense of duty; whereas actions of punishment should come from a sense of duty only, without feelings of hatred or revenge (*TMS*, p. 172).

The study of human morality undertaken by Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* reveals an ideal of human virtue which could be condensed in the following statement: perfect virtue is made up of perfect prudence, strict justice, proper benevolence and perfect self-command.

It is also important to remark here that, like Condorcet, Smith has a natural law conception of morality. His combination of descriptions of what is natural with normative recommendations is unequivocal in this respect: we ought to do what is recommended because it accords with nature's ways.

Let us now briefly review the two ideals of humanness presented by Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, namely wealth and greatness, on the one hand, and wisdom and virtue, on the other. In the case of the former, which is mainly discussed as a relative ideal, one necessarily applies the imperative of bettering one's condition to the aim of achieving superiority over others. Here the pursuit of excellence is driven by a need for the admiration of others.

Although it may not reflect his personal preference, Smith acknowledges the relative pursuit of wealth and greatness as a sound ideal because there is at least a proper match between the end and the means. If one strives primarily for as much admiration from as many as possible, then material wealth is perhaps the most recommended means of acquiring this admiration because it is the kind of distinction most evident to everyone. By comparison, aiming to obtain the admiration of others through wisdom and virtue is not such a good plan, because these two qualities are much harder to notice and judge by most people, therefore the prospects of achieving one's goals this way are far less promising.

On the other hand, aspiring continuously to absolute wealth and power would be an extremely demanding task, not in the least because it would be difficult to envisage this (material, quantitative) form of absolute. This is certainly not a sound ideal because it is more likely to remove the prospect of fulfilment from us rather than draw it nearer. However, aspiring to wisdom and virtue in absolute terms is a proper ideal in the sense that the natural dominion (the guiding force) of these two qualities is absolute truth, independent of the circumstantial appreciation and judgement of others. Wisdom and virtue constitute their own rewards in the sense of one's conscience being enlightened by their governing truths even when the rest of humankind may believe the opposite. Consequently, when choosing this path one must satisfy oneself with the uncertain possibility of obtaining the recognition and approval of only very few, but within a depth and constancy of truth, virtue and affection which may never be attained by following the path of wealth and greatness<sup>22</sup>.

So far, one can distinguish at least four dimensions of humanness which may count as criteria for human progress in our discussion: material wealth, social power, wisdom (inclusive of knowledge) and virtue (inclusive of prudence, justice, benevolence and self-command).

There are, however, two other dimensions of humanness worth mentioning here, due to their prominent place in Smith's theory, namely liberty and security. In *The*

*Wealth of Nations*, the two ideas represent mainly *systemic* principles, therefore criteria for social progress, considered in relation to human beings as recipients rather than creators of these goods. They do, however, take a positive aspect in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where the active role of individuals in achieving liberty and security is emphasised.

Accordingly, the constitutive function of liberty and security is illustrated in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as follows: ‘...We may find, in the most humble station, where there is only personal liberty, every other [pleasure] which the most exalted can afford’ (*TMS*, p. 150). And further:

‘In ease of body and peace of mind, all the different ranks of life are nearly upon a level, and the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security which kings are fighting for.’ (*TMS*, p. 185)

Is it reasonable for human beings to set up for themselves, under the umbrella of ‘bettering one’s condition’, more than one goal and more than one guiding value? According to Smith, it clearly is. The intricate multi-dimensionality of human fulfilment has its origin in the diversity of human needs, and in finding motivation for human action in reasons other than benevolence:

‘Benevolence may, perhaps, be the sole principle of action in the Deity... It is not easy to conceive what other motive an independent and all-perfect Being, who stands in need of nothing external, and whose happiness is complete in himself, can act from. But whatever may be the case with the Deity, so imperfect a creature as man, the support of whose existence requires so many things external to him, must often act from many other motives.’ (*TMS*, p. 305)

Elaborating on suggestions made above, Smith groups the desirable dimensions of humanness in two different hierarchies, and thus conceives of two mutually exclusive ideals of humanness, which he calls ‘the path of wealth and greatness’ and the path of ‘wisdom and virtue’. Under each of these imperatives, liberty and security acquire a different scope.

It must be noted here that, although a distinction can be made between wealth and greatness, for Smith's construction of this ideal such a distinction is not relevant. Thus, wealth and greatness form one target, determined relatively by superiority over the easily appraisable condition of others. Similarly, though insufficiently explained in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, wisdom always appears in the context of virtue, and points in one direction only, namely the absolute benevolence of nature. To harmonise with that benevolence, we have more certain and basic means than enlightenment through reason, and these are given by all our natural passions properly balanced.

The relationship between reason and natural inclinations in Smith's theory of moral judgement is complex, and deserves some attention at this point. For example, Smith explains that, to systematise the regularities of our moral experiences, reason controls the passions and guards against self-deceit by creating general rules of conduct and by giving rise, together with those rules, to the sense of duty. However, this is the enlightened rationalisation of a natural inclination that was already there, in the primary feelings – namely, self-command. What general rules and duty recommend through reason, self-command recommends through natural instincts.

Smith believes that, because feelings are of a fundamentally different nature from reason, reason itself cannot temper them. Thus, passions can only be balanced or moderated by other passions. Excessive passions will not be kept in check by knowledge and rules, but by the power of self-command (itself, ultimately, a natural instinct):

‘The man who acts according to the rules of perfect prudence, of strict justice, and of proper benevolence, may be said to be perfectly virtuous. But the most perfect knowledge of those rules will not alone enable him to act in this manner: his own passions are very apt to mislead him; sometimes to drive him and sometimes to seduce him to violate all the rules which he himself, in all his sober and cool hours, approves of. The most perfect knowledge, if it is not supported by the most perfect self-command, will not always enable him to do his duty.’  
(*TMS*, p. 237)



Similarly, all selfish passions are to be kept in check by the social passions, thus giving rise to virtue. In this context, virtue is defined as the state of excellence and propriety created through a harmonious and constructive combination of (different, even opposite) passions.

Smith concludes that moral judgement, as a medium of interaction among values, is a process which involves mainly four factors. In chronological order, the first two factors are empirical, the other two are analytical:

‘When we approve of any character or action, the sentiments which we feel are... derived from four sources. First, we sympathize with the motives of the agent; secondly, we enter into the gratitude of those who receive the benefit of his actions; thirdly, we observe that his conduct has been agreeable to the general rules by which those two sympathies generally act; and, last of all, when we consider such actions as making part of a system of behaviour which tends to promote the happiness either of the individual or of the society, they appear to derive a beauty from this utility, not unlike that which we ascribe to any well-contrived machine.’ (*TMS*, p. 326)

To the unadvised reader it may appear that *The Wealth of Nations* was written entirely from considerations of the fourth kind mentioned above. But, while such focus is to be expected in a treatise of political economy, one should not ignore the emphasis Smith places in this study on the primacy of natural inclinations in the behaviour of individuals as economic agents. Profit-making, for example, is never ultimately treated (at the level of individual agents) as calculated economic reason but as a universal natural propensity to pursue one’s interests and to improve one’s material condition.

Based on examples like the ones given above, Smith appears to assume that, if absolute reason may in the end appear unattainable, or if our exercise of reason tends to fail us, there is fortunately the safer and more accessible path of virtue achieved through the balance of passions.

In conclusion, in Smith’s conception, two radically different ideals of humanness are available to human beings in pursuit of their self-fulfilment, and a radical choice

between them must be made. One of these ideals includes material wealth (including relative greatness) as the driving force, followed by virtue, liberty and security. The other ideal promotes virtue (including absolute wisdom) as the driving force, followed by liberty, security and material wealth. While wealth and greatness are better pursued relatively<sup>23</sup>, it is appropriate for wisdom and virtue to be sought absolutely.

Having outlined the dominant dimensions of humanness in Smith's two ideals, we are now in a position to explore the role of these dimensions of humanness, expressed as criteria of human progress, in the achievement of the ideal society.

## **6. Relations among dimensions of humanness: universal means, endless benefit and the natural limits of wealth and virtue**

Having identified the dimensions defining Smith's ideal of humanness (wealth, greatness, wisdom, virtue, liberty and security), let us now take a closer look at the nature of the relations among these dimensions of humanness.

One can remark that, within each of the two ideals of humanness discussed by Smith, there is (implicit in the way each exclusive path is defined) one dimension of humanness which, from a privileged position, leads all the others onto the path of progress. Thus, for the path of 'wealth and greatness' the suggested priority order appears to be led by wealth, followed by virtue, liberty and security; whereas for the path of 'wisdom and virtue' virtue comes first, followed by liberty, security and wealth. This priority of wealth or virtue clearly promotes each as a *universal end* within its respective ideal of humanness, namely (as defined in Chapter One) a dimension worth developing for its own sake, and to which the progress of all other dimensions should be subordinated.

As I shall further discuss in Chapter Five, this feature of a multi-dimensional ideal of humanness in which one particular dimension is nevertheless in a privileged position in relation to all others favours the belief that it may be possible to reduce

social projects for the facilitation of human progress to advancing the privileged dimension only. Below I shall elaborate on two important respects in which the priority dimension in each ideal of humanness appears to be privileged: (1) the progress of the priority dimension is considered to be a universal means for the progress of all the other dimensions; and (2) the priority dimension is considered to be of endless benefit to all the other dimensions.

In relation to the universal means idea, it can be noted that, although in the two ideals wealth overrides virtue and virtue overrides wealth respectively, there is a minimal sense in which the two values appear indispensable to each other and, implicitly, to all other values.

As previously shown, individuals cannot acquire wealth unless they exercise virtues like prudence, frugality (*WN*, I, p. 363), courage (*WN*, II, p. 296), or enterprise (*WN*, I, p. 301). However, just as those who pursue material wealth must understand that wealth itself cannot be acquired without some elementary attention being paid to requirements of such virtues, those who pursue them for their own sake must never abdicate from the basic duty they have to attend to their own material needs. This idea is implied in Smith's statements that the best person to care for one is oneself (*TMS*, p. 82 and p. 219) and that no human being can take up God's purely contemplative role when their real duty, as a human being, is to be active in fulfilling both their needs (including material needs) and duties (p. 237).

Accordingly, it can be said that there is a minimal level of material wealth that must be achieved in order to develop any other value, including all the admirable virtues, just as there is a minimal level of virtue that must be practised in order to develop any other value, including wealth. At these minimal levels, wealth and (respectively) virtue can be considered as universal means to all the other values. However, as I shall discuss below, wealth pursued beyond satisfaction of immediate needs and in order to obtain admiration from peers presents important limits in its impact on other values, especially on liberty and security. By contrast, as 'virtue is excellence' and cannot easily be found in most people as a path chosen for its own sake (*TMS*, p. 25), in an evaluation of the two ideals from an overarching

perspective, Smith appears to consider virtue as superior to wealth in that it clearly does not present the shortcomings of wealth.

With respect to the idea of endless benefit, for Smith, virtue appears to be of endless benefit to all other values, provided that an individual displays the minimal self-love (itself a virtue) required to fulfil the duty of self-care (including the satisfaction of material needs) and that less importance is placed upon ambition and admiration from others.

However, Smith shows that, in pursuing the path of 'wealth and greatness' for its own sake, beyond satisfaction of minimal needs and with the unlimited objective to secure the admiration of as many people as possible, a human being necessarily sacrifices goods to which greater amounts of wealth are clearly detrimental:

'It is this [the acquisition of admiration], which, notwithstanding the restraint it imposes, notwithstanding the loss of liberty with which it is attended, renders greatness the object of envy, and compensates, in the opinion of mankind, all that toil, all that anxiety, all those mortifications which must be undergone in the pursuit of it; and what is of yet more consequence, all that leisure, all that ease, all that careless security, which are forfeited for ever by the acquisition.'

(*TMS*, p. 51)

In support of the pre-eminence of virtue over wealth in an overarching perspective comes Smith's contention that our moral faculties properly govern all our other faculties, a doctrine I have already mentioned in Subsection 4.1 of this chapter. The supreme guiding and co-ordinating role played by the moral faculties in human conscience and behaviour is presented by Smith in an interesting comparison with the functions of the physical senses and with the values derived from those functions:

'Every sense is supreme over its own objects... Whatever gratifies the taste is sweet, whatever pleases the eye is beautiful, whatever soothes the ear is harmonious. The very essence of each of those qualities consists in its being fitted to please the sense to which it is addressed. It belongs to our moral

faculties, in the same manner to determine when the ear ought to be soothed, when the eye ought to be indulged, when the taste ought to be gratified, when and how far every other principle of our nature ought either to be indulged or restrained. What is agreeable to our moral faculties, is fit, right, and proper to be done; the contrary wrong, unfit, and improper.’ (*TMS*, p. 165)

Hence, from an overarching perspective, Smith clearly values pursuit of virtue more than pursuit of wealth. While the admiration needed by the virtuous is more like a form of validation against pure fantasy, and this admiration may well have nothing to do with the acquisition of wealth and greatness, no wealth and greatness will ever be acquired without a certain amount of wisdom and (economically relevant) virtue<sup>24</sup>. As previously illustrated, Smith believes that a perfect system of natural liberty attracts a certain responsibility from each individual citizen to be (to the best of their abilities) well-informed, enlightened, prudent, just, benevolent and exercising self-command, in order to pursue their own interests in society in accordance with nature.

Smith does not elaborate on the implications of this perceived tension between admiration from others, on the one hand, and one’s liberty and security, on the other hand. But if someone were to contemplate the path of wealth and greatness as the superior path, then one can imagine there would be more discussion of the limited benefits that increased virtue towards perfection can present to securing the admiration of many. This implication is supported by Smith’s presentation of the two paths as mutually exclusive.

Smith seems to suggest that the path of wealth and greatness is, in effect, one step below true human fulfilment. In his view, there is a different reason (that is, different from the fulfilment of the individuals involved) why nature instills in most human beings a conception of human fulfilment which favours material wealth and social status. While necessary, this reason (namely the natural creation of social order) distorts our sense of truth and justice:

‘This disposition to desire, and almost to worship, the rich and the powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition,

though necessary both to establish and maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society, is, at the same time, the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments. That wealth and greatness are often regarded with the respect and admiration which are due only to wisdom and virtue; and that the contempt, of which vice and folly are the only proper objects, is often most unjustly bestowed upon poverty and weakness, has been the complaint of moralists in all ages.' (*TMS*, p. 61)

On the other hand, Smith recognises the need for society as a collective product of the human species, which ultimately benefits everyone through its systemic accumulation, organisation and production of value. Accordingly, 'man... can subsist only in society', and 'all the members of human society stand in need of each others assistance' (*TMS*, p. 85). Although the contemplative pursuits of those who aspire to absolute virtue and wisdom is revered as God-like (*TMS*, p. 236), the need for society is a basic, inescapable need also shared by the followers of the path of wisdom and virtue, who (in virtue of their essentially human condition) cannot consider themselves exempt from the duty to look after themselves and their own (*TMS*, p. 237). One can infer from here that, in Smith's perspective, the popular pursuit of wealth and greatness appears as the best practical solution for the creation and maintenance of human society, a task which cannot possibly be accomplished through absolute virtue and wisdom (or, in other words, through the contemplation and accordance with the order of the universe).

Although, like Condorcet, Smith relies heavily on ideals of humanness and society, unlike Condorcet he does not speculate on the possible limits of human progress. Neither *The Wealth of Nations* nor *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* provide sufficient information on this topic<sup>25</sup>.

One can, however, identify certain assumptions about the possible limits of wealth or virtue as ultimate ends. Elaborating on what has been said above about the implications of endless benefit, one may note an important contrast between Smith's two ideals of humanness. On the one hand, the pursuit of wealth as a relative ideal appears to have no limit, which explains Smith's warning against the

continuous frustrations and dissatisfactions one is condemned to by getting drawn into the 'circle of ambition' (*TMS*, p. 57). On the other hand, the absolute pursuit of virtue is evidently limited by absolute moral perfection. However, in practice, both ideals are relative because human beings cannot reach absolute virtue. This is emphasised in the way Smith explains the impossibility of human beings to assume God's purely contemplative and self-contained position (*TMS*, p. 237). Consequently, the difference between the two paths with respect to human fulfilment lies in the quality of the life and experiences (e.g. virtue is harmonious, while vice is discordant).

There is in Smith a sense that true human fulfilment can only be achieved by pursuing the ideal of virtue, which is attainable by those who have become enlightened enough to reconcile their human condition with the wisdom of nature. However, nature has instilled in most people the inclination to pursue fulfilment in wealth and greatness. Smith sees in this nature's plan to create social order, society being an efficient instrument for the channelling of all human achievements towards the advancement of humankind as a whole in accordance with nature.

Reflecting on the features of the relations among desirable dimensions of humanness, as discussed above, one can observe that Smith's conception is more complex than Condorcet's, in that priorities for human fulfilment do not align themselves so readily in a virtuous chain. On the contrary, as human knowledge plays a secondary part in Smith and virtue (including wisdom) takes up the primary role, wealth and greatness appear more like a kind of hoax played by nature on human beings for a higher purpose. The fundamental tension between absolute virtue and the admiration of others divides human fulfilment into two radically different formulae.

On the one hand, the unlimited pursuit of wealth and greatness, whose rationale is obvious to everyone, is in effect equal to condemnation to continuous stress, at the expense of liberty and security. It is important, however, that the individual embarking on this path enjoys the admiration of others more than virtue, liberty and security, for otherwise humankind would not achieve as much as it is destined to.

On the other hand, as the moral sense governs all our other faculties, it appears that the ideal of wisdom and virtue can have a similar structure to that of Condorcet's virtuous chain, in that virtue (of the appropriate kinds) can be considered a universal means of endless benefit to all other values, provided – one might add – that the admiration of others (especially in its quantitative or comparative aspect) takes a low profile, and that the basic material satisfaction of needs is taken care of.

As a general conclusion on Smith's perspective on the relations among dimensions of humanness, although at the level of minimal satisfaction of needs, both wealth and virtue can be understood as universal means to the progress of all other dimensions of humanness, as soon as we embark either upon the relative pursuit of admiration and rank within the social order, or upon the absolute pursuit of universal virtue, there must be a clear understanding that neither wealth nor virtue will be of endless benefit to all the other values, and that sacrifice of one or the other will have to be accepted.

In addition, it must be noted that, just as Condorcet believes in the complete, unhindered access of the human intellect to absolute truth, so Smith thinks that human beings can, simply by listening to their natural inclinations, exercise absolute virtue. Moreover, just as Condorcet's universal reason helps us distinguish knowledge from ignorance, and from here the nature of universal human rights, so Smith's universal virtue assists us in recognising the principles of natural liberty at work in the ideal society.

## **7. Possibilities for human progress at supra-individual (collective) levels**

As discussed in Section 2 above, the qualities of individuals compound into collective qualities in an obscure way, governed by the invisible hand of nature. In this context, even what at individual level may appear as vices can successfully convert into public virtues if the perfect system of natural liberty is implemented.



In addition, one must remark here the crucial role of liberty and security as collective dimensions of humanness with the significance of regulative principles in the ideal society. When Smith postulates that a well-governed society is one that allows ‘universal opulence’ achieved through division of labour to ‘extend itself to the lowest ranks of the people’ (WN, I, p. 15), he has in mind a perfect system of natural liberty in which each individual, as a labourer or artisan, justly owns (in direct proportion with their skills, time and efforts) the results of all their labour, and can freely exchange the surplus to satisfy their other needs. This basic entitlement forms the crux of the social place or power that individuals can command for themselves, and their benchmark of security (at least as a form of economic security) in the social order. According to Smith, the guaranteed social place can only be made reasonably secure by the liberty each individual must enjoy in utilising their social entitlement to best pursue their own interests. In practical economic terms, this liberty refers, for example, to freedom to choose one’s own occupation or trade (WN, I, p. 493), to negotiate the wages of their labour (WN, I, p. 158), to fix the prices of their produce (WN, I, p. 159), to work and live wherever they wish (WN, I, p. 157), and to have access to general education (WN, I, p. 150).

While an indispensable, fundamental condition of establishing one’s own entitlements in the social order, liberty cannot legitimately extend, for each individual, beyond what is produced through the individual’s own merit. In Smith’s view, this limitation necessarily causes the liberty of each individual to remain small enough not to encroach upon the liberty of others. As illustrated in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, no society can be formed on principles that allow the unjust hurt and injury of others, and the judgements of the impartial spectator require that the exercise of *natural* liberty implies pursuing one’s interests through *natural* means, that is the means designed by nature for the respective ends.

In the context of political economy, an agent who acquires too much power in the economy always constitutes a potential threat to the natural liberty of others. Accordingly, the law should protect the liberty of all economic agents (WN, I, p. 367) under universal constraints of justice and equality.

As discussed in Section 5, also necessary for bettering one's condition is a basic level of security. This is relevant for collective progress in the sense that any individual progress beyond mere self-preservation and subsistence is discouraged whenever a standard of security fails to be achieved collectively and individuals are not guaranteed the reward of their labour:

‘...Men in [a] defenceless state naturally content themselves with their necessary subsistence; because to acquire more might only tempt the injustice of their oppressors. On the contrary, when they are secure of enjoying the fruits of their industry, they naturally exert it to better their condition and to acquire not only the necessaries, but the conveniencies and elegancies of life.’ (WN, I, p. 426)

Nowhere in *The Wealth of Nations* is the collective value of liberty and security better emphasised than in this passage from Book IV, Chp. V – *Digression on the Corn Trade*:

‘The natural effort of every individual to better his own condition, when suffered to exert itself with freedom and security, is so powerful a principle, that it is alone, and without any assistance, not only capable of carrying on the society to wealth and prosperity, but of surmounting a hundred impertinent obstructions with which the folly of human laws too often incumbers its operations; though the effect of these obstructions is always more or less either to encroach upon its freedom, or to diminish its security.’ (WN, II, pp. 49–50)

The main significance of liberty and security as collective values is that the preservation of these goods at a collective level can provide the only justification for constructive interventionism by the state in the social order. For example, Smith advocates the need to regulate the practice of banking promissory notes, even if this may look like a prima facie infringement of natural liberty:

‘To restrain private people, it may be said, from receiving in payment the promissory notes of a banker, for any sum whether great or small, when they themselves are willing to receive them; or, to restrain a banker from issuing such notes, when all his neighbours are willing to accept of them, is a manifest violation of that natural liberty which it is the proper business of

law, not to infringe, but to support. Such regulations may, no doubt, be considered as in some respect a violation of natural liberty. But those exertions of the natural liberty of a few individuals, which might endanger the security of the whole society, are, and ought to be, restrained by the laws of all governments; of the most free, as well as of the most despotic. The obligation of building party walls, in order to prevent the communication of fire, is a violation of natural liberty, exactly of the same kind with the regulations of the banking trade which are here proposed.' (WN, I, pp. 344–345)

To conclude on this point, Smith provides valuable insights into the collective significance of liberty and security, as sole acceptable reasons for public regulation. Thus, each individual's liberty must be limited for the sake of similar liberties for all other individuals (therefore, one may infer, for the achievement of optimal public liberty) and for the sake of public security.

## **Summary**

Undoubtedly, Smith's social project of material wealth increase at national scale is founded on a humanist conception of social progress. This conception relies on a well-formed and fairly sophisticated conception of human progress, which can be reconstructed from considerations on human nature, needs, desirable potential and fulfilment, expressed in both *The Wealth of Nations* and (especially) *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

Consequently, from a perspective on human nature as more safely governed by instincts than by reason, combined with a perspective on human needs which (apart from basic, limited needs) includes the propensity to continuously seek to 'better one's condition', with a perspective on desirable potential as probably unlimited, and with a rich idea of human fulfilment which moves well beyond mere satisfaction of limited needs, one can infer certain important assumptions about Smith's conception of human progress, in particular about the nature and features of his criteria for human progress.

Extremely important in elucidating certain issues of human progress (which in *The Wealth of Nations* may appear vague, ambiguous or even inconsistent) is the account of two mutually exclusive ideals of humanness presented by Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Accordingly, ‘the path of wealth and greatness’, embraced by most people, is a relative (or relational) ideal, conditioned by achieving superiority over others and by gaining the admiration of others. On the other hand, ‘the path of wisdom and virtue’, only adopted by very few, is an absolute ideal, where success is validated not through a maximisation of public recognition but through a harmonisation of one’s human qualities with the perfection of an essentially benevolent universe.

All of the above constitute important sources that allow us to infer the following assumptions about the relations among desirable dimensions within the two ideals of humanness as they appear in Smith’s conception: (1) as intrinsic to human fulfilment, these dimensions articulate with a naturalism which embraces Smith’s humanist perspective without any tensions being apparent; (2) these dimensions are structured in an order of evaluative priority, which is universal and immutable; (3) within the ideal of wealth and greatness, while a limited amount of virtue is necessary, the infinite pursuit of wealth and greatness is bound to lead to sacrifices of virtue, liberty and security; (4) within the superior ideal of wisdom and virtue, wisdom should tell us that the infinite pursuit of the admiration of others is, after all, a dispensable good; (5) with this lesson learnt, one can then pursue virtue in fairly harmonious conditions, as it appears indispensable to the advancement of all other criteria, including liberty and security; and (6) within certain minimal constraints (which recognise minimal material wealth as a universal means to needs satisfaction), virtue appears to be of endless benefit to all other criteria, in a pyramidal pattern of relationships with the other goods, very similar to that identified in Condorcet’s conception.

All these features of Smith’s conception of human progress, as identified in this chapter, will be further discussed and evaluated in Chapter Five.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations and references from Smith's works provided in this chapter are based on Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* ([ed. by Edwin Cannan], Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); and on Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [ed. by D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie], Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976). The references provided in brackets at the end of each quotation will employ *WN* for *The Wealth of Nations* (I for Volume One of the given edition, and II for Volume Two) and *TMS* for *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

<sup>2</sup> On this point, I have relied on Charles L. Griswold Jr's conclusions, presented in his *Adam Smith and the Virtues of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), in particular on pp. 29–39 ('The Unity of Smith's Thought, and the Projected *Corpus*').

<sup>3</sup> This does not prevent Smith from commenting on the destructive effects that division of labour can have on the many-sided development of the labouring individuals – an issue which will be resumed in more detail in Section 3 of this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Thus, Smith takes particular care to demonstrate that a nation's wealth does not reside in the amount of gold in its possession but in its capacity to accumulate and circulate capital, therefore in its potential for multiplying opportunities of wealth increase (*WN*, I, pp. 358–362).

<sup>5</sup> There is no inconsistency between this idea and that of minimum wages being 'consistent with common humanity' because Smith believed that a perfect system of natural liberty would ensure that each individual could command and obtain the right price for their labour, while this right price would reflect the amount of material resources needed to (at least) secure their subsistence. Smith provides detailed explanations of how this is supposed to occur (*WN*, I, p. 82 and p. 89).

<sup>6</sup> In this respect, Smith is convinced that market demand is naturally the direct expression of the interests of individuals. Nowhere in the treatise does Smith entertain the possibility that individuals' awareness of their interests may be distorted by the action of other agents in the market: 'It is not the multitude of ale-houses... that occasions a general disposition to drunkenness among the common people; but that disposition arising from other causes necessarily gives employment to a multitude of ale-houses' (*WN*, I, p. 383).

<sup>7</sup> In *TMS* (p. 86), Smith remarks: 'Society... cannot subsist among those who are at all times ready to hurt and injure one another... If there is any society among robbers and murderers, they must at least... abstain from robbing and murdering one another.'

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<sup>8</sup> At p. 90 (*WN*, I), Smith writes: ‘The liberal reward of labour... as it is the effect of increasing wealth, so it is the cause of increasing population. To complain of it, is to lament over the necessary effect and cause of the greatest public prosperity.’

<sup>9</sup> See Dugald Stewart, ‘Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LL.D.’ (1793), as quoted in D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie’s ‘Introduction’ to the 1976 edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, Smith considers desirable the division of great estates and the multiplication of small proprietors, who are naturally in the best position to improve their condition and, with it, that of society as a whole (*WN*, I, p. 441).

<sup>11</sup> On this topic, a particularly interesting insight is provided by Vivienne Brown in her book *Adam Smith’s Discourse: Canonicity, Commerce and Conscience* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, D. D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie’s account of the ‘Adam Smith problem’ in their ‘Introduction’ to the 1976 edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (p. 20), which mentions Bruno Hildebrand (1848), Carl Knies (1859), H. T. Buckle (1861) and Witold von Skarzynski (1878) among those who, very early in the philosophical analysis of Smith’s work, suggested that *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* are founded on two different conceptions of human nature.

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed explanation of this deception, see the chapter entitled ‘The “corruption” of the moral sentiments and the “deception” of the imagination’, in C. L. Griswold Jr, op.cit., pp. 262–266.

<sup>14</sup> Smith enounces this principle of human nature as follows: ‘Every man is, no doubt, by nature, first and principally recommended to his own care; and he is fitter to take care of himself than of any other person, it is fit and right that it should be so. Every man, therefore, is much more deeply interested in whatever immediately concerns himself, than in what concerns any other man...’ (*TMS*, pp. 82–83).

<sup>15</sup> In *The Wealth of Nations*, for example, this principle is expressed in relation to people’s natural tendency to seek labour closer to home (*WN*, I, p. 475).

<sup>16</sup> And other value judgements, including economic judgements (see the criteria of agreeableness and hardship invoked in valuing labour and profit-making enterprise in *WN*, I, p. 112 and p. 120).

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<sup>17</sup> Here Smith draws a lengthy comparison between the middle and lower classes (dependent on the benevolence of others for their own social and economic advancement) and the (somehow self-sufficient) ‘courts of princes’. Hence, the development of higher virtues in the lower and middle classes is a function of practical necessity: ‘The success of such people... almost always depends upon the favour and good opinion of their neighbours and equals; and without a tolerably regular conduct these can very seldom be obtained. The good old proverb, therefore, That honesty is the best policy, holds, in such situations, almost always perfectly true. In such situations, therefore, we may generally expect a considerable degree of virtue; and, fortunately for the good morals of society, these are the situations of by far the greater part of mankind.’

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, *WN*, I, p. 411 and p. 426.

<sup>19</sup> See for example, *TMS*, p. 263, in the discussion of the Stoic doctrine.

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, with the conclusion that the social passions are more intrinsically satisfying than the unsocial passions comes the suggestion that virtue (including wisdom) is the real, ultimate human wealth (value) because it can fulfil both subject and object, whereas material wealth cannot perform this role with the same success because it cannot be shared in the same way.

<sup>21</sup> A detailed account of Epictetus’ ideas is provided in *TMS*, pp. 276–277.

<sup>22</sup> Smith appreciates that friendships based on love of virtue are the most valuable and enduring: ‘Men of virtue only can feel that entire confidence in the conduct and behaviour of one another, which can, at all times, assure them that they can never either offend or be offended by one another. Vice is always capricious: virtue only is regular and orderly’ (*TMS*, p. 225).

<sup>23</sup> On this point, see also Smith’s suggestion, discussed in Section 2 above, that the more common pursuit of wealth and greatness is nature’s way of creating social order.

<sup>24</sup> There are two meanings of *virtue* at work in Smith’s writings. In *The Wealth of Nations*, virtue appears to acquire a narrower meaning, limited to the virtues envisaged as necessary for the pursuit and acquisition of material wealth, as well as for the satisfaction of the natural, unlimited impulse to seek the improvement of one’s condition. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, virtue has a broader meaning, which encompasses an absolute perspective on the relationship between human beings and the universe.

<sup>25</sup> It should be noted at this point that Smith’s conception of the stationary state does not have an adverse, limiting impact on his perspective on human fulfilment, despite the commonly held view that fulfilment is to be measured in terms of wealth and greatness. In *The Theory of Moral*

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*Sentiments*, Smith discusses at length examples of unhappiness caused by pursuit of wealth and greatness, which are clearly due to the inherent limitations people experience (encounter) in attempting to secure both material riches and admiration from others in excessive amounts. This is one of the justifications he employs in supporting his preference for virtue and wisdom as more appropriate criteria of human fulfilment, being dimensions whose unlimited development is indeed both desirable and possible.

As further discussed in Chapter Four, Marx relies on Smith's conception of the natural pattern of national wealth development, in particular on the idea of the stationary state, to conclude that capitalist economies inevitably lead to the unhappiness of individuals. Although Smith does not make this explicit in *The Wealth of Nations*, a careful reading of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* reveals that Smith is fully aware of an inherent tension between social and individual priorities. Accordingly, it would not be implausible to imagine Smith himself agreeing with Marx's conclusion, with the more pessimistic proviso that Smith would have viewed this tension as the inevitable (and perhaps insoluble) condition of *any possible* society, and not as something specific to capitalism.

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# KARL MARX: WHAT WEALTH, WHAT FREEDOM?

## - Chapter Four -

*That true SELF-LOVE and SOCIAL are the same...*

### **Introduction**

Another view that has informed a series of influential conceptions of social progress is that it consists mainly in the improvement of political institutions. I have presented an outline of the political paradigm in Chapter One. I have also referred there to the existing literature which considers Marx's philosophy of social progress to be one of the most prominent sources of this paradigm.

Like Condorcet, and to a more radical extent, Karl Marx (1818–1883) had a revolutionary and militant personality, whose actions reflected most of his philosophical ideas. Unlike either Condorcet or Smith, he often experienced extreme poverty, a source of unparalleled insights into the socio-economic condition of the proletariat.

In this chapter I shall briefly describe Marx's explicit social project (the political, revolutionary establishment of the communist society), explore his perspective on the relationship between social and human progress, and then analyse in more detail his implicit conception of human progress. In discussing Marx's conception of human nature, human needs, desirable human potential and human fulfilment, I intend to identify Marx's ideal of humanness, with its dimensions and relations among these dimensions.

For the analysis presented below I have referred to the following works by Marx: *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844), *The German Ideology* (1846), *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1846–1847), *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), *Grundrisse* (1857–1858), *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), *Theories of Surplus Value* (1862–1863), *Capital* (1863–1867), *The Civil War in France* (1871) and *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875)<sup>1</sup>.

## 1. The explicit social project: a new social order through political change

Marx's elaborated critique of capitalist society, the life-project theme of all his writings, is mainly directed against two (related) evils: exploitation and alienation.

In socio-economic terms, exploitation is a necessary quality of the relation between the performer of labour and the owner of capital, a relation defined by 'the domination of the person who does not produce over production and over the product' (*EPM*, p. 279). To put it simply, exploitation is the illicit appropriation of the surplus value created in the process of production by the owners of the means of production at the expense of the direct creators of this value, namely the workers. However, as I shall illustrate below, exploitation can also be interpreted and analysed at the level of the individual living in accordance with their own (human) nature. In this sense, exploitation emerges when individuals themselves overemphasise certain aspects of their existence (e.g. *having*) over others (e.g. *doing*).

Through the illicit appropriation of the worker's labour, the capitalist takes away from the worker not only the results of their work (the product) but also a portion of the worker's humanity and human life that has been put into the creation of this product (e.g. their time, effort, skills, etc.). Being reduced to a mere instrument of production, the worker (whose human labour has been commodified) is thus alienated not only from the outcomes of their labour but also from themselves as human beings. This self-alienation appears, in the process of production, as 'the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him... activity as suffering, strength as weakness, begetting as emasculating, the worker's *own* physical and mental energy, his personal life... as an activity which is turned against him, independent of him and not belonging to him' (*EPM*, p. 275).

How did human civilisation get to this situation? According to Marx's theory of history, at each stage in the development of human civilisation, the material conditions of human life are expressed in a mode of production which generates

relations of production as the material (technological and economic) source of social relations, of social classes, of the social order (*GI*, p.74). Marx's classification of the historical stages of human civilisation is a taxonomy of modes of production (tribal, ancient, feudal, and capitalist), each with their particular means and processes<sup>2</sup>.

Irrespective of the type of society they are in, human beings must produce, in order to create their physical means of subsistence. While there is a symbiotic, inter-defining relationship between production and consumption, and while distribution is an inseparable aspect of either production or capital (*CCPE*, pp. 276–290), Marx concludes that production is central to the whole economic process, in the sense that a particular form of it 'determines... consumption, distribution, exchange, and *also the mutual relations between these various elements*' (*CCPE*, p. 291). Society is thus the indispensable medium in which individuals organise, primarily, their material life. This organisation relies on certain categories of human *being* which, although profoundly different from one type of society to another, are nevertheless constant: labour (as productive activity), and property. In other words, human *being* (as a process or activity, as a verb in the gerund) is expressed socially as *doing* and *having*.

The historical transition from one type of society to the next is also a movement with a certain pattern (certain constants). In explaining this process, Marx is heavily influenced by Hegel's dialectics, except that he applies its principles not to the advancement of human consciousness towards the Absolute Spirit (Idea) but to the historical evolution of human civilisation in its material forms. Accordingly, as the mode of production (the thesis) develops always faster than the relations of production it gives birth to, these relations gradually fail to properly articulate with their material basis, which leads to a contradiction between the two (the antithesis). From this conflict, a new mode of production (with new relations of production and a new social order) must emerge as a form of resolution (the synthesis). The progressive factors that have led to this synthesis will be the cause of a later contradiction which will have to be transcended, and so on (*GI*, pp. 74–75).

Historical evolution as the creation and dissolution of contradiction is reflected, in Marx's view, in class conflict:

'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on in an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.' (*MCP*, pp. 45–46)

Here Marx clearly suggests the necessary dependency of the oppressor (exploiter) upon the (existence of) the oppressed (exploited).

The constants of human being as doing and having have evolved, socially, towards an increasingly radical (and simplified) separation between *those who do* (the property-less workers) and *those who have* (the work-free owners), with the former being constantly oppressed by the latter. As it becomes the focus of social and political institutions, property imposes its rules on labour, and the result of this reductionist, stifling domination is exploitation as appropriation by one class (the exploiter) of the values created by the other (the exploited).

Marx's analysis of the phenomenon of exploitation is thorough and precise. He describes the sources of pure exploitation (*Cap*, p. 249, p. 351), analyses the reasons why 'the system of wage labour is a system of slavery'<sup>3</sup>, outlines how the expansion and centralisation of capital exposes exploitation to human consciousness (*MCP*, p.46), and illustrates all the social aspects of this phenomenon in a book dedicated to this subject: *Theories of Surplus Value*<sup>4</sup>.

The synthesis humankind is waiting for is a social order in which exploitation ceases to occur. This requires social relations developed in conditions that *necessarily cannot* give rise to exploitation. As will be amply illustrated in this chapter, Marx sees the solution in conceiving human being as a harmonious, inter-supportive articulation between doing and having as inseparable, equal aspects of humanness.

In Marx's view, the domination, at the social level, of the *active* aspect of human life by its *possessive* aspect is illegitimate, for reasons inherent in human nature, which will be clarified in Subsection 4.1 of this chapter. Consequently, the social solution for this historical problem is the abolition of all private property, which would thus ensure the natural integration of material appropriation with all the other active faculties of the human being. The universal means for the achievement of this goal resides in political decision: the *étatisation* of the means of production, the abolition of private land ownership and the introduction of collective ownership, and the creation of a centralised and planned economy.

While the validity of Marx's prophecies may itself be questioned, the questions raised by his analysis of *actual* societies are enduring. While the determinist and evolutionist aspects of his theory of history have received solid, valuable criticisms<sup>5</sup>, the view that the equality and justice inherent in a harmonious social order can only be achieved through the progressive liberation of humankind (first from the domination of natural forces as a form of natural necessity, then from intrasocial exploitation as a form of social necessity) has exerted an enormous influence on social progress thought<sup>6</sup>. From here, there has been an increasing preoccupation with whether (and how) it would be possible to implement by political decision a mode of production which is non-exploitative<sup>7</sup>.

However, as the Marxist social project has been increasingly associated with essentially political change, it is important to emphasise here the economic foundations of Marx's perspective on communism. As outlined above, according to Marx the political changes envisaged to lead to the appearance of communism are not simply the product of a will to change exercised by conscious agents. For the proletarian revolution to occur, it is historically (that is, objectively) necessary for certain economic developments (more exactly, forces of production) to have occurred, in order to bring about those relations of production that would facilitate the appearance of the revolutionary consciousness required for this political move. It is on this basis that Marx criticises what he calls 'utopian' models of communism, that is precisely those projects that fail to ground their goals into a proper

understanding of the economic conditions that must emerge *before* any political change can occur and survive<sup>8</sup>.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx considers three factors as the premises of all human history: production, division of labour (*GI*, pp. 32–34) and private property (*GI*, pp. 46–48). In this context, capital (as a modern development of private property) is of particular importance to realising one necessary condition for a good society, namely productivity creating ‘surplus labour’ to a level well above the basic means of subsistence (*Gr*, p. 85). Moreover, in producing extensively and universally, capital provides the opportunity for the enrichment of natural human needs through history:

‘...Capital, with its restless striving after the general form of wealth, drives labour out beyond the limits of its natural needs, and thus produces the material elements needed for the development of the rich individuality, which is just as universal in its production as consumption, and whose labour thus itself appears not to be labour any more but a full development of activity, in which the natural necessity has disappeared in its direct form; since the place of natural needs has been taken by needs that are historically produced.’ (*Gr*, pp. 85–86)

The revolutionary role of capital in human history is that it forces the means of production to continuous, unlimited progress, breaking the boundaries of local self-sufficiency. It also transforms nature into an object of utility for humankind, and nature thus ceases to be worshipped as a ‘power in its own right’. For Marx, these two phenomena are inescapably ‘civilising’ (*Gr*, pp. 94–95). Furthermore, ‘the highest development of the productive forces’ (*Gr*, p. 120) is understood to cause, in direct proportion, the richest development of the individual (*Gr*, p. 121). Exactly how the refinement of automated technology is bound to increase production, enrich needs, and expose the contradictions inherent in the capitalist economic system is discussed at length in *Grundrisse* (pp. 132–140).

Similarly, Marx recognises competition, in particular capitalist competition, as an important social force. He remarks that the more competition is generalised by the economic system, the more destructive it becomes of the capitalist social relations (*PoPh*, pp. 151–152). As the interest of the individual in society is inversely

proportional with society's interest in the individual (*EPM*, p. 263), there is a contradiction in motivating society through the promotion of unsocial, particular interests (*EPM*, p. 321).

However, Marx does not share Smith's confidence in an invisible hand of nature safely converting private vices into public goods. On the contrary, he proposes to demonstrate in detail why society's reliance on competition as a remedy to economic and social dysfunctions is inappropriate. Against what liberalist political economy professes, competition fails to eliminate exploitation (*EPM*, p. 250), tends to concentrate and monopolise private property (*EPM*, p. 251) and leads to the qualitative deterioration of production, including production in response to false or imaginary needs (*EPM*, p. 253, p. 264).

Marx's main charge, at the level of the social project, is against private property. As exploitation is a social evil that must be eliminated, a society that legitimises the appropriation of alien labour must also be changed (*Gr*, pp. 103–105). Here again, liberalist political economy cannot provide the answer, for it is a normative theory which adopts the premises of capitalist society as natural and universal, and from here somehow eternal, a-historical. Mainly, it fails to recognise its own reductionist premises: the worker reduced to a source and instrument of labour (*EPM*, pp. 283–284), human reason as the merchant's reason, society as commercial society (*EPM*, p. 320).

In Marx's dialectical perspective on history, within each social order the tendency of modes of production to create exploitation is eventually overridden by the tendency of the superstructure to remove exploitation. However, in Marx's account of the history of human civilisation, successive social orders have only managed, so far, to replace some form of exploitation by another, in a process that has increasingly polarised the mode of production from the superstructure. As capitalism has developed into the most advanced, universally exploitative socio-economic order<sup>9</sup>, social consciousness has also developed towards the pursuit of justice, freedom and equality. As these two forces come into universal contradiction, only an outburst of direct conflict between the two universal classes

(the capitalists and the proletarians) can effect the profound change required to resolve this contradiction (*Cap*, p.846; *MCP*, pp. 54–55). The product of this revolution is the communist society, a perfect society in that its structures are necessarily free from exploitation and alienation (*GI*, p. 438; *Gr*, p. 151). This perfect society is not only attainable; its advent is dialectically inevitable (*GI*, pp. 49–54; *Cap*, p.54).

In sum, Marx predicts that communism cannot possibly attain its full form other than through at least two painful but necessary transitional stages, theorised by him as ‘the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat’ (*CGP*, p. 18) and as ‘socialism’, i.e. a ‘social republic’ which would abolish class rule itself, not just one existing form of class rule (*CWF*, pp. 56–57). As a communist society is, in the first instance, produced by the further developed economic conditions of a capitalist order, it is to be expected that the new society will be ‘still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges’ (*CGP*, p. 8). Consequently, it is inevitable that the power of the state falls in the hands of the most progressive of its classes, namely the working class. This essentially political move is required in order to create the economic prerequisites for the association of free producers in the socialist stage (the ‘self-government of producers’, as stated in *CWF*, p. 58), which will then form the economic and political basis for the abolition of private property as class property (*CWF*, p. 61) and the complete subordination of the state to society (and eventually the disappearance of the state), in mature communism (*MCP*, p. 55).

This vision is made clear in *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, where Marx famously states:

‘In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of individuals under division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour, from a mere means of life, has itself become the prime necessity of life; after the productive forces have increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be fully left behind and society inscribe on



its banners: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!’  
(*CGP*, p. 10)

According to Marx, each of these stages is economically conditioned by the preceding one, and – in line with his own dialectical and historical materialism – there is nothing utopian about any of them, as they are either anchored in existing historical conditions or necessarily dictated by future (partially predictable) conditions<sup>10</sup>. Having noted that, I also have to add that this dialectical treatment of the tension between determinism and free will does not take anything away from the legitimacy of Marx’s proposal of communism as a social project. Marx does not emphasise the economic conditions of political revolution with a view to undermining the project’s rationale, but only to distinguish between utopian (i.e. general-abstract, a-historical) and non-utopian (i.e. historically grounded) projects.

Concluding on the social project proposed by Marx, the most worthwhile social efforts are considered those focused on the creation of a social system which has the capacity to liberate human beings from exploitation and alienation, and to assist them in creating their own humanity, their active human wealth.

## **2. The communist order as perfect society**

On the grounds that capitalism (like other modes of production before it) brings about the undesirable social phenomenon of alienation<sup>11</sup>, Marx projects into the future a society free from this phenomenon. While his doctrine of history seems deterministic, Marx interprets the historical evolution of modes of production (and, with them, of societies) as having a positive meaning, namely that of inevitably increasing society’s capacity to emancipate individuals from oppression.

It is interesting to remark that, in his doctrine of political institutions, Marx pays little attention to political parties and voluntary organisations, and focuses instead on political rulers (as institutions formed by the political figure and their aides/staff) and on the state bureaucracy. Marx strongly believes that in all historical societies

the state acted in the interests of the dominant class(es) but that, through the natural succession of social orders, this condition is inevitably progressing towards the elimination of both social classes and the state, as a means of liberating persons from the domination of social institutions.

For Marx, men's citizenship in the state is a form of alienation from their true destiny and powers. As a necessary condition of his perfect society, the proletarian class, having become aware of its own historical mission, will seize the power and subordinate the state to its will, thus paving the way towards the elimination of state-based and other social institutions which prevent persons from fulfilling themselves as human beings. However, political change (e.g. change of state power) is for Marx only a means to the more significant goal of social change, i.e. the change of civil society.

Marx shows that the very conditions which have led to the development and expansion of capitalism are bound to lead to its demise. By creating a capitalist class, the capitalist mode of production has created its ideological support. But the capitalist class cannot exist without the proletarian class, which, while contributing (through its very existence) to the capitalist society, is in intrinsic conflict with the capitalist class and is the main source for the subversion of this type of society, not only because of an opposite (contrasting) ideology but because the existence of the labouring poor is pushed to the limit.

Accordingly, the fulfilment of human needs and potential accepts only one (painful, temporary) trade-off: the revolutionary, violent creation of the communist order, the society of associated producers. Unlike Smith (who regarded the use of physical force as contrary to nature and reason, and inferior to persuasion by appeal to self-interest), for Marx, physical force is a means as natural as enlightened reason. As long as the two reasons produce the same end, they are both justified.

I have mentioned before Marx's remark that, while liberalist political economy claims to recognise the proper value of labour, in terms of economic power it actually sides with private property (*EPM*, p. 290). According to Marx, the law

should not represent private property but the individual rich in needs (*GI*, pp. 89–92).

Through the careful examination of each principle of Marx's critique of exploitation exposed in *Theories of Surplus Value*, one can infer his conception of the value of emancipation (as freedom from exploitation) for human fulfilment, and thus better understand his recurrent suggestion that the first and foremost goal of society is to ensure equal freedom from exploitation to all its members. It is in this sense that communist society appears as 'the necessary solidarity of the free development for all' (*GI*, p. 439).

As 'domination of dead matter over man' (*EPM*, p. 267), private property is a barrier to real human progress. Therefore, the first and most emphasised point on the agenda of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, for example, is the abolition of private property. Instead, collective association applied to land can create genuine equality (*EPM*, p. 268). In the context of European civilisation progressively losing traditional common ownership (or at least utilisation) of land as a basis for community survival, thus creating proletarianisation and the absolute need of rural populations to join urban wage labour, Marx's ideas may appear as a qualified return to the traditional 'commons'.

Marx believes that the abolition of private property would naturally lead to the abolition of the division of labour, a desirable result because it removes the unfortunate effects of the reification of economic relations. In the dialectical elimination of the division of labour in communism, he welcomes 'the abolition of a state of affairs in which relations become independent of individuals, in which individuality is subservient to chance and the personal relations of individuals are subordinated to general class relations' (*GI*, p. 438).

The manner in which communism would overcome the alienation of labour and promote living labour as the only social and economic value is explained in more detail in *Grundrisse*:

‘...As living labour loses its *immediate*, individual character, whether subjective or entirely external, as individual activity becomes directly general or *social*, the objective elements of production lose this form of alienation. They are then produced as property, as the organic social body in which individuals are reproduced as individuals, but as social individuals.’ (*Gr*, p. 151)

When postulating the premises of communism as the abolition of private property (the political premise) and the considerable increase in productive powers (the material premise), Marx assumes that the material condition has been met and, therefore, the historical condition will also have to emerge, through political means. Importantly, the communist revolution is conceived as an objective, inevitable result of the dialectics of history (*GI*, pp. 49–54; *Cap*, p.54). Within this dialectical process Marx recognises the scope of collective human free wills but not the outcome of individual free will in a bourgeois sense.

The emergence of the communist social order (the association of producers) is described in detail in *Capital*. The key to the transformation of the old society is the progressive tendency of capital to accumulate and create monopoly, thus increasing poverty among the majority of the population, polarising the antagonist classes to an extreme, and revealing the true nature of productive labour as social labour. In reaction to these phenomena, the proletarian mass will grow to be ‘disciplined, unified, and organised by the very mechanism of the capitalist method of production’ (*Cap*, p 846).

Achieving the consciousness of a revolutionary class, the working class will be the ‘subject’ of history and, through its actions, objectively complete the process of transcending the contradictions of the old order through the creation of the communist order. The dialectical movement of this process is explained as follows:

‘The capitalist method of appropriation proceeding out of the capitalist method of production, and consequently capitalist private property, is the first negation of individual private property based upon individual labour. But, with the inexorability of a law of nature, capitalist production begets its own negation. It is a negation of a negation. This second negation does not re-establish private

property, but it does reestablish individual property upon the basis of the acquisitions of the capitalist era; i.e. on cooperation and the common ownership of the land and of the means of production (which labour itself produces).’ (*Cap*, p.846)

The avatars of the working class struggle are sketched in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, where the tone changes from theoretical analysis to a more passionate justification of political goals, and the idea of an *objective* revolution is somewhat subdued (*MCP*, pp. 53-54). But it transpires again, with renewed vigour, in the explanation of the propertyless essence of the working class as *the* reason (an objective reason) for the abolition of private property:

‘All the preceding classes that got the upper hand, sought to fortify their already acquired status by subjecting society at large to their conditions of appropriation. The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation, and thereby also every other previous mode of appropriation. They have nothing of their own to secure and to fortify; their mission is to destroy all previous securities for, and insurances of, individual property.’ (*MCP*, pp. 54–55)

Marx’s response to the critics of the abolition of private property as conducive to the destruction of individuality is that this measure is directed against exploitation, not against individuality: ‘Communism deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society; all that it does is to deprive him of the power to subjugate the labour of others by means of such appropriations’ (*MCP*, p. 59). In explaining how this transformation is supposed to occur, Marx revolutionises the meaning of both ‘appropriation’ and ‘individuality’. In practical terms, these semantic revolutions must occur at the level of the individual, and they become the responsibility of the individual. This idea will be further discussed in Section 3 below.

For now, I would like to emphasise Marx’s idea that the desirable society should not be divided into classes and experience class conflict<sup>12</sup>: ‘In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an

association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' (*MCP*, p. 63). Although class conflict is recognised as an invariant law of social organisation, Marx still dreams of absolute harmony.

Although Marx profoundly disagrees with Smith on which economic phenomena are natural and which are not (see Marx's discussion of the 'errors' of liberalist political economy in *EPM*, p. 271), Marx's implicit projection of a desirable economic system (to be derived from his normative statements) must necessarily rely on a principle of accordance with nature, with the proviso that, in Marx's case, the work of nature is explained through materialist and historical dialectics.

Similarly, the issue of emancipation and individual freedom will be further discussed in the next section. Here it suffices to mention that, in Marx's view, at the social level, the freedom of individuals can only be achieved through the subordination of the state to civil society: 'Freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it' (*CGP*, p. 17).

As an external means to human fulfilment, social order can do several things that would facilitate the multi-dimensional development of individuals. For example, it can recognise collective property and disregard private property, because 'the appropriation of a totality of instruments of production is... the development of a totality of capacities in the individuals themselves' (*GI*, p. 87). It can also change labour into self-activity (*GI*, p. 88; *Gr*, pp. 123–127), promote multi-skilled labour rather than division of labour (*GI*, p. 394; *PoPh*, p. 144), and subordinate capital (as accumulation of labour) to the human priorities of the labourer (*MCP*, p. 58). In sum, through communism, society can assist individuals in overcoming alienation from their material life, in the same way as atheism can help them overcome alienation from their own consciousness (*GI*, p. 342).

In conclusion, the good society is, for Marx, one that advances those objectives that are central to the complex, multi-dimensional self-realisation of individuals, not material objectives that have grown to be conceived technically, as separate from

this end (see also *MCP*, p. 58). The ideal social order is, more specifically, one which necessarily excludes alienation and exploitation through the abolition of private property, public ownership of means of production, and (consequently) the dissolution of division of labour and of socio-economic classes. Within this ideal order, the ideal economy is not one aimed at increasing capital at all (human) costs, but one which focuses on maintaining the rich human life of as many workers as possible.

This conclusion will be further illuminated by the discussion of Marx's humanism in Section 3 below, and the exploration of his concept of human wealth in Section 4.

### **3. The humanist roots of the social project**

There is ample evidence of this humanism in Marx's writings, especially in the earlier books, such as *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. Among other factors, the observation that a humanist vocabulary is more explicit and abundant in Marx's earlier works has led some prominent Marxist critics such as Louis Althusser to conclude: (1) that there is an 'epistemological break' between Marx's works preceding *The German Ideology* (in particular, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*) and his later works, which replace an 'ideological philosophy' (that is an ideological interpretation of history) with 'the foundation of a scientific discipline' (namely dialectical and historical materialism as a scientific theory of history)<sup>13</sup> and, derived from this point, (2) that once this epistemological break occurred, Marx also became what Althusser calls an 'anti-humanist', in the sense of clearly detaching himself from any theory 'that based history and politics on an essence of man'<sup>14</sup>. Instead, Althusser remarks, the mature Marx explained society 'scientifically', through structures and relationships, rather than humanistically, through the purposive actions of individuals<sup>15</sup>. This line of thought spurred an important debate in continental European philosophy, starting with Erich Fromm's response to Althusser's argument in 1965<sup>16</sup>. In line with Althusser and in opposition to the Frankfurt School, Sebastiano Timpanaro criticised later Marxists

for reading into Marx's purely scientific materialism (that is, an empirical explanation of the dialectical succession of historical modes of production) 'something far more ambitious: the achievement of the greatest possible degree of happiness'<sup>17</sup>.

While Marx's writings are somewhat ambiguous regarding this issue, I believe that the whole of Marx's thought, far from being divided by a contradiction between the Individual (interpreted humanistically) and the Social (interpreted scientifically), was constantly informed by a 'methodological individualism'<sup>18</sup> which establishes the category of the 'individual' as primary in the explanatory order, thus consolidating his humanism implicitly. In other words, it is clear that for Marx, at all times, society cannot be conceived in abstraction from the individuals who compose it and from their characteristics and needs. While I do not propose to approach and resolve this issue upfront, within the space of this thesis, I suggest that the following sections of this chapter will provide sufficient indirect evidence of the humanist roots of Marx's social project to demonstrate both Marx's inherently humanist philosophy and the connection between the 'young Marx' and the 'mature Marx' in this respect.

Through Marx's perspective of history, social progress and human progress are not only distinct but in a constantly troubled relationship. Within a dialectical movement, this troubled relationship is destined to achieve harmony in the perfect society. As previously suggested, the perfect society is that order which reconciles social and human progress and eliminates all possible tensions between the two.

In a narrow sense, the material means of production have certainly improved towards speedier, more powerful, more efficient performance, and division of labour has been, undoubtedly, a decisive factor in this progress. But Marx does not interpret these criteria as indicative of a better society. On the contrary, there is a multitude of aspects of social evolution which indicate regress.

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movement, this troubled relationship is destined to achieve harmony in the perfect society. As previously suggested, the perfect society is that order which reconciles social and human progress and eliminates all possible tensions between the two.

In a narrow sense, the material means of production have certainly improved towards speedier, more powerful, more efficient performance, and division of labour has been, undoubtedly, a decisive factor in this progress. But Marx does not interpret these criteria as indicative of a better society. On the contrary, there is a multitude of aspects of social evolution which indicate regress.

For example, Marx does not only state that capitalism has simplified class structures and antagonisms, and made exploitation more obvious. He also suggests that it has reified the worker into a commodity (*MCP*, p. 51), completed the alienation of the workers from their material creation (*EPM*, p. 271; *Gr*, pp. 103–105), universalised its specific mode of production and relations of production, thus generalising exploitation (*GI*, p. 75; *Gr*, pp. 119–122; *MCP*, pp. 47–48), and increased poverty through its insatiable demand for the continuous growth of capital (*Cap*, pp. 235–244). It is this expanded and profound state of social dysfunction that reveals the bourgeoisie as inadequate to rule in the demanding conditions of its own universalism, and leaves the exploited no space of refuge from the conquests undertaken by industry (*EPM*, pp. 245–246).

With respect to the reification and commodification of human activity, Marx's critique of political economy (in particular his summary of David Ricardo's work) clearly establishes the humanist co-ordinates by which progress should be evaluated: 'Nations are merely production-shops; man is a machine for consuming and producing; human life is a kind of capital; economic laws blindly rule the world. For Ricardo men are nothing, the product everything' (*EPM*, p. 256). In Marx's opinion, this tension between human beings and material objects, which is apparent in theories of capitalism, is the reflection of a real contradiction engendered by the capitalist system itself. Under the economic conditions specific to the capitalist mode of production, the realisation of labour is equivalent to loss of realisation in the human life of the labourers, appropriation is alienation (*EPM*, p.

272), production of goods is performed at the expense of consumption of the life of the worker (*Cap*, pp. 45–46, p. 49).

Hence, the overthrowing of the existing social order and the creation of a new, more humane order are inevitable. It seems as if the whole course of history has been preparing for this (final, in Marx's view) social revolution from the most comprehensive exploitation to total liberation. This clearly implies that no social progress is real without the real progress of human beings. Somehow, the criteria of social progress must converge or translate into criteria for human fulfilment.

Marx's humanism as subordination of social projects to human fulfilment is evident not only in his suggestion of human individuality and self-realisation as a social priority but also in his methodological individualism<sup>19</sup>, namely the premise that society is never an entity distinct from the human beings who create it, and that individuals come first in the explanatory order: 'Above all we must avoid postulating "society"... as an abstraction *vis-à-vis* the individual. The individual *is the social being*', the society in its existence (*EPM*, p. 299).

Accordingly, Marx invests the future communist society with the key mission of achieving 'the abolition of a state of affairs in which relations become independent of individuals, in which individuality is subservient to chance and the personal relations of individuals are subordinated to general class relations' (*GI*, p. 438). Related to this humanist individualism mentioned above is Marx's belief that the state as a social institution is, in reality, not an autonomous, impartial arbitrator, but reducible to the interests of the most powerful, dominant class(es) in the respective social order. Consequently, the state is an instrument serving the interests of the dominant class, with no autonomy of its own (J. Elster, *MSM*, p. 408).<sup>20</sup>

In Marx's view, while human beings are fundamentally active and creative, capitalism imposes on human development unacceptable but necessary constraints: unacceptable, in the sense that people must revolt against such constraints which act against their true nature; and necessary, in the sense that capitalism is an important

stage in the development of human beings as individuals, and in the development of their consciousness as individuals.<sup>21</sup>

This priority given to human fulfilment is vividly illustrated in Marx's critique of Adam Smith's political economy. While commending Smith for his acknowledgement of the central economic and social importance of labour and the wage earning class, Marx depicts a much gloomier fate for the worker in capitalism. He provides a detailed demonstration of how, irrespective of the economic state of the capitalist society, the working class is condemned to misery as the sum of overwork, loss of liberty and poor subsistence: 'in a declining state of society – increasing misery of the worker; in an advancing state – misery with complications; and in a fully developed state of society – static misery' (*EPM*, p. 239).

While relying on a different interpretation of the economic facts, Marx employs Smith's humanist principle to conclude that the material wealth-seeking imperative of the capitalist economic and social order stands in clear opposition to real social progress:

'Since... according to Smith, a society is not happy, of which the greater part suffers – yet even the wealthiest state of society leads to this suffering of the majority – and since the economic system (and in general a society based on private interest) leads to this wealthiest condition, it follows that the goal of the economic system is the *unhappiness* of society.' (*EPM*, p. 239)

As he agrees with Smith's observation that the wage earner's interest is necessarily identical with that of society as a whole, Marx turns this idea on its head:

'Whilst the interest of the worker, according to the political economists, never stands opposed to the interest of society, society always and necessarily stands opposed to the interest of the worker.' (*EPM*, p. 240).

Thus he emphasises that there are two directions of interest realisation (from class to society and from society back to class) and that in the capitalist order society itself, through its oppressive institutions, is not fulfilling its side of the deal towards the most significant part of its members. Consequently, this kind of society must change.

If Marx had taken a piecemeal approach to the issue of exploitation, he could have easily recommended a solution at the level of the redistribution of surplus value (eg the small artisan-owner revered by Smith, means-of-production hire schemes, employee share ownership schemes, etc). But he is not at all interested in saving any of the existing institutions and practices. These institutions and practices have an original defect, which will always be likely to enslave the individual to goals alien from his or her own development: they reduce the human being to an instrument in the process of production, and subordinate the individual's humanity to the needs of the economic system.

No amount of later redistribution can compensate for this original perversion of the human destiny. If inadequate for the development of the individual as a complex human being (and not just as a worker), an institution cannot be mended. It must be replaced with an institution or practice that does, naturally, deliver this outcome of human fulfilment. In this context, it can rightly be said that Marx's humanism is a *radical humanism*.

In reformulating Smith's humanist points, Marx draws a stern conclusion:

'In the economic system, under the rule of private property, the interest which an individual has in society is in precisely inverse proportion to the interest society has in him...' (*EPM*, p. 263)

He strongly believes that the destructive effects of division of labour, rightfully emphasised by Smith, have a much deeper significance than Smith would have admitted.

I have shown in Chapter Three that Smith accepts division of labour as a necessary evil, more exactly as a complex phenomenon in which the good effects (e.g. increase in productivity and material wealth) override the bad effects (e.g. lack of opportunity for a many-sided human development), and that this acceptable trade-off, compensated for by responsible public education policies from the part of the government, is due to a specific understanding of the hierarchy of human needs:

division of labour is worth having because it responds to needs considered more basic than education.

For Marx, such a trade-off would be unacceptable, and no amount of state effort in public education could compensate for the loss of opportunities for human fulfilment through free creative activity. Set in direct opposition to free creative activity, division of labour fails to satisfy more important needs than those related to mere physical subsistence. This may appear in contradiction with Marx's materialism but the difference between subsistence and fulfilment is not one between material base and its derivatives: it is the difference between living a sub-human life and living a life that is truly (specifically, essentially) human.

However, Marx's decisive argument against a trade-off like the one implied by Smith is not a different understanding of the human needs hierarchy but the idea that division of labour itself does not, in fact, directly satisfy human needs at all. It only satisfies the need of capital growth, i.e. accumulation of labour at first, then accumulation of more capital (*EPM*, p. 263).

One interesting aspect of Marx's earlier writings (perhaps obscured by his later class militancy) is his *universalist humanism*, apparent in his treatment of both exploiter and exploited as human beings subject (to different degrees) to the dehumanising forces of the productive system:

‘... The emancipation of society from private property, etc., from servitude, is expressed in the *political* form of the *emancipation of the workers*; not that *their* emancipation alone is at stake, but because the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation – and it contains this, because the whole of human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production, and all relations of servitude are but modifications and consequences of this relation.’ (*EPM*, p. 280)

The starting point to understanding Marx's universalist (trans-class) humanism is his conception of human nature, more exactly of the human essence, on which I shall elaborate further in Section 4.1 of this chapter<sup>22</sup>.

As a human being, the capitalist is also enslaved to the reductionist imperatives of private property, although not to the same extent as the worker. While capitalists may enjoy the opportunity to separate their life as human beings from their role in the economic system, the workers cannot do that because their own time, their own existence is consumed by their productive role<sup>23</sup>. But in both cases, the unifying assumption is that the economic system fails to treat members of both classes as complex human beings. In exercising the function of owner of means of production, the capitalist is never considered with respect to personal qualities or skills but strictly as owner (*EPM*, p. 247).

Perhaps the most eloquent description of the dehumanising effects of a social order upon all its classes, including the ruling class, is provided by Marx in *The German Ideology*:

‘...Society has hitherto always developed within the framework of a contradiction – in antiquity the contradiction between free men and slaves, in the Middle Ages that between nobility and serfs, in modern times that between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This explains, on the one hand, the abnormal, “inhuman” way in which the oppressed class satisfies its needs, and, on the other hand, the narrow limits within which intercourse, and with it the whole ruling class, develops. Hence this restricted character of development consists not only in the exclusion of one class from development, but also in the narrow-mindedness of the excluding class, and the “inhuman”<sup>24</sup> is to be found also within the ruling class.’ (*GI*, p. 432)

In this context, how can economic and social progress be aligned with human progress? As it stands, the actual goal of political economy is to increase the sum total of annual savings. This goal, Marx shows, is not necessarily related to human fulfilment. If anything, it tends to go against it (*EPM*, p. 284). Hence, the aim of production (as material wealth increase) should be, instead, to maintain as many workers as possible and create for them as many opportunities as possible for human fulfilment.

Marx agrees with Engels in considering Smith ‘the Luther of Political Economy’. Accordingly, Smith’s doctrine is ‘enlightened’ in its premise that wealth resides in human activity (*EPM*, p. 290). But in the prominence it gives to private property, English liberalist political economy remains problematic (*EPM*, pp. 291–292).

The *Manuscripts* provide perhaps the most accomplished description of communism as a system of social relations which can produce the desired results for complex human development:

‘*Communism* as the *positive* transcendence of *private property* as *human self-estrangement*, and therefore the real *appropriation* of the *human* essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a *social* (i.e., human) being – a return accomplished consciously and embracing the entire wealth of previous development. This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man – the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species.’ (*EPM*, p. 296)

In this context, Marx explains humanism (the priority of human fulfilment) as a perspective in harmony with naturalism (the priority of the ‘interests’ of nature).

The ultimate significance of human life and realisation is a recurrent underlying theme in Marx’s critique of the anti-humanism that dominates the capitalist economic system. He exposes the political economy of frugality as an ethics against human life itself:

‘Frugality as the principle of political economy is *most brilliantly* shown in its *theory of population*. There are too *many* people. Even the existence of men is a pure luxury; and if the worker is “ethical”, he will be *sparing* in procreation... The production of people appears as public destitution.’ (*EPM*, p. 311)

And further:

‘When political economy claims that demand and supply always balance each other, it immediately forgets that according to its own claim (theory of

population) the supply of *people* always exceeds the demand, and that, therefore, in the essential result of the whole production process – the existence of man – the disparity between demand and supply gets its most striking expression.’ (*EPM*, p. 314)

And further:

‘It is because wages, as a result of competition, oscillate now above, now below, the price of food necessary for the sustenance of the worker, that he can participate to a certain extent in the development of collective wealth, and can also perish from want. This is the whole theory of the economists who have no illusions on the subject.’ (*PoPh*, p. 102)

But Marx’s main attacks against the capitalist system are focused on the crippling reductionism it imposes on human being and individuality: ‘In the eyes of capital, all human beings are of one flesh’ (*Cap*, p. 256). In conclusion, nearly everything that is wrong with capitalist social structures is expressed from a *humanist* point of view: alienation, frustration of human development, insufficient justice, insufficient democracy, economic inefficiency (wastefulness), poverty (material and/or otherwise).

Marx also has an explicit theory of humanism, which is outlined in terms of a ‘positive humanism’ to be achieved (intellectually) through atheism and (materially) through communism:

‘...Atheism, being the supersession<sup>25</sup> of God, is the advent of theoretical humanism, and communism, as the supersession of private property, is the vindication of real human life as man’s possession and thus the advent of practical humanism...Only through the supersession of this mediation... does positively self-deriving humanism, *positive* humanism, come into being.’ (*EPM*, pp. 341–342)

Of central importance to the realisation of positive humanism is the fact that Marx contemplates the improvement of political institutions as a factor involving the moral progress of individuals. This idea is crucial in understanding Marx’s *responsible humanism*, in which the principle that no institution should be regarded



as having an existence independent of or preceding the individual human being is combined with the exigence that individuals must internalise certain ethical principles in their social behaviour.

Summarising the features of Marx's humanism, one can remark (despite a radically different social project) certain similarities with the humanism found in Condorcet and Smith: (a) social systems are general means to human fulfilment (an idea enforced by Marx's methodological individualism); (b) the emphasis on the facilitating and empowering role of social systems (labour as self-creative activity is clearly to be practised by people); (c) the requirement for accordance with nature in pursuing one's *true* self-fulfilment; and (d) the responsibility of all individuals to realise their potential as social beings. To this nexus of similarities one must add at least three ingredients specific to Marx's perspective: (1) the radicalism of recommending the complete replacement of anti-humanist institutions; (2) the universal perspective on the dehumanising effects of exploitation on all economic agents (including the exploiters); and (3) the original idea of positive humanism as vindication of real human life against property (as reified *having*).

#### **4. Marx's implicit conception of human progress**

Having established the centrality of the humanist perspective in Marx's conception of the desirable relationship between social and human progress, it now becomes important to clarify Marx's main premises about human nature, human needs, desirable human potential and human fulfilment, with a view to achieving as complete an image as possible of his underlying ideal of humanness.

##### **4.1 Human nature: the primacy of *doing* over *having***

Like Condorcet and Smith, Marx has something to say about what distinguishes human beings from animals, as a method of defining (or at least indicating) humanness:

‘[Men] themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their material life.’ (*GI*, p. 31)

This explanation relies on the premise that material production has causal priority, both in human life and in the economic system of society.

In this context, industry (as the organised capacity to transform natural resources into products of utility to human beings) is interpreted by Marx as an essential human activity, a necessary aspect of humanness:

‘*Industry* is the *actual*, historical relationship of nature, and therefore of natural science, to man. If, therefore, industry is conceived as the *exoteric* revelation of man’s *essential powers*, we also gain an understanding of the *human* essence of nature or the *natural* essence of man.’ (*EPM*, p. 303)

In his ontological doctrine of the human essence, Marx is profoundly influenced by Hegel’s *Phenomenology* – bar the metaphysical idealism, which he carefully filters away from his conception of human *being* in a lengthy analysis in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. The key elements retained by Marx in his realist-materialist construction of human nature are: (1) the human being is a species-being (a being that cannot exist in isolation but within and for its species); (2) human beings have a ‘real’ and ‘active’ orientation towards themselves (including human consciousness as self-consciousness); and (3) as ‘natural beings’, human beings have ‘vital powers’, instincts and needs, are active and sensuous (therefore suffering), and direct their needs towards objects external to themselves (*EPM*, pp. 332–336). Absolutely self-sufficient human beings cannot *exist in nature* because there would be no interaction, just as ‘*nature... for itself* – nature fixed in isolation from man – is *nothing* for man’ (*EPM*, p. 345). This condition of self-realisation outside the self is the main source of both self-confirmation and self-alienation, through the objectification of human consciousness (*EPM*, p. 338).

From here Marx’s conception of human nature develops in several, more specific directions: (a) the formation of society and social relations (human beings as

essentially social individuals); (b) labour as self-realising activity through creation for others; (c) the complexity of human needs and desirable potential; and (d) appropriation as a form of self-realisation, in a conception of human fulfilment which gives priority to creative activity and experience.

With respect to social *being*, Marx emphasises the family as the first social entity created by human beings for the purpose of both self and species realisation. This primary condition of human life creation is then amplified in larger social structures – a historical condition which must always be explained in relation to its material, economic basis. As Marx describes it, ‘the production of life, both of one’s own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a twofold relation: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relation – social in the sense that it denotes the co-operation of several individuals... It follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation, or social stage, and this mode of co-operation is itself a “productive force”. Further, that the aggregate of productive forces accessible to men determines the condition of society, hence, the “history of humanity” must always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange’ (*GI*, p. 43).

Furthermore, while society does not have any meaning as an abstract concept, separated from the beings that compose it, it is the necessary link between human beings and nature. This is how Marx describes this connection:

‘Activity and enjoyment, both in their content and in their *mode of existence*, are *social*: *social* activity and *social* enjoyment. The *human* aspect of nature exists only for *social* man... Only then does nature exist as the *foundation* of his own *human* existence... Thus *society* is the complete unity of man with nature... the accomplished naturalism of man and the accomplished humanism of nature.’ (*EPM*, p. 298)

In relation to labour as an aspect of human activity, again, Marx reads Hegel through materialist lenses: ‘Hegel conceives labour as man’s act of *self-genesis*’ through objectification and alienation, which constitute ‘the *absolute...expression of*

*human life*' (EPM, p. 342). But while Hegel regards supersession (recovery of self from alienation) as an act of the human mind (spirit), Marx believes that this recovery can be achieved materially, in society, in the real life of the individual, not just in their consciousness.

As mentioned in Section 2, for Marx labour and property stand on very different levels<sup>26</sup> of priority. This is apparent both in his critique of political economy and in his conception of human nature. In fact, it is his conception of human nature that provides the foundation for his critique of political economy. While labour is essential to humanness, property is only external to it<sup>27</sup>, wherefrom the potential for the reification of human life, for converting it into a *thing*: having is no longer an activity or a process (expressed by a verb) but the outcome or state of possession (expressed by a noun). It is this outcome of possession that society recognises in the individual as owner of private property, and not the human activity of appropriation. The very fact that capitalist society is polarised into two classes, 'the *property owners* and the *propertyless workers*' (EPM, p. 271), of which those without property form the majority of the population, confirms the non-essentiality of property to humanness and human fulfilment.

Marx's positive theory of labour as intrinsic to human nature is exposed in *Capital*: 'Primarily, labour is a process going on between man and nature, a process in which man, through his own activity, initiates, regulates, and controls the material reactions between himself and nature' (Cap, p. 169). But as activity labour is a complex process, directed towards – and involving – objects outside the agent's self: '...The elementary factors of the labour process are: first, the purposive activity, or the labour itself; secondly, its subject matter; and thirdly, its instruments' (Cap, p. 170). This feature makes possible the reification of labour through the separation of its outcomes, as material objects, from the human life put into it.

In conclusion, it is a fact of human nature that labour is essential to humanness, while reified property is a problematic contingency. However, as will be illustrated in Subsections 4.2 and 4.3 below, the distinction Marx invites us to make here is not

so much between labour and property as such, as it is primarily between – on the one hand – doing and having (labour and appropriation) as forms of creation and experience intrinsic to human life, and – on the other hand – commodified labour and property as illicit transformations of these features of human life into inanimate things.

It is also a fact of human nature that human beings are social beings, and that both the satisfaction of their needs and their broader fulfilment depend considerably on their success in harmonising the individual and collective levels of their existence. In addition, while actively oriented towards their own selves, human beings have natural needs directed towards objects outside themselves.

#### **4.2 Needs and desirable potential: the wealth of human experiencing**

Like Condorcet and Smith, Marx accepts that human needs are diverse and of different significance to human fulfilment. This is apparent in the distinctions drawn by Marx between ‘natural’ (or ‘necessary’ needs) and ‘luxury’ needs (*PoPh*, p. 68), as well as between ‘personal’ needs and ‘social’ needs (*Cap*, p. 253).

The crucial premise in Marx’s theory of human needs is, I believe, that needs are essential objects – an idea derived from Hegel’s theory of human nature (*EPM*, p. 336). With all other categories of objects, human beings must carefully avoid identification, for the sake of preserving their own selves. However, needs are different: they are part of human essence, but also indicators of objects outside the human being. It is this reality that makes alienation possible in the first place, for example in the form of estranged labour. But how can human beings live with this intrinsic source of contradictions, and make peace with it in a way that reflects their complex humanness and frees them towards genuine development?

One of the main distinctions drawn by Marx between capitalism and the previous social orders in human history is that the ‘contradiction between the conditions and needs of people’, engendered in different forms by each of these orders, is expanded to an unprecedented level, and has become ‘universal’ (*GI*, p. 430).

The underlying assumption behind this critique is that needs are the natural condition for the self-realisation of human beings. Because people have needs that can only be satisfied through objects outside themselves, human beings can (and have to) interact with nature in ways characteristic of their species. Therefore, both needs and potential for fulfilment are aspects of the same reality, namely of the social nature of humanness. In this context, we can talk about what is *human* in a productive process as its positive capacity to satisfy the true needs essential to the species, and about what is *inhuman* as the negation of this capacity (*GI*, p. 432).

Hence, the power required by individuals to realise their needs and their humanness is not material power but personal power. Accordingly, the social order should facilitate conducting competition among individuals by personal means rather than material means. For Marx, this is a ‘moral postulate’ which cannot be overridden by any other principle (*GI*, pp. 375–376). What is this personal power? The key, for Marx, is in complex experiencing, through all human senses and faculties, as the most accomplished and expanded form of life. This is where the true richness of human beings lies, the real *human wealth*, and not in the vulgar idea of richness expressed in material possessions. Real wealth is life and living, material wealth is nothing but the hoarding of dead things.

This is how Marx describes rich experiencing, as appropriation of the world through the senses:

‘Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man’s essential being is the richness of subjective *human* sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form – in short, *senses* capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of *man*) either cultivated or brought into being. For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses, the practical

senses (will, love, etc.), in a word, *human* sense, the human nature of the senses, comes to be by virtue of *its* object, by virtue of *humanised* nature. The *forming* of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present. The *sense* caught up in crude practical need has only a *restricted* sense. For the starving man, it is not the human form of food that exists, but only its abstract existence as food. It could just as well be there in its crudest form, and it would be impossible to say wherein this feeding activity differs from that of *animals*. The care-burdened, poverty-stricken man has no *sense* for the finest play; the dealer in minerals sees only the commercial value but not the beauty and the specific character of the mineral: he has no mineralogical sense. Thus, the reification of the human essence, both in its theoretical and practical aspects, is required to make man's *sense human*, as well as to create the *human sense* corresponding to the entire wealth of human and natural substance.' (*EPM*, pp. 301–302)

Thus, for Marx, being rich in needs is a measure of wealth, an 'enrichment of human nature' (*EPM*, p. 306), a positive power rather than an absence or deficit (lack) of something.

According to these standards, the needs of the worker as a human being are practically ignored in the capitalist economic system, as the worker is reduced to a 'working animal' (*EPM*, p. 242) with physical needs whose satisfaction is understood only in this abstract, desensitised manner illustrated above.

However, real human needs are those essential to human *being*. We know that labour, for example, can fulfil a human being in this essential way only when it is performed and enjoyed for its own sake, free from imperatives or 'needs external to it'. In this context, the labour required by the capitalist economic system is a kind of forced labour in which the labourer denies himself and his own life (*EPM*, p. 274). In capitalism, labour is opposed to free activity, and the needs related to free activity are only recognised as long as they ensure the subsistence of the worker and the perpetuation of the working class (*EPM*, p. 275). In the desirable society, labour and free activity should aim to coincide.

Although capitalism appears to operate unacceptable reductions on human needs, Marx optimistically reads into the whole evolution of modes of production in human history a natural tendency of human consciousness to approach the true, absolute understanding of real human needs (*EPM*, pp. 303–304).

He also has a complex view on the issue of the appearance or creation of new needs. In itself, the creation of new needs is not something unnatural; on the contrary, it is a specifically human ability. Through association (in production or otherwise), human beings create a new need, the need for society (*EPM*, p. 313), where society is (as mentioned before) both the human expression of nature and an expression of human nature. Moreover, the creation of new needs signifies the creation of history: ‘...The satisfaction of the first need, the action of satisfying and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired, leads to new needs; and this creation of new needs is the first historical act’ (*GI*, p.42). While the given, natural needs may be different from the newly acquired needs, this does not mean that history stands opposed to nature. On the contrary, it means that history accomplishes human nature, in actualising its specific potential.

Following the principle that the desirable society must be one in which individuals are, equally and universally, both rich in needs and rich in the satisfaction of their needs<sup>28</sup>, according to Marx capitalism scores a significant progress from the previous orders because it has (almost) achieved the first part of this principle. Thus, he welcomes the cosmopolitan development of needs achieved through the global expansion of capitalism: ‘In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes’<sup>29</sup> (*MCP*, p. 49). He also argues that, because of this increased awareness of universal possibilities, the shortcomings of an alienating society appear as much more obvious and painful to the individual.

For Marx, the tendency of capitalism to increase needs while failing to satisfy them is (from an evolutionist point of view) healthy, because this factor inevitably creates contradiction, and contradiction is the sole, genuine source of all progress. This umbilical relationship between antagonism and progress is emphasised, in the



*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, as the natural law of human civilisation so far. Accordingly, all social progress is possible, even inevitable – but not in a linear sequence. It can only occur dialectically, through traumatic and radical tendencies of contradictory forces to reach resolution by the creation of a new socio-economic order. In the attainment of a perfect such order, which harmoniously integrates social and human progress, as well as the individual and the collective, lies the (collective) answer to human fulfilment.

One can conclude at this point that, in Marx's view, needs are inescapable human attributes which govern the interaction between the human self and the world. Needs are diverse and organised in a universal order of priority, and the real needs are those essential to the species. These real needs essential to the species define what is human in processes of material production, by evaluating the positive capacity of these processes to satisfy such needs. Satisfaction of needs and rich experiencing lead to the creation of new needs. Being rich in needs is a form of (human) wealth and not a lack, as it expands the potential for self-creation.

#### **4.3 The true meaning of human fulfilment: self-creative activity**

Like Condorcet and Smith, Marx regards human fulfilment as, ultimately, a universal category, definable objectively, in the absolute, and which requires from the individual a considerable degree of enlightenment.

In Marx's opinion, beyond the objective necessity of labour, the self-fulfilling individual must understand, for the sake of their own happiness, that the true value of labour for the life of the individual who performs it resides primarily in the satisfaction and accomplishment attained through the activity itself, and only secondarily in the satisfaction indirectly produced by the products, or by the exchange value of the products employed in satisfying other needs. The key to this understanding is again inspired by a Hegelian idea, namely that of the human being's awareness of itself as a species-being. Unlike animals, humans produce *universally*, that is well beyond the local immediate needs apparent to themselves and their young. They are also capable of producing not only to the standards of

their own species but to the standards of any species. Accordingly, it is only when humans free themselves from the specific necessity of their immediate needs that they develop their true nature (*EPM*, pp. 276–277).<sup>30</sup>

In this context, the boundaries so sharply drawn by the liberalist political economy between production and consumption are beginning to blur. All production is, in a sense, consumption: a finished product is created by consuming raw materials (*Gr*, p. 23). On the other hand, consumption itself is also production, because it fulfils the human being in a certain way, thus creating human life, participating in the human existence. For example, in eating, an individual ‘produces his own body’. While production and consumption appear as two aspects of an intermingling cycle, there is an important difference in direction and emphasis between the two: ‘in the first, the producer transforms himself into things; in the second, things are transformed into human beings’ (*Gr*, p. 24). The mediator between the two aspects is *need*, because need determines production, then consumption recreates need (*Gr*, p. 25).

Marx infers from here that production and consumption necessarily determine one another, therefore they should be regarded as equally significant in economic life. However, he observes, society disrupts the natural cycle by interposing *distribution* as a separate category between production and consumption. Marx considers this interference arbitrary and postulates that human beings are capable (and should aspire) to create a social order which eliminates this problem.

As previously mentioned, the main criticism levelled by Marx at the capitalist economic system is that it commodifies labour, and this causes its estrangement from the labourer. Thus, in the process of production, the labourer is no longer a human being performing a creative activity as part of their human essence, but an instrument producing means to life (their own life, but also other lives). Alienation is undesirable because it prevents the individual from self-realisation. Estranged labour reverses the end-means relationship between the human being and the means of their existence. The human being is unjustifiably subordinated to those material means: ‘life itself appears only as a *means to life*’ (*EPM*, p. 276). In conclusion,

estranged labour has profound dehumanising and desocialising effects: ‘one man is estranged from the other, as each of them is from man’s essential nature’ (*EPM*, p. 277).

The crippled existence of the alienated individual is described at length by Marx in *Grundrisse*, where he elaborates on the ideas of the perverting powers of money, private exchange as opposed to the free exchange of associated individuals, the subordination of individuals to social production (*Gr*, pp. 65–69), the alienation of labour as a cause of the labourer’s poverty (*Gr*, pp. 78–84), and capital as the alienated state of the value of living labour (*Gr*, pp. 96–102). Against this distortion of the true human destiny, humanity must exercise all its revolutionary powers. Marx points out that, just as alienation occurs in human consciousness through religion (through the projection of humanity outside the human self, into an objective, omnipotent Being), it also occurs (more importantly) in real life, in society. The instrument of this alienation is private property, with all the social institutions created to protect it (*EPM*, p. 297).

In this context, individuals should understand, for their own benefit, that true wealth (‘human wealth’, as Marx calls it) is the total value intrinsic in complex human fulfilment, not the material wealth divorced from its creator (*EPM*, p. 296).

How can one achieve human wealth in its totality? According to Marx, this can be done through an appropriation of the self in all its complexity:

‘...The positive transcendence of private property – i.e., the *perceptible* appropriation for and by man of the human essence and of human life, of objective life, of human *achievements* – should not be conceived merely in the sense of *immediate*, one-sided enjoyment, merely in the sense of *possessing*, of *having*. Man appropriates his comprehensive essence in a comprehensive manner, that is to say, as a whole man. Each of his *human* relations to the world – seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, observing, experiencing, wanting, acting, loving – in short all the organs of his individual being, like those organs which are directly social in their form, are... in their *orientation to*

*the object, the appropriation of the object, the appropriation of human reality.'*  
(*EPM*, pp. 299–300)

In Marx's view, political economy (as a theory of utility) necessarily distorts the essential, complex, *human* meaning of human activity by evaluating it not as spontaneous, intrinsically creative activity, but according to the category or relation of *utility*, which disguises humanness into an externality in relation to itself (*GI*, p. 409). As utility in the material sense stands in opposition to real human wealth, wealth for the state is equivalent to poverty for the individual (*GI*, p. 361). This antagonism is expressed in the increasingly tense and disruptive duality, experienced by people in modern society, between public life (which Marx is here conceiving in predominantly economic terms) and private life (*GI*, p. 363).

Marx does not share the opinion of some liberalist political economists that individual poverty is a natural law and cannot be eliminated (*CGP*, p. 271). Instead, he proposes a way out of the destructive duality mentioned above: because (as human history proves) capital is not essential to the preservation of human individuality, the historically contingent bourgeois property can (and must) be discarded for the sake of true emancipation and fulfilment of the complex, whole human being. However, as suggested in Section 2 above, this does not mean that appropriation is denied; it only means that exploitation is no longer possible (*MCP*, p. 59). Consequently, appropriation is no longer reduced to utility but preserves its naturally rich, multi-dimensional significance, because 'the abolition of private property is... the complete *emancipation* of all human senses and qualities' (*EPM*, p. 300).

Marx shows that capitalism is also missing an important point about facilitating human fulfilment, in that it promotes competition among individuals according to material rather than personal criteria. Human beings are thus reduced to coordinates of material rather than personal power. In this context, Marx shows that private property is not only an expression of non-genuine needs, but also a vehicle for the inflation of false needs and an obstacle to the affirmation of real needs:

‘Under private property... every person speculates on creating a *new* need in another, so as to drive him to fresh sacrifice, to place him in a new dependence and to seduce him in a new mode of *enjoyment*... Each tries to establish over the other an *alien* power...’ (EPM, p. 306)

Consequently, the need for money, for example, is not a natural need because money is an abstract carrier of exchange value, created by economic practices. Hence, the need for money is itself imaginary, a kind of ghost which produces a non-real mode of existence: the ‘*quantitative* being’ (EPM, p. 307).

If for Smith frugality was a virtue indispensable to the acquisition of wealth, for Marx it is a denial of real, human wealth:

‘The less you eat, drink and buy books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorise, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you *save* – the *greater* becomes... your *capital*. The less you *are*...the more you *have*.’ (EPM, p. 309)

This is because the political economy of private property is at odds with true human fulfilment: instead of responding to genuine needs, it produces luxuries, and it produces them extensively (EPM, p. 310); while in turn it regards as luxuries a human being’s most fundamental needs, such as the need for fresh air, light, cleanliness, companionship (EPM, pp. 307–308). According to a principle of utility external to the essence of humanness, ‘production of too many useful things produces too large a *useless* population’ (EPM, p. 310). Moreover, *human* pleasure treated *economically* appears on the balance sheet as an expense, when it should really (*humanly*) be considered income (EPM, p. 316).

In addition, money has the perverse power to transform human essential powers into their contrary (EPM, pp. 324–326). Marx criticises money as ‘the *procurer* between man’s need and the object, between his life and his means of life’ (EPM, p. 323). In his view, money has the perverse capacity to turn everything into its contrary:

‘Money is the alienated *ability of mankind*. / That which I am unable to do as a *man*, and of which therefore all my individual essential powers are incapable, I

am able to do by means of *money*...It transforms fidelity into infidelity, love into hate, hate into love, virtue into vice, vice into virtue, servant into master, master into servant, idiocy into intelligence, and intelligence into idiocy...It...serves to exchange every quality for every other, even contradictory...It is the fraternisation of impossibilities.’ (*EPM*, pp. 325–326)

Furthermore, capitalist society unnaturally inverts the relationship of ‘land ownership’, by appending the owner, as land owner, to the land rather than the land to the owner as a human being. But land ownership does not have to take this form which distorts the essential human qualities: one can maintain a relationship with land as human beings and not just owners. This can be done through communal or collective property, which is opposed to individual property in that it fosters equality in human development (*EPM*, p. 268) and turns what to bourgeois society appears as a scarce good into a source of unlimited potential for human fulfilment.

What the political economy of private property is lacking here, in Marx’s opinion, is the realisation that *human*, unalienated labour as free creative activity redefines utility altogether. Thus, utility is no longer identified as a response to some local demand from another individual, but as *general* utility, established in relation to a universal, absolute understanding of real human needs (*GI*, p. 392).

In the language of historical dialectics, when a society whose individuals are rich in needs fails to create opportunities for the satisfaction of these needs, it is time for the respective socio-economic order to change. For this change, Marx proposes that the traditional social distribution principle of ‘to each according to their abilities’ should be replaced with ‘from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs’ (*CGP*, p. 10), with needs defined as real human needs, not as material needs contemplated through the reductionist lenses of economic value. Importantly, Marx suggests that, although human needs are often assessed in economic theories through the concept of economic value, they are in fact fundamental categories which precede the formation of any economic value<sup>31</sup>.

Finally, in Marx’s view, individuals can fully develop their true potential only as social individuals. Being social means, in Marx’s perspective, relinquishing one’s self-centred subjectivity and self-sufficiency, relating to others and becoming

capable of objectively contemplating human essence universally, not only in local relations to oneself. Only the human being whose fulfilment depends on the interaction with others can develop their humanness in all its real capacities (*EPM*, pp. 301–302). The senses of the social man are different from those of the non-social man, and significantly richer, in fact containing the true wealth of humanness. As Marx regards the person and the social (collective) as interactive and inter-conditional, he concludes that, for communities and systems to change, individuals must change as well, to make possible the total reform integrating both levels.

Summarising all concluding ideas in this chapter, the following perspective on human nature, needs and fulfilment obtains: human beings have the natural propensity to produce in order to satisfy their own needs and, universally, those of the human species. They also have the capacity to develop and ‘create’ themselves. These propensities are central to human life and destiny. Despite what classical political economy tends to assume, human needs are more fully realised through personal power, not through material power (although the latter is necessary to support the former). Accordingly, true wealth is not material wealth (the totality of products as objects, and appropriation as property) but human wealth (the totality of opportunities for self-satisfying creative activity, and appropriation of the world through the development and refinement of all human faculties). The achievement of this development and refinement represents true human fulfilment, which appears as inversely proportional with the advancement of economic value, and involves the supersession of the alienation and reification phenomena caused by the primary pursuit of material wealth. Marx also suggests that true human fulfilment integrates harmoniously some problematic dualities, e.g. between private life and public life, or, more specifically, between self-developing activity and socially productive labour.

## **5. The ideal of humanness: the social individual as the recovery of the alienated self**

Marx does not explicitly describe an ideal of humanness but his criticism of the capitalist socio-economic order is clearly developed with such an ideal in the background. As previously illustrated, Marx's most severe charges against the capitalist political economy are: (1) the massive reification of human life and being, in a context of unresolved tensions between the world of humanness and the world of objects; and (2) the self-alienation suffered by individuals, through the estrangement of their labour.

Resuming the opposition between material wealth and human wealth in Section 4.3, everything that is desirable and a priority of the economic system increases in inverse proportion to what is desirable and a priority for human fulfilment, and social utility is a denial of human utility. Production, wealth, value, perfection, development, civilisation, power, ingenuity acquire for the socio-economic system the opposite meanings they have for humanness. Through alienation, these attributes are illicitly transferred from human beings to material objects (*EPM*, p. 273)<sup>32</sup>. Consequently, just as thrift (the virtue indispensable to material wealth creation) is, in human living, a form of poverty (*EPM*, p. 309), the science of wealth and saving stands in direct opposition to the science of living a human life (*EPM*, p.306). Marx suggests that what we need here is not economics but the 'science of man' (*EPM*, p. 304), as a method for establishing the general principles of the universal human being. Interestingly, to attain the ideal of humanness embodied by 'universal man', human beings must develop the 'science of man' in close interaction with natural science and social science (*EPM*, p. 304). In this respect, Marx adopts a conception of human knowledge very similar to the one practised by Condorcet: the advancement of human access to absolute truth is extensive, cumulative, and inevitable.

According to Marx, the human needs and the objects required for their satisfaction, the ends and the means of human existence should develop in unity, without any possibility of estrangement from one another. In this way, exploitation (as the illicit



appropriation of goods pertaining to somebody else's needs, or the illicit utilisation of somebody's life as a means to somebody else's life) cannot possibly occur. For this purpose, money (as an artificial product of alienation, causing even more alienation) must cease as a social practice, for the sake of restoring the true human values in the process of exchange, so that love can only be exchanged for love, trust for trust, beauty for beauty; so that every thing can preserve its essence in front of a human consciousness undisturbed by appearances (*EPM*, p. 326). The absence of a universal quantitative currency may close the doors to many quantitative possibilities of exchange but it certainly opens wide the horizon of proper qualitative valuation.

As previously suggested, to achieve their own fulfilment, human beings must avoid self-alienation, which is, in terms of humanness, far worse than alienation of the product from its producer, because it renders self-realisation impossible. Instead, human beings must practice appropriation through all human senses and faculties in their rich complexity. Once the obstacle of alienation is removed, the human being cannot suffer any distractions from the fulfilment of their true potential: 'man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real condition of life, and his relations with his kind' (*MCP*, p. 48).

Despite the collectivist description of the requirements of the social individual, as presented in Subsection 4.3 above, Marx's ideal of humanness relies heavily on principles of individual freedom. However, Marx's understanding of freedom is profoundly different from that of the liberalist tradition.

While rejecting the tenet of liberalist political economy that labour is the free result of a free transaction (*EPM*, p. 245), Marx emphasises how the social individual can act freely, as an individual, without experiencing the social bonds as constraints to his or her freedom. Thus, social activity and social enjoyment become expressions of the person's essence (*EPM*, p. 298), through life in association with others rather than through the privileged possession of resources at the expense of others (*EPM*, p. 301). In this process Marx sees the harmonious union of individual essence with general human essence, of the particular and the universal.

Importantly, to avoid the limitations imposed by exploitative relations on the human fulfilment of both the exploited and the exploiter, the social individual must understand the necessity of social solidarity as a premise of their own individual freedom (*GI*, p. 439)<sup>33</sup>. What the individual stands to gain from free association is not just fulfilment through interaction with another, but also the use of all the past and present productive forces created by human society, to be employed as means for the human development of all individuals. Marx believes that the noble mission of the technological progress of society is to ‘reduce the necessary labour of society to a minimum’ and free individuals from the need to work strictly for subsistence (*Gr*, pp. 141-143).

In *Capital*, Marx spends some time explaining ‘the economic paradox, that the most powerful instrument for shortening labour time, proved to be the unfailing means for placing every moment of the worker’s time and that of his family at the disposal of the capitalist, for the purpose of bringing about the accumulation of capital’ (*Cap*, p.434). If machinery is designed with the purpose of reducing labour and labour time, the socio-economic system is diverting the use of machinery from this goal, and directing it towards precisely the opposite consequences. Marx’s explicit conclusion here is that the system (the mode and relations of production) must be changed, for it is obviously faulty. But there is also the implication that the reduction of labour and increase of free time has always been recognised by human consciousness (including the intellect designing and perfecting technology) as the natural end of human creativity.

The importance of free time for the real wealth of human beings is illustrated by Marx in *Grundrisse*. There he remarks that the contradiction between the natural tendency of technology to create disposable time and its actual demand for surplus labour in capitalist economy can only be resolved by ensuring that this surplus labour is not appropriated by a few (non-labourers) at the expense of the many (labourers) but ‘the masses of the workers must appropriate their own surplus labour’ (*Gr*, p. 144). In communist society, ‘the labour time necessary will be measured by the requirements of the social individual, and... social productivity will grow so rapidly that, although production is reckoned with a view to the wealth

of all, the disposable time of all will increase. For real wealth is the developed productive force of all individuals. It is no longer the labour time but the disposable time which is the measure of wealth' (*Gr*, pp. 144-145).

In this context, within Marx's implicit ideal of humanness the real saving is not saving of capital but of labour time: the real 'fixed capital' is 'man himself'. Labour as free creative activity is no longer distinct from leisure, and production no longer separated from enjoyment (*Gr*, p. 148). It is the most effective way in which human beings can reconcile the boundless complexity of their potential for development with the bounds of their mortality.

Having generally described Marx's ideal of humanness, we are now in a position to focus on the particular dimensions of humanness which appear, in Marx's conception, as most desirable: creative activity, freedom, and (in a less prominent role) material wealth.

Let us resume Marx's key ideas in relation to the uniquely fundamental role of creative activity for human fulfilment. As previously discussed, for Marx *doing* is *the* essential aspect of human being. Activity is crucial for at least three reasons: experience, power, and creation. Realising one's humanness is a matter of interaction with nature and with other human beings, in the first instance as expression of the self. As experience, this interaction means appropriation through the senses, internalisation of the world through essential human faculties. As power, it means using the acquired experience to realise those needs directed towards objects outside the self. As creation, it means transforming the given objects of nature into something that satisfies the agent in itself and for itself, rather than for the realisation of needs extrinsic to the activity.

It can be noted here that classical empiricism tends to reduce creative activity to enjoyment. Marx too mentions enjoyment in relation to free creative activity. However, for him enjoyment does not constitute the essence either of activity or of self-realisation, but simply a psychological outcome, a sensuous confirmation of a more profound internal development.

For activity to occur for the sake of human development and fulfilment, certain conditions must be met. Firstly, the immediate needs must be satisfied efficiently, that is fully and with the most expedient (i.e. fast and powerful) means. Human life's most precious resource is time, and its value is established by the irrevocable reality of its finitude. In Marx's view, what is specifically human about needs satisfaction is that human beings have the potential to create new needs, hence the diversity and complexity of their humanness. It follows from here that the less time one can spend on satisfying those inescapable needs given by nature the more time one gains for the purpose of expanding the horizon of creating one's humanness. True human wealth is the enrichment of those possibilities through liberation from natural necessity.

This is the context in which, Marx believes, the concept of freedom acquires its only true meaning, namely as freedom *from* the domination of necessity and freedom *to* create one's humanness. Without these two co-ordinates, one negative and the other positive, there can be no existential significance attached to freedom.

Understood in this way, the concept of freedom is profoundly different from the idea of individual liberty expressed in classical liberalist ethics in at least two respects. Firstly, while the philosophy of individual liberty assumes that only social constraints can (and should) be overcome but not natural necessity, Marx believes that human beings can overcome natural necessity in certain important ways, provided that the advantages of association are fully utilised. For this purpose, social connections must be re-evaluated as creative potential rather than as constraints on the individual. For individuals to freely associate, a certain level of enlightened self-interest is required. For example, individual labour can only be satisfying if it is social labour (*Gr*, p. 146).

Secondly, the philosophy of individual liberty leaves the positive specification of liberty to the individual. In Marx's concept of freedom, there is an extra condition: the freedom to fulfil one's humanness is not just a right, it is equally a responsibility. In the context of bourgeois society, as Marx puts it, it can be a quite demanding responsibility<sup>34</sup>, for it requires from the individual vigilance in avoiding

all forms of self-alienation. Thus, real human fulfilment is not something left entirely for the individual to determine; it is something determined in an absolute sense.

It is within these constraints that, according to Marx, one can then talk about free time, free activity and free association. This is also why nearly everything presented by classical liberalism under the banner of freedom appears to Marx to be the contrary. Labour, for instance, is *not* ‘the free result of a free transaction’ but a form of enslavement (*EPM*, p. 245). Free competition is the freedom of capital to accumulate, not of human beings to develop (*Gr*, pp. 128–131). Free trade is *not* free creative activity for the individual but subordination to the valuing premises imposed by others (*MCP*, p.48).

However, material wealth is not entirely excluded from Marx’s ideal of human fulfilment. On the contrary, it plays an important role, as long as it is *positively* channelled towards reducing the constraints of natural necessity, and *negatively* constrained to operate under the reign of free creative activity.

Accordingly, there is no limit to how much material wealth production should be promoted to reduce natural necessity without reducing free creative activity, and to increase free creative activity without increasing natural necessity. What mode and relations of production are required to ensure that material wealth production will always, simultaneously, reduce natural necessity and increase free creative activity? All the technological advancements available, as far as human ingenuity can develop them, must combine with the free availability of these advancements to all human beings as associated producers.

Social labour in the ‘automatic workshop’, for example, is valuable not only for producing far beyond the requirements of basic subsistence but also for providing, in itself, a multi-skilling beneficial to the labourer as a human being:

‘What characterizes the division of labour in the automatic workshop is that labour has there completely lost its specialized character. But the moment every special development stops, the need for universality, the tendency towards an

integral development of the individual begins to be felt. The automatic workshop wipes out specialists and craft-idiocy.’ (*PoPh*, p. 144).

For Marx, the key to real human wealth for individuals is collective material production and wealth:

‘The exchange originally found in production – which is an exchange not of exchange values but of activities determined by communal needs and communal aims – would from the start imply the participation of individuals in the collective world of products.’ (*Gr*, p. 74)

There is nothing wrong with the specific feature of labour power in capitalism, namely that ‘of being able to produce more value than it itself had’ (*Cap*, p. 188). This feature is important, and must be preserved in the new society. What must change is the manner in which the newly created value is appropriated, and by whom.

In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx reflects on the bourgeois meaning of public wealth:

‘What is, actually, collective wealth, public fortune? It is the wealth of the bourgeoisie – not that of each bourgeois in particular... The economists have done nothing but show how, in the existing relations of production, the wealth of the bourgeoisie has grown and must grow still further. As for the working classes, it still remains a very debatable question whether their condition has improved as a result of the increase in so-called public wealth’. (*PoPh*, p. 101)

If private property is abolished, says Marx, then no particular social class will be excluded from sharing in the public wealth.

The key value obtained in this all-inclusiveness is *equality*. Marx considers classlessness and social equality as the main outcome of the abolition of private property (*MCP*, p. 57). Moreover, equality is the premise that resolves any possible contradiction between individuality and universality. It is in this sense that one can harmoniously articulate, in society, the individual and humankind – the ‘free development of each’ and ‘the free development of all’ (*MCP*, p. 63).

To summarise, in Marx's conception of human progress, the primary criterion is many-sided, creative, intrinsically fulfilling human activity for the sake of the community, as an integration of doing and having, and liberated from the imperative of securing material subsistence. The basis for exercising this creative activity, apart from the individual's proper understanding of sociality and equality, is freedom. As negative freedom (i.e. freedom from natural and social necessity), this can be achieved by efficient, time-saving production of material wealth.

## **6. Relationships among dimensions of humanness: a universal hierarchy**

Marx's ideal of humanness reveals an uneven multi-dimensionality, defined by a fixed, universal order of evaluative priority. One can conclude here that this order is: creative activity, then freedom, then material wealth.

Undoubtedly, creative activity is the ultimate, universal end, the substantive expression of human fulfilment. As such, creative activity gives meaning, scope and limits to everything else. Freedom (including free time), as the next most valuable criterion, is truly exercised only if employed to bring about creative activity. Similarly, freedom is an end for material wealth production, for the latter can only be valuable if it increases freedom for self-fulfilment.

Therefore, as long as it delivers this freedom, material wealth production appears as a universal means of endless benefit to other possible dimensions of humanness, capable of satisfying a wide range of human needs. In the same way, as long as it is used for creative, self-fulfilling activity, freedom is also a universal means of endless benefit to other dimensions of humanness.

Moreover, because self-fulfilment can only be attained in perfect understanding of one's sociality and equality with others in this sociality, creative activity is only self-fulfilling because it is done for the sake of the community, or, more exactly, with the needs of the universal human being in mind. By creating universally, human beings do not produce just for themselves but for the whole of humanity. Creative activity will inevitably contribute to increase freedom and material wealth

for self and others, via society as free, non-exploitative association. The universal end is, thus, also a universal means of endless benefit to all other dimensions of humanness.

Although this sociality requirement can be interpreted as the weak link that allows the subordination of individual interests to the general interests of society, it is not at all clear that, in Marx's view, self-realisation is subject to examination from a communal authority. However, what is clear is that, while Marx describes understanding the role of sociality for self-fulfilment as an entirely individual responsibility, the fulfilment of this responsibility is subject to examination from the standpoint of 'universal man'. This standpoint is treated as an absolute perspective.

Despite Marx's suggestion of absolute priority of creative activity over material wealth, within the tension between freedom and necessity, there is a clear sense in which creative activity and material wealth limit each other. There is no normative limit to technological advancement and productivity (and Marx even encourages it as a crucial feature of the ideal society), provided that this increases the liberation of the individual from natural and social necessity. Reciprocally, there is no limit to creative activity for self-realisation, and no prescription as to how far and in what directions humanness can develop, but this can only happen as long as the implacable imperatives of subsistence are met. Under these premises, any step forward towards freedom from necessity which is equally a step forward towards human self-creation brings about an improvement of all the other values one may hold.

One mention must be made here of Marx's more refined understanding of relationships among social values. An important premise of his dialectical and historical materialism is that contradiction or antagonism is a natural quality of relations among things in nature, and, as such, conflict in itself is not necessarily a sign of regress or stagnation. On the contrary, it is the central driving force of progress.



However Marx does not believe that social order is infinitely improvable (although humanness may well be). Thus, all social antagonisms must ultimately dissolve in communism, wherefrom there is no need for further revolution, progress or conflict, for harmony has been achieved. Although conflict is necessary and unavoidable, harmony remains the ultimate expression of perfect relations.

On the other hand, for Marx, human progress appears to occur along very different co-ordinates from social progress. Here conflict and contradiction are not welcome; when they occur, they are a sign of self-alienation, which must be overcome by all means. In this respect, Marx's perspective on the possible relationships among criteria for human progress is similar to that of Condorcet and Smith, and does not bring about any improvement to the pattern of ultimate harmony among absolute values. Even though Marx extends the potential element of human nature to unpredictable dimensions (human beings can create their own humanness, not just embellish what is already given), his conception does not transcend the principle of accordance with nature (manifested to human understanding through forms of harmony). Ultimately, Marx insists, it is only by aligning their goals with those of nature (i.e. universal human nature) that human beings can truly create themselves.

In sum, while material wealth production is a means to freedom, freedom itself is a means to creative activity, which is the substance of self-fulfilment. In this sense, material wealth production appears of endless benefit to self-fulfilment. However, an important source of wealth production is labour time, which is – in non-economic terms – human living time. Accordingly, wealth production should not be pursued when it absorbs the time of the labourer and turns labour into an alienating (rather than self-fulfilling) experience. This is where the mediation of freedom between creative activity and material wealth becomes essential. The ultimate indicator of true human fulfilment is harmony as the dissolution of all problematic dualities in human life (e.g. individual versus collective, private versus public, human/universal production versus material/local production).

## **7. Human progress in a non-alienating collective**

Following the logic provided by Marx's conception of human fulfilment, how does human progress compound from individuals to collective categories?

Resuming the co-ordinates of the social project outlined in Sections 1 and 2, the satisfaction of the widest range of needs and the fulfilment of potential in all dimensions of humanness should be achieved through a social organisation which excludes the occurrence of exploitation and facilitates the exercise of leisure as creative, many-sided activity, as required by the developmental needs of the individual. In this context, Marx considers that the tension between the development of persons and the development of humanity as a whole is caused by the existence of classes with conflicting interests (*MCP*, p.63). In his view, the eradication of exploitation would also eliminate social conflicts of interests and harmonise individual and collective interests.

He thus observes that public and private goals have always appeared, in societies so far, as polarised but interdependent. In the same way as centralised production increases in direct proportion with division of labour, centralised public authority goes hand in hand with the division of private interests. Marx sets the resolution of this polarisation into a harmonious social order as his life project.

Marx's recommendation that the capitalist society of consumers should be replaced by a society of producers has led some critics to conclude that he emphasises the social role of production (creation) at the expense of that of consumption<sup>35</sup>. As I remarked in Subsection 4.1 above, Marx's original contribution here does not consist simply in a change of emphasis but in a redefinition of production and consumption, and of the relationship between the two, based on the premises of a mode of production altogether different from that of bourgeois society.

The association of free producers restores the co-operative foundation of competition to its natural state. As increased and universalised production

eliminates the imperatives of scarcity, humanness has all obstacles to its fulfilment removed. In Sartre's words:

'In pure reciprocity, that which is Other than me is also the same. But in reciprocity as modified by scarcity, the same appears to us as anti-human in so far as this same man appears as radically Other – that is to say, as threatening us with death.'<sup>36</sup>

Marx's idea of production for the sake of 'universal man' emphasises precisely the all-inclusive character of this sort of production, as a guarantee of universal respect for human life in general.

In this context, the distribution principle that recommends 'from all according to their abilities, to all according to their needs' appears clearly as a principle of universal equality which ensures the all-inclusive character of the pure reciprocity emphasised in Marx's ideal social order. Accordingly, as all significant material wealth becomes public, individuals are in principle *equal* in their access to this wealth, and the basis of this equality of access is response to their needs. Similarly, all significant human wealth (as self-creative activity) must have a social role, and as such individuals are in principle *equal* in their responsibility to produce this wealth. The basis of this equality of duty is demand for the individuals' abilities. Beyond these basic equalities, individuals should reach status and prominence in society according to their personal power (determined by the rich-experiencing quality of their lives and by the complexity of their humanity), and not according to their material power (determined by the economic value of their material possessions). Marx never makes it clear how exactly the personal power of different individuals is to be manifested as social power beyond the basic levels of universal equality.

As previously mentioned, according to Marx, the ultimate goal of the social progress of humanity is human emancipation – which (at the level of the individual) is mainly a liberation from false needs, false values, and mistaking the appearance of things for their essence. This personal emancipation goes hand in hand with social emancipation understood as collective liberation from the domination of oppressive social institutions.

Marx also believes that, for individuals to free themselves from false consciousness, a prerequisite is political emancipation, in the form of exposing the opposition between state and civil society, of acknowledging the division that exists between the public and private spheres of human life, of secularising the state and thus completing people's political development. The perfection of political relations would reveal the need for the division between public and private life to be overcome, thus pointing the aspiration for human liberation in the right direction. Eventually, as civil society develops harmoniously through fully responsible social individuals achieving their *true* self-fulfilment, the institutions of the state (as the systemic overseer of individual and collective goals) are likely to become superfluous.

One can conclude that collective human progress is possible, in the ideal social order, through: (1) the elimination of exploitation and the disappearance of conflicting social classes; (2) the elimination of alienation and the integration of individual and collective interests within the social being; (3) the realisation of pure reciprocity through all-inclusive production for the sake of 'universal man'; (4) universal equality based on the principle 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs'; and (5) personal emancipation from false needs articulated with social and political emancipation from oppressive institutions.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I have illustrated how Marx's humanism unifies his social project with an implicit ideal of humanness. His conception of human nature asserts the primacy of human activity over property or possession, while his theory of human need emphasises the ability of humans to create new needs through life in society. Contemplated as more than mere lacks or wants, needs are indicators of an unlimited potential for human development, and the focus is on their significance as human wealth rather than economic poverty. Accordingly, Marx's recommendations for human fulfilment appear as the opposite of the

recommendations of classical political economy for the achievement of material wealth.

On this basis, Marx promotes an ideal of humanness which underpins both his conception of the desirable society and his theory of the self-realised human being. Thus, the key to a good society is given by social relations which favour appropriation as experience through all the human senses and faculties against possession as outcome embodied in the things possessed. On the other hand, the primary criterion for human progress is creative activity for the purpose of self-development, which justifies other primary values such as freedom as leisure time or liberation from material necessity, and material production as the main social instrument in achieving such freedom.

Within this value system, creative activity is perceived to be the universal end and means of endless benefit to all other criteria for human progress, although a limitation of it by the necessity to satisfy certain (apparently more immediate) natural and social needs is implied. This order of evaluative priority among criteria for human progress is fixed and universal.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In providing quotations and references from English versions of Marx's works, I have relied on the following editions: for *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (EPM)* – Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975); for *The German Ideology (GI)* – Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976); for *The Poverty of Philosophy (PoPh)* – Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1973); for the *Manifesto of the Communist Party (MCP)* – Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto and Its Relevance for Today* (Chippendale NSW: Resistance Books, 1998); for *Grundrisse (Gr)* – David McLellan, *Marx's Grundrisse* (London: Macmillan, 1971); for *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (CCPE)* – Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (transl. by N. I. Stone, Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1911); for *Theories of Surplus Value (TSV)* – Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1951); for *Capital (Cap)* – Karl Marx, *Capital*, vols. I and II (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1939); for *The Civil War in France (CWF)* – Karl Marx and V. I. Lenin, *The Civil War in France: The Paris Commune* (International Publishers, 1968); and for *Critique of the Gotha*

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*Programme (CGP) – Critique of the Gotha Programme* ([C. P. Dutt (ed)], New York: International Publishers, 1966). In the references provided between brackets throughout this chapter, each of Marx's works will be abbreviated as indicated here.

<sup>2</sup> In *The German Ideology*, Marx provides a detailed description of the history of production, division of labour (*GI*, pp. 32–34), private property (*GI*, pp. 46–48), of the appearance of the state (*GI*, p. 35), and of the emergence of human consciousness from material conditions of life (*GI*, p. 36).

<sup>3</sup> 'Thereby the whole bourgeois conception of wages hitherto, as well as all the criticism hitherto directed against this conception, was thrown overboard once and for all and it was made clear that the wage worker has permission to work for his own life, i.e., to live, only in so far as he works for a certain time gratis for the capitalist (and hence also for the latter's fellow consumers of surplus value); that the whole capitalist system of production turns on the prolongation of this gratis labour by extending the working day or by developing productivity, i.e., the greater intensity of labour power, etc., that, consequently, the system of wage labour is a system of slavery, and indeed a slavery which becomes more severe in proportion as the social productive forces of labour develop, whether the worker receives better or worse payment.' (*CGP*, p.15)

<sup>4</sup> For the most comprehensive accounts of exploitation (causes, physiology, consequences, and resolution), see *TSV*, pp. 127–129, 148, 154, 179, 181–186.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. II (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1999), pp. 81–88.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Steve Bolger *et al.*, *Towards Socialist Welfare Work* (London: Macmillan, 1981); A. T. Hennelly (ed.), *Liberation Theology – A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990); and J. Crush, *Power of Development* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> As an example of this kind of criticism, see Marx's detailed discussion of the Gotha Programme, in *CGP*.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Jon Elster interprets Marx's contention that history indicates a continuous progress in the production of surplus labour (value) as implying that the power of social institutions to extract this surplus from individuals has also continuously increased from one social order to the next. This

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is how Marx accounts for the transition from feudalism to capitalism (see J. Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 278–288).

<sup>10</sup> Lenin correctly explains, in *The State and Revolution* (1916), that Marx's doctrine of the 'new society' is not based on 'inventing' its structures but on examining its 'natural-historical process of evolution' from the old society. For a more elaborate exposition of this point, see V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (Sydney: Resistance Books, 1999), p. 41, p. 47 and p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> Based on the belief of individuals that social institutions are immutable and possess a life of their own, individuals thus relinquish their power to change these institutions and allow themselves to be dominated by objects of their own creation.

<sup>12</sup> Marx provides a more detailed explanation of how the working class will abolish all classes and political power, thus dissolving its own power and identity as a class, in *PoPh*, pp. 173–174.

<sup>13</sup> L. Althusser, *For Marx* ([transl. by B. Brewster], London: Verso, 1977), pp. 32–33.

<sup>14</sup> L. Althusser, *op.cit.*, p. 227.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 236.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed account of the history of this debate, see Althusser's essay on 'The Humanist Controversy' (1967), for example in L. Althusser, *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings* (1966–67), ([transl. by G. Goshgarian], London: Verso, 2003), pp. 221–227.

<sup>17</sup> S. Timpanaro, *On Materialism* ([transl. by L. Garner], London: NLB, 1975), p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> J. Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, p. 116.

<sup>19</sup> Here I am using in a broader sense the terminology adopted by Jon Elster in his previously mentioned study, where he strictly discusses methodological individualism in an explanatory sense, i.e. the premise that the individual human being invariably precedes supra-individual entities in the explanatory order (J. Elster, *MSM*, p. 5).

<sup>20</sup> On this point, Elster further remarks that, as certain social orders may have several dominant classes, which may compete for supremacy and have conflicting interests, in later writings Marx seems to advance the idea that the state did appear as an active, autonomous agent (especially from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards) pursuing its own interests by harnessing those of others to its purpose and by mediating between classes through 'divide-and-conquer' approaches (J. Elster, *MSM*, p. 426).

<sup>21</sup> Tom Rockmore, *Marx after Marxism: The Philosophy of Karl Marx* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 69.

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<sup>22</sup> There is no doubt that, in Marx's hierarchy of forms of human being (existence), doing takes precedence over having. Labour is intrinsic to human beings, inseparable from their essence. On the other hand, when appropriation (*An-eignung*) as an act of experience and assumption of identity (i.e. experiencing as the dialectical interaction between the person and the world) is transformed to become possession and reside entirely in what is possessed ( i.e. the property), having as reified into property becomes a source of alienation of the human being from its own self. Private property is external to the human essence, and it cannot be part of what Marx calls human wealth, or the 'truly human property' (*EPM*, p. 281).

<sup>23</sup> Marx emphasises this difference in status between the capitalist and the worker in the following terms: 'The non-worker does everything against the worker which the worker does against himself; but he does not do against himself what he does against the worker' (*EPM*, p. 282).

<sup>24</sup> Through the term 'inhuman' Marx denotes the degrading and self-limiting conditioning of the exploiters to satisfy their needs only 'at the expense of others'.

<sup>25</sup> In the same paragraph, Marx defines supersession as 'an objective movement of *retracting* the alienation *into self*'.

<sup>26</sup> According to Marx, the essential objects of humanness are enjoyment and activity, not possession (*EPM*, p. 322).

<sup>27</sup> Marx summarises this idea as follows: 'when one speaks of *private property*, one thinks of dealing with something external to man. When one speaks of labour, one is directly dealing with man himself' (*EPM*, p. 281).

<sup>28</sup> See J. Elster, *MSM.*, p. 68.

<sup>29</sup> While I am aware that other theories may systematically distinguish between the concept of 'need' and that of 'want', it must be noted that in this context Marx appears to use the terms 'needs' and 'wants' synonymously.

<sup>30</sup> Here is the original text: 'In creating a *world of objects* by his practical activity, in his *work upon* inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species-being, i.e., as a being that treats the species as its own essential being, or that treats itself as a species-being. Admittedly animals also produce. They build themselves nests, dwellings, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc. But an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself and its young. It produces one-sidedly, whilst man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom. An animal produces only itself, whilst man reproduces the whole of nature. An animal's product belongs



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immediately to its physical body, whilst man freely confronts his product. An animal forms objects only in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object. Man therefore also forms objects in accordance with the laws of beauty.’

<sup>31</sup> On this topic, see Agnes Heller’s study on *The Theory of Need in Marx* (London: Allison & Busby, 1976). At p. 24, Heller concludes: ‘The statement that material wealth ought to serve the worker’s needs is based squarely on a *non-economic choice of values*.’

<sup>32</sup> Here is the original text:

‘...The more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more values he creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes; the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker; the more civilised his object, the more barbarous becomes the worker; the more powerful labour becomes, the more powerless becomes the worker; the more ingenious labour becomes, the less ingenious becomes the worker and the more he becomes nature’s servant.’

<sup>33</sup> The causal relation between individual liberty and the liberty of all is differently expressed in *MCP*, where Marx writes that ‘the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all’ (*MCP*, p. 63).

<sup>34</sup> In Joseph Martin’s interpretation, ‘to Marx, freedom did not denote freedom to own and acquire property, freedom to better oneself materially, freedom of religion, and so on. On the contrary, it meant freedom from craving for possessions and from competitive acquisitiveness, from religious dogma, from state authority, and from all other facts of man’s environment that take away, or “alienate”, from him opportunities to develop his essential human nature’ (Joseph Martin, *A Guide to Marxism*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1979, p. 17).

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, J. Elster, *MSM.*, pp. 82–83. In Elster’s interpretation, Marx’s perspective on the good life is at core Aristotelian, but with a rather strong emphasis on creation at the expense of consumption. For Elster, this premise is socially self-defeating because in a society of creators there would be no time left for anyone to passively consume what has been created. In a society of givers there would be no one left to receive.

<sup>36</sup> J. P. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* ([transl. by Alan Sheridan-Smith], London: NLB, 1976), p. 131.

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# IDEALS OF UNIVERSAL HUMANNESS: AN EVALUATION

## - Chapter Five -

*Go, teach eternal wisdom how to rule*

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*Then drop into thyself, and be a fool!*

### **Introduction**

Having explored and analysed, in the previous three chapters, the ideals of humanness and conceptions of human fulfilment underlying the social projects proposed by Condorcet, Smith and Marx, I now propose a comparative summary of the distinctive features of these theories. In particular, for all three cases I would like to evaluate the characteristics of the social project and the ideal social system, the conception of human fulfilment (with its assumptions about human nature, human needs and human wealth or value), and the perspective on the dimensions of humanness and the relations among these dimensions.

In undertaking this evaluation, I refer to the criticisms of anti-humanism and uni-dimensionality launched by post-modern thinkers against the social projects and discuss to what extent, and in what sense, the weaknesses of the later developments of these projects can be attributed to difficulties inherent in the classical theories.

In discussing later developments, I have selected Daniel Webster, Friedrich Hayek and V. I. Lenin as examples of later interpretations of the social projects initiated by the classical writers (Condorcet, Smith and Marx) in the three paradigmatic directions: scientific-technological, economic and political. While this selection is by no means representative of all historically achieved developments of the three projects, it is illustrative of a dangerous propensity of these social projects to run into similar conceptual and practical difficulties. As I will elaborate in Section 5 of this chapter, these difficulties (in particular the conceptual ones) are, I believe, due to a pyramidal pattern of thinking about progress, which can (and should) be replaced by a dynamic-relational perspective (as outlined in **Chapter Six**). The

transitional analyses undertaken in Section 5 (from Condorcet to Webster, from Smith to Hayek, and from Marx to Lenin) are by no means intended to be exhaustive and historically validated. They are rather philosophical speculations on possible conceptual and ideological connections and developments between different generations of theories within the same paradigms.

### **1. The social project and the ideal social system**

Summarising the themes discussed under Chapters Two, Three and Four, three different social projects have been proposed. For Condorcet, human civilisation must advance through the cumulative and expansive development of the sciences and the arts, mediated by philosophy, and through the unification of all sciences and arts under a universal rational method and language.

In Smith's case, the central social issue is the acquisition of national wealth and the preservation of national economy in a 'progressive' state of opulence. Although material wealth is taken to be a sign of civilisation and material poverty an indication of barbarism, Smith does not reduce social utility to economic productivity. Material wealth is far from representing all that matters in a good society, but because economic productivity is, in Smith's view, a necessary condition for the development of all other forms of social utility, the advancement of economic productivity claims special attention. Therefore, division of labour as the best available means to superior economic production is far preferable to self-sufficiency, despite its apparent shortcomings in relation to human fulfilment.

From Marx's perspective, the real social project should be the achievement, through political decisions and institutions, of a mode of production (and derived from it, a social order) from which exploitation and alienation are necessarily eliminated.

Despite their fundamental differences, all three projects are, in some respects, strikingly similar. Firstly, they all purport to be universal, and indeed their success depends enormously on their universal implementation. I shall resume this idea in Section 4 of this chapter.

Secondly, each one of them sets up the main objective of achieving a particular ideal social system, different in each case. In Condorcet, for example, a global social and political culture must be achieved among all nations, by adopting in all constitutions the same enlightened principles of universal equality of natural rights, by unifying the sciences and the arts under the same universal method and language, and by equally enjoying sovereignty and practising democracy.

Smith's ideal economy is a perfect system of natural liberty, in which the natural inclination of individuals to better their own condition should be fostered by guaranteeing the protection of one's liberty to administer their wealth according to their interests. Because the interests of the small wage earner or artisan necessarily coincide with the interest of society, and because the 'invisible hand' of nature transforms private vices into public goods, a perfect system of natural liberty would naturally ensure a social order which does not favour the accumulation of economic power in the hands of 'great people' or 'great orders of the state'.

Finally, Marx's communism is the ideal social order, in which all social means of production belong to the state, private property is abolished, the national economy is planned and centralised, and social classes (with their inherent, insoluble inter-class conflicts) have disappeared. The aim of the ideal economy is not primarily to increase capital (the sum total of annual savings) but to maintain as many workers as possible while rewarding them with as many opportunities for free creative activity as possible.

## **2. The humanist foundation of the social project**

From a thorough analysis of the ultimate justifications presented by the three authors in support of their systemic recommendations, it is clear that the ultimate rationale of each of the three systems is not some criterion inherent in the system itself but the criterion of human fulfilment. Thus, in each case social progress as the

progress of systems is in a general means-end relation with human progress as the progress of people.

I have suggested in the General Introduction that one of the main criticisms brought against these social projects, especially in their later implementation, refers to the anti-humanism of their objectives, defined as the technocratic pursuit of goals that satisfy the 'needs' of technical systems rather than the needs of people.

It would be clearly unfair to direct these accusations to the conceptions proposed by Condorcet, Smith or Marx. The humanism of these conceptions is evident in at least two crucial respects: (a) the ultimate role of each system is to empower individuals and to facilitate their ability to achieve their own fulfilment, indicating the human being as the ultimate, responsible agent in achieving human fulfilment; and (b) the ultimate values or goods produced by these systems are, in each case, practised, enjoyed and/or possessed by people, not confined to the systems producing them or to the few humans controlling these systems.

To illustrate the first point, it is sufficient to consider Condorcet's focus on the political recognition of natural human rights, Smith's emphasis on the protection of the natural liberty of the economic agent, and Marx's aim at social opportunities for personal power (rather than material power). As shown in the respective chapters, each of these three principles, considered separately, is justified by the respective author in terms of its empowering and facilitating qualities. Far from delivering human fulfilment directly, each proposed system helps create the best social environment for human beings achieving their own fulfilment.

In support of the second point, I have also shown how Condorcet discusses reason as practised and knowledge as acquired by every individual, because it is the individual who is in the best position to understand their specific circumstances and apply the general principles of reason and knowledge to these circumstances. Similarly, Smith conceives of natural liberty as nothing else but an attribute of people acting in an economy. He even warns, as we have seen, against the tendency of 'men of system' to make judgements about people's circumstances which only

the people themselves are endowed and entitled to make. Marx too suggests that human fulfilment is entirely about people's capacity to 'create themselves' and, as such, no systems or institutions can replace the people in this creative role.

Therefore, it must be concluded that if the three social projects developed in modern times in an anti-humanist framework and delivered anti-humanist outcomes, this anti-humanism cannot be attributed to the conceptions proposed by Condorcet, Smith and Marx.

### **3. The conception of human fulfilment**

It is the humanism of these three conceptions of the social project which confers their underlying conception of human fulfilment its central importance for the whole theory or model. In each of the three cases, if there is a particular social system preferable to other options in the first place, it is because a particular premise has been adopted about the nature of human fulfilment. The chosen system is justified in terms of its ability to promote that value or good which is most significant for human fulfilment. To be able to prescribe the former, one must describe the latter.

Let us now remember that the second major criticism levelled at the social projects is (as briefly illustrated in my discussion of Marcuse's ideas in the General Introduction) their severe reductionism, more exactly their uni-dimensionality, which explains the disillusionment experienced by human beings with the outcomes of these projects in terms of important dimensions of human fulfilment being ignored.

Again, I believe this criticism could not fairly apply to Condorcet, Smith or Marx themselves, whose conceptions of social progress and human fulfilment are considerably rich and complex, indicating a rather refined understanding of (almost) all the major issues and factors involved in the development of human beings.

In each case, substantive premises are adopted about human nature (as describing the scope and limits of the physical potential for human development), human needs (as our inescapable reasons for valuing) and human wealth or value (as those goods that produce authentic fulfilment).

For Condorcet, human nature involves plural, non-reducible faculties such as perception, conceptualisation and valuing. It has potential for both a virtuous chain (containing knowledge, virtue and happiness) and a vicious chain (characterised by ignorance, vice and misery). Human needs are not only diverse (a fact reflected in the diversity of the arts) but also of different significance, a fact which justifies the different values we are called to place on different goods. Due to their diverse nature, human beings have rights, which are also plural. Furthermore, human beings not only have needs, they also have the faculties required for their satisfaction. The real, ultimate wealth for every human being to aspire to is knowledge of all these needs and of the required goods as a form of power and of freedom.

In Smith's view, the human being is an intricate nexus of natural inclinations, which include self-love, sympathy, justice, benevolence and self-command. Apart from immediate needs which usually claim very limited resources for their satisfaction, human beings also have the propensity to continuously seek to better their condition, and this propensity is unlimited. There are two mutually exclusive paths to human fulfilment, each revealing a multi-dimensional hierarchy of goods. The path of wealth and greatness, whose notion of success is so easily assessable, may require a more severe limitation of liberty and security for the sake of obtaining superiority over others and the relative admiration of others; but wealth and greatness cannot do without a certain amount of virtue, liberty and security, and these goods are certainly not reducible to one another. Similarly, the more difficult and obscure path of wisdom and virtue is not devoid of requirements for liberty, security and material wealth. The real, ultimate prize of human fulfilment is indeed virtue, but that does not entail a lack of consideration of the other, autonomous goods.

For Marx, human essence lies in activity as production of one's own means of subsistence, rather than in material possession. As species-beings producing for the sake of 'universal man', human beings are essentially social and have natural, vital powers, instincts and needs directed towards objects outside themselves. In this sense, human needs are essential objects; they are diverse and of different significance for human fulfilment. Accordingly, they can be classified as 'natural' (or 'necessary') needs, 'luxury' needs, 'free' needs, 'individual' needs and 'social' needs. Moreover, need satisfaction through rich experiencing can lead to the creation of new needs, which heralds the unleashing of new potential, of new directions for self-fulfilment. In conditions of freedom from exploitation and alienation, the potential for self-creation is virtually unlimited and unpredictable. The real, ultimate human wealth is personal power as complex, refined experiencing, through creative activity and appropriation of the world through all human senses and faculties, developed continuously, as a self-creative way of living.

Despite their considerable differences in defining human nature, human needs and human wealth, all three conceptions share a belief in potential for human fulfilment as inherent in human nature, and the confidence that this potential is realisable. Moreover, they share a perspective on human needs as guiding co-ordinates in selecting the desirable potential from the physical possibilities. They also have in common (as already mentioned) the assumption of an absolute, universal blueprint for human fulfilment, an idea I shall expand upon in Section 4 of this chapter.

For now, I would like to conclude that, if there are criticisms that can be raised against these three conceptions, uni-dimensionality is definitely not one of them.

#### **4. Absolutism and universalism: two possible objections**

One charge that may legitimately be launched against the conceptions of human fulfilment espoused by Condorcet, Smith and Marx is *absolutism*, namely the idea



that there is such a thing as an absolute truth or virtue, openly available to all human beings and therefore attainable.

As repeatedly illustrated in Chapters Two, Three and Four, the authenticity of one's needs, interests and fulfilment is always verifiable through accordance with nature, manifested to our understanding as a form of harmony or absence of tensions. For example, Condorcet's true reason cannot possibly result in poverty, humiliation and dependence. For Smith, pursuit of wealth in natural liberty cannot involve impoverishing others, just as true patriotism cannot imply hatred of other nations. Similarly, for Marx, true self-creation integrates the individual and the collective, public life and private life, socially productive labour and self-developing activity.

We can conclude, therefore, that this idea is indeed strongly represented in the three theories. However, whether it is in itself an unsound idea, which should be easily dismissed, requires further discussion, which I will resume in Section 5.5 below.

This absolutism combines, in all three theories, with *universalism*, i.e. the assumption that certain needs and interests are essentially the same for all human beings. The universalist assumption itself derives from the premise that there is a universal human essence which can be specified in dimensions. I shall further elaborate upon this idea in Chapter Six. At this point I would like to note that, quite often, the three theories merge what is considered to be absolute with what is considered to be universal. None of the three authors provide sufficient explanations as to why we should assume that what we can observe as occurring in a similar way in all members of our species is also necessarily – to use a gem of Condorcet's rhetoric - 'written in the book of nature' and, therefore, should be accepted as an absolute given.

The idea of true needs and interests, combined with the belief that each individual is in a privileged position in relation to their self-fulfilment, places on the human being extremely demanding responsibilities, not only to self-fulfil according to the same blueprint, but also to act under the guidance of the same values, so that the ideal social system can be achieved universally and so that everybody else can self-

fulfil in the same facilitating circumstances<sup>1</sup>. In this context, Condorcet's virtuous chain becomes irreversible only if the majority of people become enlightened and apply universal reason appropriately. Smith's system of natural liberty can only be fair if natural ends are pursued with natural means by a critical number of economic agents, thus protecting the natural liberty of others. Marx's communist society would only guarantee the personal power of each individual to claim social resources for self-fulfilment provided that all individuals relinquish the primary pursuit of material power through property.

In conclusion, a perfect social system which cannot be achieved unless all (or most) human beings aspire to be perfect in the same way may appear, upon closer

scrutiny, an extremely difficult social project to complete. This may seem to be at odds with the optimism displayed by Condorcet, Smith and Marx in the attainability of these ideal social systems. In other words, a universal social project like this may appear implausible (or empirically unsound) simply by making the trivial remark that people are different, have different values, understand self-fulfilment differently, one cannot rely on all people doing the same thing for a system to work, because it is too difficult to achieve this sort of cohesion in practice, etc. This sort of objection, however, comes from a risk-minimising tendency to reduce the responsibility of individuals towards systems as much as possible, to avoid systemic hiccups. From the absolutist-universalist perspective, the proposal goes the other way round: if we wish to create a social system that can significantly improve our chances for human fulfilment, then we may need to adopt a rather exigent, socially responsible view of what we should aspire to as human beings. It becomes clear that, for our perspective to remain truly humanist, the priority of human fulfilment must be properly balanced by exigently assumed human responsibility. For the world to change our way, we must accept the necessity to change ourselves.

Empirical objections against absolutism and universalism account for a great part of the disillusionment suffered by humankind in response to some of the outcomes of the three social projects. But such objections do not necessarily invalidate the three classical theories. As suggested above, it may be considered that the social projects

have failed to deliver because (at least) some of us have not lived up to the ideal human being.

There are, however, more subtle weaknesses in these three theories, which may, in certain combinations and circumstances, lead to anti-humanist and uni-dimensional outcomes, and even to absurdities. I am mainly referring here to the inadequate treatment (or understanding) of the nature of the relations among dimensions of humanness, which is apparent in each theory. This point will be discussed at length below.

## **5. The ideal of humanness: its dimensions, and the relations among them**

In exploring each of the three conceptions of human fulfilment, I have remarked that each such conception promotes a particular ideal of humanness, in the form of ‘universal man’ or the ideal human being. Each ideal selects a particular set of desirable dimensions of humanness, in other words it prescribes a set of dimensions which should be developed.

However, in each case, these dimensions are not just selected among others, they are also valued in an internal hierarchy within the prescribed set. This involves adopting particular premises about how these dimensions are understood to relate to one another.

Thus, Condorcet has in view knowledge, followed by virtue, material well-being, liberty and equality. These goods come together in an ‘unbreakable chain’, in which knowledge is the driving force, the universal means of endless benefit to all other dimensions of humanness. Once engaged in this virtuous chain, there are no significant tensions among these dimensions of humanness, which tend to develop harmoniously with the support of knowledge.

According to Smith, whether on the path of wealth and greatness or on the path of virtue and wisdom, there are four dimensions of humanness of universal prominence: wealth, virtue, liberty and security. They are universal means in the sense that a certain amount of each is needed in order to achieve any other value. But, depending on their place in the order of evaluative priority, these dimensions are not all of equal, endless benefit to other values and to each other. As important means for the satisfaction of many of our immediate needs, liberty and security can be severely limited by the pursuit of wealth and greatness. One of the reasons for this is that the relative pursuit of wealth can be conceived as unlimited, while absolute pursuit of virtue is limited by the attainment of absolute virtue (which is immutable). In sum, there are important tensions between virtue and admiration from others, as well as between limited immediate needs and the need for the unlimited improvement of one's condition. Overall, the path of virtue is superior to the path of wealth because it allows more liberty and security (the next most important dimensions in the given hierarchy) and because it is in accordance with the governing role of our moral faculties over all our other faculties (a central assumption made by Smith about human nature).

In Marx's terms, material wealth is the universal means to freedom as free time, which is a universal means to self-developing, socially creative activity (which is the ultimate expression of human fulfilment). But Marx also closes the circle, for individual creative activity is not something to which everything else must be sacrificed. Authentic self-fulfilment of the social being involves producing for the sake of the community, for 'universal man', thus also producing materially to satisfy the needs of others, and producing opportunities for free time for others. The universal end is also a universal means of endless benefit to all other values, and no tensions are ultimately envisaged between promoting this dimension and advancing any of the other dimensions.

Despite the substantive differences among the four ideals of humanness discussed here, the four orders of evaluative priority have at least five similar features: (a) they are regarded as absolute hierarchies, i.e. each order indicates the unique, *true*, harmonious relations among dimensions of humanness; (b) they are considered

universal, i.e. these relations are general and obtain in all circumstances; (c) they are static hierarchies, i.e. the general relations are unchanging (immutable); (d) they are established empirically, i.e. these general relations are given facts of human nature, and not expressions of what is desirable; and (e) there is only one dimension of humanness which is in a privileged position, in that it claims to be *the* driver of all other progress, the universal means of most benefit to all other dimensions of humanness.

The combination of these five assumptions provides us with a model of dimensions of humanness locked in a unique, fixed, universal, natural order of priority which justifies empirically our evaluation of human fulfilment. I would like to refer to this model as the *pyramidal* model, to illustrate the idea of *the* uniquely privileged dimension of humanness which is always more valuable than all others and always drives all others.

Below I shall illustrate how this model can render each of the three theories vulnerable to four dangerous propensities in social projects, namely unidimensionality, anti-humanism, infinite improvability and (linear) empirical determinism.

### **5.1 The myth of scientific and technological progress: from Condorcet to Webster**

As O’Hear and Sarewitz observe, the identification of social progress with scientific and technological advancements is still a common stereotype in institutional decision-making, especially in public policy.

In a historical analysis, Richard Bronk finds it typical for the period starting with the 1800s that scientific and technological advances begin to affect almost everyone, at all levels of society, and significantly transform their lives and practices within the span of one generation. ‘From 1800 onwards – states Bronk – the catalogue of technological advance was breathtaking and inspiring’ (*PIH*, p. 75)<sup>2</sup>. Among the life-changing inventions mentioned by Bronk are steam navigation

and railways, gas lighting, urban sanitation and piped water systems, the car, the plane, electricity, refrigeration, the typewriter, the computer, cinema, radio, television, the washing machines, the electric iron, the vacuum cleaner, the microwave oven, synthetic clothing, vaccines and antibiotics (*PIH*, pp. 75–76).

Bringing facts closer to our time, Bronk concludes:

‘Life expectancy worldwide has risen in the last thirty years alone from 53 to 66 – progress indeed... The all-pervasive and seemingly benign nature of most of the changes, and the rapidity of improvements to still young technologies, quickly established a world where ‘new’ was seen as almost synonymous with ‘better’. The accelerating pace of technological and medical advances increasingly seemed to suggest the possibility of an indefinite progress in health, welfare and material prosperity for everyone.’ (*PIH*, p. 76)

Perhaps the most representative period of the enthusiastic popular embrace of the idea of progress as technological advancement is that of the later 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the United States, when the flamboyant rhetoric of politicians like Daniel Webster and Edward Everett gains ground as the faithful expression of the mood that dominates the times. Here is what Webster was stating as early as 1847:

‘It is an extraordinary era in which we live. It is altogether new. The world has seen nothing like it before. I will not pretend, no one can pretend, to discern the end; but everybody knows that the age is remarkable for scientific research into the heavens, the earth, and what is beneath the earth; and perhaps more remarkable still for the application of this scientific research to the pursuits of life... We see the ocean navigated and the solid land traversed by steam power, and intelligence communicated by electricity. Truly this is almost a miraculous era. What is before us no one can say, what is upon us no one can hardly realize. The progress of the age has almost outstripped human belief; the future is known only to Omniscience.’<sup>3</sup>

The more enthusiastically we interpret Webster’s words, the more a disquieting shadow tends to grow in their background. As human imagination appears to be taken over by a soaring reality, trust in an apparently inevitable scientific and technological progress seems to obliterate the possibility that humankind may lose control of its own future. Science and technology are developing at maximum

speed, as autonomous driving forces of human history and civilisation. How this happens is mysterious, for it is running ahead of the human will and power of prediction. But this is not for a moment, in Webster's mind, a reason to get concerned. Is it because there is a divine plan which ensures that the impact of scientific and technological progress on human life is invariably beneficial?

Webster's image of inevitable technological advancement is not devoid of a certain sense of humanism. After all, what is mostly admirable about this age of science and technology is the application of their findings to the goals of life (mainly, human life). But the context in which this idea is called to reside is one of an empirical (rather than normative) interpretation of progress: progress is not what we make of it, it is something 'miraculous', with a life of its own, whose 'end' is not within reach of our understandings. Webster does not clarify whether this lack of understanding is only temporary or a permanent condition of human knowledge. Either way, however, we are strongly encouraged to rely on the implicit beneficence of inevitable scientific and technological progress.

In these circumstances, the task of human conscience is simplified considerably: all we have to do is contemplate the 'technological sublime' (L. Marx, *DITMP* p. 31), enthused by Webster's rhetoric. It is symptomatic of the times that a politician's recommendation to his fellow citizens is, mainly, one of admiring how science and technology will so certainly deliver to us not only the future we are hoping for, but even more and better than that, in directions we can hardly fathom.

As we have not yet debated or reflected on what it is that we are hoping for, what does Webster's recommendation mean? There is the suggestion here that science and technology can deliver towards any end, known or unknown; and that the very task of considering our hopes is lifted from our shoulders.

In his analysis of Webster's rhetoric, Leo Marx states as its main feature the propensity to value 'improvements in power, efficiency, rationality as ends in themselves'. Further, he concludes that 'the technocratic idea of progress is a belief in the sufficiency of scientific and technological innovation as the basis for general

progress. It says that if we can ensure the advance of science-based technologies, the rest will take care of itself' (*DITMP p. 31*).

But is this really what Condorcet recommends in the *Esquisse*? It is true that, as illustrated in Chapter Two, knowledge appears, in his conception, as a universal means of endless benefit to virtue, material well-being, liberty and equality. However, saying that knowledge is always indispensable to all other goods (e.g. nothing of relevance to utility can be gained in the absence of truth), and that knowledge will always lead to increase in other goods does not yet imply that increasing knowledge is always sufficient for the advancement of other goods.

However, if knowledge is singled out as *the* universally recognisable significant means to increase all the other goods (as Condorcet suggests), then *the* (only possible) universal social project is the advancement of knowledge. Moreover, relying on the suggestion that this one good (knowledge) is both needed most by each person and needed by everyone (so it is needed most overall) further intimates that the universal social project should take precedence in commanding resources from any individual or local projects.

Let us remember that Condorcet offers a universal humanist guarantee to human fulfilment, i.e. an empowerment instrument. This guarantee is not directly given by the advancement of the sciences and the arts but is a consequence of the development of the political science and the political art: the constitutional recognition of natural human rights. According to Leo Marx the political dimension of the social project was an essential ingredient, of primary importance, in the French, English and American Enlightenment:

‘...A necessary criterion of progress was the achievement of political and social liberation. They regarded the new sciences and technologies not as ends in themselves, but as instruments for carrying out a comprehensive transformation of society...’ (*DITMP p.31*).

Within Condorcet’s model, the political project should ensure that the goods



pursued are enjoyed by people and not confined to systems. But as only universal rights are guaranteed or recognised, the goods enjoyed by people are perceived as enjoyed within this universal pattern that does not account for diversity.

Importantly, although Condorcet states that political enlightenment is at hand and that the principles of the French constitution should be followed as the most advanced available, we cannot yet infer from this that perfection in political matters had been attained. On the contrary, he clearly sees the state of the political science and political art in his time as incomplete, still in need of catching up with the precise methods of the natural sciences. In the last chapter of the *Esquisse* he also indicates a few directions in which the political, social and moral sciences and arts should develop.

One assumption that can too hastily be made about Condorcet's absolutist conception of human nature is that he regards human nature as immutable. Such an assumption has far reaching consequences. If human nature is immutable, and therefore its universal features are immutable, then the universal natural rights will always be the same. Hence, the perfect constitution will only need to be written once.

All we need to do in this case is make sure that the particular constitution in question is indeed the perfect constitution. For this purpose, we require a reliable validation method. Condorcet suggests that this method is the harmony test: we know that we have reached perfection when all the goods involved articulate beneficially in all circumstances. The 'unbreakable chain' between knowledge, virtue and happiness only obtains in an absolute sense. If something we perceive as knowledge appears to conflict with virtue or produce suffering, then it is not true knowledge, and so on. But when describing ignorance as attracting slavery, vice, fear and misery, Condorcet points to a certain universal coherence that exists within the vicious chain as well. How can we then firmly distinguish between manifestations of the virtuous chain and those of the vicious chain? Condorcet's implicit response to this problem is that, as human happiness is at the heart of the 'interests of nature', the ultimate test is the absence or presence of human suffering.

The crucial difference between the virtuous and the vicious chain is that the former cannot possibly produce human suffering, whereas the latter almost invariably does. However, to carry this point further, one should also ask: by what means do we identify human suffering? If it is through our own feelings, how do we know that these feelings correctly indicate genuine suffering, and not some whimsical frustrations? We have now moved our discussion to a level of detail which is not addressed in the *Esquisse*. To continue in its spirit, however, one can say that one firm feature of genuine suffering is its universality. The test questions will then be something like: would anyone else suffer in the given circumstances? Would most or all people suffer similarly in these circumstances?

The universality of genuine human suffering confirms that human beings are equal in having essentially the same nature, the same needs, the same rights and the same values. Consequently, when truly enlightened, we should all see human wealth, in its general principles, as expressed by the value set knowledge – virtue – material wealth – liberty – equality within the pyramidal model suggested by Condorcet. This absolutism legitimates the moral primacy of our (universal) similarities over our (contingent) differences.

Moving ahead to Webster's 19<sup>th</sup> Century America, could Webster have thought that, as the enlightened and perfect constitution had already been put in place by the Founding Fathers of the Republic, and as there were no feedback signals of distress from the constituency (on the contrary, signals of prosperity were rapidly multiplying), nothing remained of the social project but the uni-dimensional, indefinite development of science and technology?

As discussed in Chapter Two, Condorcet's position on the issue of limits is complicated and ambiguous. Most of his premises about human nature, human needs and human fulfilment in general seem to converge towards the idea that human nature is treated as immutable. However, in the last chapter of the *Esquisse* he clearly states that he does not exclude the possibility for human nature to change in time. Interestingly, on this crucial point he prefers to adopt an agnostic position,

and simply close the issue by saying that not enough is known at this stage to establish one way or the other.

Condorcet clearly conceives of an absolute limit to the advancement of the sciences, represented by the perfect development of the universal method and language. On the other hand, he suggests that the arts (as applications of the general principles of the sciences to human needs) are infinitely perfectible. This is not because universal needs are perceived dynamically, as continuously changing, but because the arts are meant to attend to local needs as well, with the contribution of each individual in their privileged position of understanding best their specific circumstances.

Condorcet's conception seems to imply that when perfect knowledge has been attained and universal needs have been satisfied, then there is no perceived requirement to maintain a universal social project. Consequently, there is never a good reason to separate the progress of science and technology from the progress of the social, political and moral arts.

Here is, I believe, the turning point from a conception like Condorcet's to that of Webster. The 'technology' envisaged by Webster as advancing the whole society is clearly a narrower concept than Condorcet's idea of 'the arts'. While Condorcet acknowledges the historical state of the natural sciences as methodologically more advanced than the other sciences, he recommends the development of all sciences in a climate of equality. In response to the question raised earlier about the possible belief (among Webster's generation) that the political and social tasks were over, I would like to formulate a more plausible hypothesis, namely that they believed the uni-dimensional pursuit of science and technology capable of resolving, through a trickle-down effect, all other problems. With Webster, it appears that a further hierarchy operates within the realm of knowledge: the natural sciences and their associated mechanical arts are the only areas of knowledge and application developed enough to produce universal results.

Thus, there appears to be increased confidence that the knowledge acquired within the natural sciences will naturally flow into all the other sciences, which will

inevitably develop, somehow by themselves. This is a very different picture of the process from the one proposed by Condorcet. Firstly, he does not talk about simplistic transfer of knowledge from an area of enquiry to another but about a universal rational method of establishing and organising scientific truth. Secondly, if any conceptual, methodological transfer is to occur from the natural to the other sciences, this is to be done, at all times, by the human mind in its rich complexity, not by some physical mechanism.

The narrowing of the field of knowledge required for the development of the universal social project proposed by Condorcet has a tremendous effect. With universal harmony assumed within this modified pyramidal model, there is no need for feedback and no need for people to closely watch or control the technological race. The criteria of development inherent in the technical systems are now sufficient to progress all goods. We can relax and even not get concerned about predicting outcomes, because whatever technology produces for us, in its natural and independent advancement, is invariably beneficial to human fulfilment.

All four dangerous propensities I have mentioned previously are present here: (1) uni-dimensionality: one type of systemic development is sufficient for all others, because one dimension of humanness develops all others; (2) infinite improvability: there is no reason to predict limits to a systemic instrument which is universally beneficial to human fulfilment; (3) empirical determinism: progress is no longer an expression of desirability, a normative construct of a valuing subject, but happens out there, objectively, according to linear laws we may even fail to understand, let alone assess; and (4) anti-humanism, on which I would like to elaborate below.

Intentionally or not, through this mutation that occurred in the scope of knowledge between Condorcet's conception and that of Webster, the central role of the human being in the social project has been eroded. The advancement of society under the lead of science and technology is no longer justified by its direct significance for human fulfilment (which is taken for granted) but by what is technologically conceivable. As human beings practically lose the leading role, they are both relieved of responsibility and deprived of power. As the social system driving

progress does not seem to require our input, we are no longer called to be the special creatures with all those enlightened attributes required of us, e.g. knowledge of our true needs and interests, exercise of true reason, rights and liberties, etc. Thus, something has occurred which for Condorcet would have been – we intuit – unacceptable: by transferring all key responsibilities to technical systems, human beings have lost touch with absolute knowledge, the ultimate condition for any human fulfilment.

There appears to be a contradiction here between assuming that, while we are not yet in possession of perfect knowledge in all areas of human enquiry we can safely start with what we have got, and the perceived distance or divergence growing between human beings, on the one hand, and knowledge and control, on the other hand.

In conclusion, one cannot help observing the fragility of Condorcet's pyramidal model, especially in the hands of its more pragmatic epigones. It was sufficient to narrow the concepts of 'science' and 'art', and the whole construct, with its originally benign intentions, turned into a severely reductionist, unsound conception of both social progress and human fulfilment.

## **5.2 The myth of economic progress: from Smith to Hayek**

The identification of social progress with economic development is another stereotype of our everyday lives in society, and of social policy thinking in particular. Out of a vast literature of economic thinking about social progress, I have selected F. A. Hayek's theory of the progressive society<sup>4</sup>, as perhaps the most popular and best articulated theory of social progress in the economic liberalist tradition.

For Hayek, progress is the necessary result of a spontaneous, unplanned evolution of human civilisation. Civilisation is everything that distinguishes human beings from beasts, it is what human beings can create from the power of their own intellect, but without the power to predict the course of progress in a unifying

design. Human nature itself is taken by surprise by this spontaneous, uncontrollable advance of civilisation, and our normative doubts are all the result of the human psyche lagging behind the overwhelming speed of material progress. In this context, growing wiser may not always mean growing happier or getting what we wanted. Against our dominant preferences for justice, the key to social progress is social and material inequality, as the only structure that allows for continued economic growth and the elimination of absolute poverty. The rules of a progressive society, which must be accepted for the sake of the greater goal, are that (1) progress will not always deliver what we expect; and (b) progress will necessarily divide people into winners and losers (*CL*, pp. 39–53).

Hayek gives the term ‘progress’ a uni-dimensional and technical meaning, separated from reflections on the complexity of our values and sentiments. It is a distinction clearly made by the author himself:

‘Progress in the sense of the cumulative growth of knowledge and power over nature is a term that says little about whether the new state will give us more satisfaction than the old.’ (*CL*, p. 41)

We also note here an understanding of progress as knowledge and power (more in the rationalist tradition of the Enlightenment). As will be illustrated below, this definition of progress converges with that of material (or economic) progress.

What does Hayek perceive as progress? Is it simply any social change or evolution? He appears to identify ‘progress’ with ‘civilisation’, and to use the terms interchangeably. There is a sense, apparent in his writing, in which the production of all those elements referred to as ‘civilisation’ – all that has evolved from the hunting stage to modern society (*CL*, p. 40) – is impregnated with value, therefore it can be called progress in the sense of improvement, betterment, amelioration, positive change.

But in relation to what is this change positive? Hayek’s evaluation of civilisation as progressive is empirical and *a posteriori*, on the assumption that its evolution is unpredictable, therefore it can only be analysed after the event. In addition, this

evolution is inevitable, with human goals (ideals) and human reason playing a limited, rather local, part in it.

Hayek adds normative attributes to the concept of 'civilisation', for example in describing civilisation as 'all we value' and all the forces that produce value (*CL*, p. 40). Here is Hayek's *progressive* interpretation of social evolution and his implicit reply to *anti-progressive* or *a-progressive* reactions to it:

'The history of civilization is the account of a progress which, in the short space of less than eight thousand years, has created nearly all that we regard as characteristic of human life. After abandoning hunting life, most of our direct ancestors, at the beginning of neolithic culture, took to agriculture and soon to urban life perhaps less than three thousand years or one hundred generations ago. It is not surprising that in some respects man's biological equipment has not kept pace with that rapid change, that the adaptation of his non-rational part has lagged somewhat, and that many of his instincts and emotions are still more adapted to the life of a hunter than to life in civilization. If many features of our civilization seem to us unnatural, artificial, or unhealthy, this must have been man's experience ever since he took to town life, which is virtually since civilization began. All the familiar complaints against industrialism, capitalism, or overrefinement are largely protests against a new way of life that man took up a short while ago after more than half a million years' existence as a wandering hunter, and that created problems still unsolved by him.'" (*CL*, p. 40)

As a driving force of human civilisation (understood mainly as material civilisation), the sentiments of individuals in relation to the meaning and value of their own lives are often likely to be hurt and disappointed. The results of progress as independent of human design are objective, therefore they cannot be influenced by our feelings. So it is us who have to adjust our affections to the emerging social realities, and not expect these realities to treat our individual feelings with sensitivity.

Hayek constructs the opposition between the morality of primitive society and that of the civilised society ('the Great Society') as an issue of scale. Accordingly,

civilised society is simply too large to ensure that one common purpose can be pursued by all its members, and in this context the ethics of solidarity and altruism suitable to a primitive society of hunter-gatherers should be (and must necessarily be) replaced by an ethics of individual freedom and responsibility. The key to this scalar transformation is society's ability to satisfy unknown needs of unknown people through a more abstract system of exchange. In this context, the progress of human society from primitive to civilised is not necessarily identical with some kind of moral progress. It is progress in the sense of society's increasing ability to support a larger population, but in order to moralise this spontaneous result, human beings would have to adopt a profoundly different set of values, essentially opposed to the old ones<sup>5</sup>.

Hayek's idea that progress as cumulative material and experiential growth is infinitely improvable relies on the premise that it is unpredictable. Human beings always strive for something, but their intellect does not have the power to understand the impact of all their pursuits on the world around or the connections among all things, and therefore to foresee all the consequences of their actions (*CL*, pp. 40–41). What emerges is a spontaneous order, which delivers results with certainty but in unpredictable ways.

The central tenet of Hayek's doctrine of the new morality of the Great Society involves the limits of the human intellect, which (in Hayek's view) cannot possibly possess complete, perfect knowledge and exercise complete control of all factors at play in modern society. Consequently, if human beings believe that they are able to plan and implement successfully on such a large scale, they are deluding themselves<sup>6</sup>.

Hayek quotes Adam Smith in relation to the idea that only a society in a progressive state of accumulating material affluence can ensure a better life for the poor of that society, while a stationary or declining society cannot deliver this result. However, overlooking the limiting role of the stationary state in Smith's empirical theory of economic development, Hayek develops the idea of a progressive society in a direction not envisaged by Smith. While Smith remains silent on the issue of



addressing social inequality, implicitly treating it as a necessary evil, Hayek interprets social inequality as the main, indispensable condition of material progress. It is this inequality that ensures the few rich to experiment first, and then the poor to partake in the multiplication of these material benefits due to a trickle-down process of natural distribution (*CL*, pp. 44–49). The certain outcome of interfering with the natural, spontaneous inequality formed in society throughout history will be the loss of the nation's role as a leader in the race of progress: '...What enables a country to lead in this world-wide development are its economically most advanced classes and...a country that deliberately levels such differences also abdicates its leading position' (*CL*, p. 47).

As the quote above clearly illustrates (and such examples abound in Hayek's text), the kind of progress central to the ideology of the progressive society is, strictly, economic progress. Hayek does not elaborate on the capacity of material progress to fulfil the role of universal means to human happiness but there are occasional suggestions of this in his text, for example when he discusses 'all the conveniences of a comfortable home, of our means of transportation and communication, of entertainment and enjoyment' (*CL*, p. 43), as results of material progress.

His emphasis is on the idea that we are more likely to obtain a positive response to our desires if we let society follow the course of its own progress spontaneously, without trying to plan it. Obviously, society's progress consists of the accumulation of material riches, assisted by the expansion and accumulation of knowledge and technology. In this process, our normative judgements about what should constitute progress are hardly relevant. What drives social progress is inevitably dictated by the criteria inherent in the logic of material growth. There is no guarantee that these criteria will always coincide with our aspirations but the accidental encounters between these two types of criteria are likely to be more frequent if we do not interfere with the inherent criteria of progress thus defined. As Hayek puts it, '[a progressive society] does not guarantee the results to everyone. It disregards the pain of unfulfilled desire aroused by the example of others. It appears cruel because it increases the desire of all in proportion as it increases its gifts to some. Yet so

long as it remains a progressive society, some must lead, and the rest must follow' (*CL*, p. 45).

Leaving the progressive society to develop according to its own devices is, in the longer term, of endless benefit to all members of that society, irrespective of their place in the social hierarchy. Material progress is also considered to be of endless benefit to any other forms of progress we may envisage: scientific, technological, artistic, or related to any other, 'non-material', values. Hayek admits that fast material development may slow down the development of non-material values, but he regards this only as a necessary short-term phenomenon (*CL*, p. 49). It does not seem to occur to him that material progress can be, at least in certain forms of its delivery, chronically inimical to the development of other values.

Hayek's theory of the progressive society, for example, is a combination of naturalist (evolutionist) interpretation of progress<sup>7</sup> with a reductionist understanding of social progress as economic (and, secondarily, scientific-technological) in a technical sense. In his perspective, the connection between social progress and human progress is so loose that it is reduced to mere accident (e.g. set up the system and hope for the best). But in his conception of accidental human progress, despite his agnosticism, Hayek finds resources to appreciate that leaving this dehumanised nature (divorced from any human values) to its own devices is still better than trying to impose on it our own designs. But from whose perspective is this *better* condition appraised? Hayek does not clarify this point, but one assumes it must be from the perspective of human interests.

How can there be a claim that Hayek's open-ended conception of the progressive society is anything like a development or continuation of Smith's conception of the constrained role of material wealth increase in human fulfilment? As illustrated in Chapter Three, this role is very carefully qualified, especially from the ideal of wisdom and virtue. I shall therefore limit my discussion here to Smith's majoritarian, less esoteric ideal of humanness, namely the one directed by wealth and greatness.

Let us remember Smith's suggestion that, while the natural inclination to continuously better one's condition necessarily pushes human fulfilment beyond the realm of limited need satisfaction, the relative and infinite pursuit of superiority over others (and of admiration from others) meets with constraints from virtue, liberty and security, even when wealth and greatness are clearly chosen as ultimate ends. In other words, a minimum level of virtue, liberty and security is indispensable for any success in pursuing wealth and greatness, and these conditions must be met independently (they cannot be taken for granted as achieved through any mechanism, but only exercised directly by human judgement and will).

In this context, material wealth is a universal means, of fairly general benefit perhaps, but definitely not of universal and endless benefit. Considering the unlimited exigences of relative socio-economic superiority, pursuit of wealth beyond immediate satisfaction of needs will inevitably reach a point that will limit (therefore become adverse to the progress of) virtue, liberty and security.

One may consider simplistic Smith's assumption that, in most people, the permanent natural inclination to better one's condition refers, first and foremost, to material improvement. This is a valid point, upon which I shall not elaborate here. However reductionist, though, this perspective is still humanist, because it is mainly preoccupied with what people appear to aspire to. But the path of wealth and greatness differs from that of wisdom and virtue in that it is one step below true human fulfilment. In Smith's view, there is a greater reason (i.e. greater than the fulfilment of the individuals involved) why nature instills in most human beings a conception of human fulfilment which favours material wealth and social status. This reason is the natural creation of social order.

The perspective proposed by Smith appears to suggest that, although this popular conception of human fulfilment may seem like nature's hoax played on most individuals, it is in effect the best arrangement possible, simply because only the path of wealth and greatness can produce social order, while the path of wisdom and virtue cannot. Indeed, to continue Smith's ideas on this point, given that wisdom and virtue are the options exercised by loners who only recognise absolute

truth and perfection as their authority, the path of wisdom and virtue can hardly be envisaged as capable of producing any social order at all. While democratising Smith's elitist view on human fulfilment by postulating that everyone can (and should) aspire to human wealth as a form of wisdom (rich experiencing) rather than as material wealth, Marx puts himself under the absolute obligation to find a social order that would support everybody's pursuit of human wealth at the expense of material wealth. The social order proposed by Marx is, as mentioned before, very demanding, for it requires the universal collective and the universal social being, with hardly any tolerance for exceptions. In other words, this order would only work if all people understood and pursued their fulfilment in the same way, in particular by invariably placing material wealth as subordinate to human wealth.

Importantly, for Smith, material wealth is not the only universal means available. Even within a wider social system, it does not make sense for any society to pursue wealth at the expense of all liberties, securities and virtues. On the contrary, natural liberty and security are the key instruments for securing wealth in a fair economic system, and a fair economic system provides the best potential (environment) for wealth increase. The role of individuals and that of the state are in fact inter-supportive. While the individual should be allowed to pursue material wealth primarily, the state should primarily ensure the liberty and security of all individuals. Accordingly, it appears that natural liberty and security naturally produce wealth. A state striving to give people wealth would not be able to provide precisely those things each individual would require for their fulfilment. However, a state striving to protect natural liberty and security equally for all individuals would be much more successful in enabling each individual to achieve their own fulfilment.

The key to the success of Smith's model is his confidence in our ability to identify natural liberty and security. Unproblematically, we seem to be able to know when a particular socio-economic situation or practice is produced by laws of nature and when it is caused by artificial distortions of the course of nature. The premise that this ability is unproblematic is itself criticisable, but what I would like to remark here is that Smith's perspective necessarily requires this premise, and that this

premise carries considerable weight in the application of the theory: one must possess and constantly apply this knowledge, especially when in a position to design economic policy. However, what makes the acquisition and validation of this knowledge problematic is the fact that Smith does not readily identify natural results with outcomes left to chance (without human intervention) and artificial results with outcomes produced by human intervention. This leaves us with hardly any clues as to how one should be able to test whether (and in what circumstances) one is in possession of this true, absolute knowledge.

The turning point towards Hayek's direction of thought appears to occur in relation to requirements for knowledge. As everything produced by and through the free market is assumed to be natural, we are no longer required to identify genuine natural liberty and distinguish it from artificial situations. Furthermore, Hayek seems to presume that human intervention towards planning an economy is necessarily artificial, while natural results are necessarily spontaneous.

Our limited knowledge (which no longer involves the key requirement to correctly identify natural and artificial economic phenomena) becomes sufficient to advance the path of material wealth increase, because the gains achieved through this approach will naturally flow into all the other goods. But how this flow occurs may not be obvious to us. Even if the outcomes of the free market may appear whimsical or irrational to us, or frustrate our feelings and desires, Hayek is convinced that this approach is still the best we can pursue to maximise our chances for human fulfilment. Similar to the transformations observed from Condorcet's conception to that of Webster, the economic system's own criterion for infinite material growth is sufficient for the progress of society, and this progress occurs objectively, leaving our feelings behind. Again, we are not required to know or be any different from what we are, as our input (feedback) is not required. A similar contradiction is apparent here between, on the one hand, human beings safely assuming control and benefit through the introduction of a universal system, and, on the other hand, progressively losing both control and benefit to the independent, divergent evolution of the system.

### 5.3 The myth of political progress: from Marx to Lenin

The project of creating a non-exploitative and non-alienating society through political change and organisation is the only one of the three social projects presented here which in our times has suffered a significant drawback (although a good number of countries today still value some of its central principles).

For the purposes of this study, let us take a brief look at Lenin's theory of the communist revolution, and discern from here the main premises of his conception of social progress and human fulfilment.

Lenin's contribution to the consolidation of political change as a criterion of social progress starts with his critique of trade unionism as insufficient for the change of social relations predicted and promoted by Marx. In his essay 'What Is to Be Done?'<sup>8</sup>, Lenin accuses trade unions of *economism*, i.e. the tendency to advocate for better conditions for workers by using purely economic criteria of justice, which do not question the mode of production and the social relations that found the capitalist society. In this context, Lenin believes that political change is more fundamental, and on this basis he explains how the tsarist autocracy in Russia (essentially a political, not economic, institution) can be removed from power by an (economically backward) peasant class<sup>9</sup>.

Lenin regards the Russian Revolution of October 1917 as a model of social and political change ahead of the rest of the world, for all other countries will inevitably look up to it for answers about their own future. Here is what Lenin writes on the first page of his *'Left Wing' Communism – An Infantile Disorder* (1920):

'...Soon after the victory of the proletarian revolution in at least one of the advanced countries, a sharp change will probably come about: Russia will cease to be the model and will once again become a backward country...// At the present moment in history, however, it is the Russian model that reveals to *all* countries something – and something highly significant – of their near and inevitable future. Advanced workers in all lands have long realised this; more often than not, they have grasped it with their revolutionary class instincts

rather than realised it. Herein lies the international “significance”...of soviet power, and of the fundamentals of Bolshevik theory and tactics.’<sup>10</sup>

There are two criteria of progress contrasted in this rhetoric: the economic criterion (which defines the ‘advanced’ as opposed to ‘backward’ countries), and the political criterion. Here the higher importance conferred to the political criterion over the economic one is obvious. While economic considerations may become important in conditions where the political revolution has occurred, they cannot override the relevance of the political lesson Russian bolshevism was teaching the whole world in the aftermath of the Great War: society is in need of revolution, and the avenue for a radical transformation can only be political class action. In this sense, Bolshevism is the progressive force available at that moment in history, a quality that remains unsurpassed by other forms of advancement, and despite Russia’s backwardness in other respects.

Importantly, Lenin also believes that, in a good society, progress in political organisation must precede other advancements (economic or otherwise) in all circumstances. Political progress, embodied in the ideals of the Communist Revolution, is the unquestionable, universal priority, of endless benefit to all other goods. In *The State and Revolution* (1916), Lenin argues that transition from capitalism to socialism is impossible without resort to ‘primitive democracy’, in which the reorganisation of the state and society is to be done, as he describes, through purely political measures<sup>11</sup>.

As a practitioner of revolutionary processes, Lenin cannot avoid observing the traumatic effects of the implementation of communist measures through physical force, the loss of human lives and of other goods indispensable to a decent human existence. But he regards all this as a necessary evil, as temporary misfortunes caused by people’s lack of unity in adopting *the* only right way forward. To support this position, in *The State and Revolution* Lenin undertakes the task of clarifying, by reference to the Soviet Revolution, what can be changed immediately, through violent movement and coercion, and what requires time to emerge, somehow spontaneously, from the abruptly introduced political order. Thus, the bourgeois state institutions of private ownership of means of production, parliamentarism, and

the privileges of army officers and public officials can (and should) be replaced straight away by social ownership, working councils (both legislative and executive), a voluntary militia of armed workers and revocable administrators who would be paid workers' wages<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, Lenin postulates that bureaucracy, the use of technical experts, division of labour (and the 'antithesis between mental and physical labour') cannot be abolished immediately, through deliberate political action. Similarly, the voluntary fulfilment of communist principles of social behaviour, the ability and willingness of all citizens to administer the state themselves, and (most importantly) equality of outcomes ('to each according to their needs') can only be achieved through a natural, time-consuming process of development, induced (but by no means completed) by the initial political change<sup>13</sup>. However, Lenin's theory of revolution into socialism and evolution into communism has many contradictions. One such contradiction is exposed by Trotsky in *The Revolution Betrayed* (1937), in a lengthy analysis of the theoretical and practical difficulties of creating a bureaucracy that, while all-encompassing, is unrealistically expected to be capable of preparing its own dissolution<sup>14</sup>.

There is, however, a visible connection between Lenin's theory of revolution and that of Marx. It must be noted here that Marx did believe in the inevitability (necessity) of violent revolution. The 'universal man' who possesses the perfect understanding of true human fulfilment, human wealth and ideal society can only freely consent to the political measures required by the implementation of a communist regime. Where there is free consent, there is no need for violence. Thus, human suffering occurs because people fail to achieve the superior understanding required by the good society.

In this respect, Marx's and Lenin's ideas about the role of the communist revolution seem to be compatible. But there is an important turning point from Marx's theory to Lenin's. In Marx's view, proletarians are in the best position to achieve the required understanding of true human wealth, because, with respect to material wealth criteria, they are not performing well. Their disadvantage under capitalism becomes the key advantage in the new society. As capitalists stand to gain on the



scale of material wealth, they are predictably reluctant to adopt a different set of values for human fulfilment. The Communist Revolution is the dialectically inevitable means of forcing (if failing to convince) all individuals to join the values of the proletariat, and thus become proletarians. As proletarians, all individuals have equal access to self-development and exercise their personal power, purified and separated from material power. The proletarian class ultimately absorbs everyone, in universal equality.

Here Lenin modifies the Marxist doctrine by operating a further hierarchy with respect to capabilities to achieve the proper understanding of proletarian values, and this hierarchy is within the proletarian class itself. He insists that, to carry out a revolution against the capitalist system, a constant political effort is needed. Contrary to the spirit of civic voluntarism advocated by Marx in political affairs, Lenin contends that the revolutionary party must consist of a body of full-time revolutionaries, whose role is to dedicate their life and energy to the cause of the revolution and its success.

His contention is based on the practical observation that the workers' revolution, being essentially political, requires professionalism (experience, strategy, and relentless effort), which is impossible to achieve in the real proletarian conditions within the capitalist system (long working hours, and the constant pressure of acquiring the necessary means of subsistence). Furthermore, Lenin argues that this lack of time and means is the main instrument employed by the capitalist system in preventing the working class from acquiring its class consciousness and a proper understanding of its revolutionary mission. For this reason, dedicated people are required to commit themselves to the awakening and organisation of the proletariat into the great political force it is destined to be.

With the ideological foundations established in favour of political action, Lenin proceeds to explain in detail a political theory that Marx never developed, namely an analysis of how the dictatorship of the proletariat would effectively operate: the workers would form a class that would organise itself and seize all political power, thus creating a state that would act against and eliminate exploiting classes like the

land owners and the bourgeoisie. The state would thus be an instrument for the liberation of the working class and of the whole society from exploitation. Lenin also explains how the concentration of power in the hands of the representatives of workers would lead to the formation of an armed movement<sup>15</sup>.

In his study on Marx's philosophy, W. L. McBride (1977) notes that, in Lenin's perspective, the role of the communist party through the transition from capitalism to communism is so efficient that the dialectical consequence of the party system being eventually dissolved in a self-sufficient civil society no longer appears logically necessary:

'If the truth about society is of the straightforward, objective sort that Lenin conceives it to be, and if the party members are genuinely dedicated and have set aside considerations of self-interest, then it seems highly unlikely that the collective wisdom of these individuals, implemented through the procedure that Lenin called 'democratic centralism' (open discussion of issues and options before arriving at a decision, universal adherence to a decision once made), would be misguided. And so the seeds have been sown, through this reasoning process, for the view that the Party is nearly infallible in its political judgements.// But if the Communist Party is guaranteed in advance... to be so beneficial to the cause of social progress prior to its seizure of political power, then there would appear to be little urgency in working towards its dissolution after a successful political revolution.'<sup>16</sup>

This is a significant departure from the classical Marxist ideal of the state-less (and party-less) civil society.

Moreover, Lenin believes that, until individuals reach a sufficiently mature social consciousness and ethics to act for the successful formation of a stateless society, this new ethics and social behaviour must be imposed from the top by the visionary party, for only the imposition of communist discipline through the state apparatus can lead to the formation of the social behaviours conducive to the creation of a new society.

It is therefore not surprising that subsequent ideologists of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (the workers' State) – including Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev – assumed the chronological priority of political improvement, suggesting that all other criteria for social progress must wait until the desired advancement of political institutions is obtained. Similarly, it is not surprising that this absolute priority given to political change contributed to the doctrine of sacrifice promoted in the Soviet Union and its satellites for almost five decades.

Although a revolutionary situation (Lenin believes) is created spontaneously, through historical necessity (E. Aarons, *LTR*, pp. 68–69)<sup>17</sup>, the actual success of a revolution is a matter of conscious class organisation led by a group of professional revolutionaries (E. Aarons, *LTR*, p. 89), with experience in disseminating the right ideas, mobilising the right forces, seizing political power and maintaining it. The noble quality of the goals is not sufficient: the practical achievement of the best society through political change is, in essence, a technical issue.

We can see how Lenin's implicit conception of social progress tends towards unidimensionality, almost identifying social progress with political change. In fact, the identification process increases with the consolidation of the political power of the Communist Party. As this power increases, so does the emphasis on political progress understood technically, in the sense of effecting the desired political structures and institutions at the expense of any human sacrifice. This is justified by Lenin's belief that the necessary sacrifice is only temporary, that ultimately the universal means of political change will prove to be of endless benefit to all other aspects of society and human life.

Interestingly, however, there is no indication from Lenin or his followers as to how close we are drawing to the moment when everyone will behave like good proletarians and the leadership of the professional revolutionaries is no longer necessary. In fact, with all the powers and responsibilities of revolutionary change bestowed on this special group, the system seems to work so well according to its own developmental logic, that there is no need to rely on the responsible behaviour of others, and no need to foresee or desire a limit to this systemic development. As

the communist social system develops objectively, without everyone's input, the creative activity, freedom and material wealth produced in these circumstances become attributes of the system rather than of individuals enjoying these goods directly.

Let us remember that Marx's conception of human fulfilment promotes creative activity for the sake of the community (or 'universal man') as the ultimate end, with freedom as a universal means to it, material wealth production as a universal means to freedom, a non-exploitative and non-alienating mode of production as a universal means to wealth conducive to freedom, and political change as a universal means to the creation of a non-exploitative and non-alienating mode of production. In this rigid (fixed), absolutist, universalist, static and empirically interpreted value set, there are, however, important limits and feedback channels between systems and people. For example, both freedom and creative activity are objectively constrained by the necessity to attend to immediate needs. This necessity can be controlled and reduced (perhaps ad infinitum) but not completely overcome. Similarly, just as material wealth production does not necessarily convert into freedom (and a particular mode of production, as social system, is required), freedom does not necessarily convert into creative activity for 'universal man', where a particular kind of individual conscience and behaviour is also required.

The social project may be criticised as unsound on the basis of a multitude of empirical evidence, but this type of evidence may be interpreted in terms of the system's failure (or to people's failure) to operate all the required conversions. Such evidence does not necessarily invalidate the model proposed by Marx, for there is no reason to assume that, if all conditions postulated by his model are met, the model would indeed produce the uni-dimensionality, anti-humanism, infinite systemic improbability (as desirable) and empirical determinism identified in Lenin's theory. On the contrary, there are sufficient constraints to ensure that the multi-dimensionality of both the social project and human fulfilment is acknowledged, limits to the social systems are envisaged (e.g. the achievement of the perfect society will remove the need for political action through the state, and

therefore the state will disappear), and the empowered input of individuals is preserved.

However, just as with the two preceding conceptions (Condorcet and Smith), the pyramidal model of goods (values) for human fulfilment, in which the relations among these values are empirical, absolute, universal and static, contributes considerably to the idea that, if we implement the uni-dimensional system correctly (in this case, the right political changes), then the rest will naturally follow. Again, relying on these premises provides that same illusion of safety which eventually removes the need for people's vigilance and input and allows the system to take over by absorbing the human power and freedom and diverting it towards a systemic, non-human path.

#### **5.4 Conclusion: the turning point as a reduction of the original requirements for certainty**

Historically, the evolutions of the three social projects indicate somewhat similar journeys from what may appear as legitimate human aspirations towards something increasingly alien. The more practice and knowledge was accumulated along a particular systemic formula, the more confidence in the normative value of a conception of progress waned, being gradually replaced by empirical-determinist conceptions, where the language of active optimism was replaced by a language of necessity. The deviation of the social projects from their original aims was possible by prioritising one criterion (type of progress) as a universal means, under assumptions of endless benefit.

The criticisms raised against these premises, and the tensions inherent in theories relying on such premises, are illustrations of how difficult it is, for any theorist of social progress, to adopt a perspective in which human civilisation has left out completely, in an anti-humanist perspective, the life (and whole-of-life values) of human beings. If human civilisation itself is defined, in Hayek's words, as 'all we value', then it means that, from the outset, our perceptions of what constitutes

progress in human civilisation are shaped by conditions inherent in our humanness (human life and experience).

In fact, science, technology, economic practices and political institutions are all, originally, dimensions of human life and activity, therefore dimensions of humanness. By essentialising human civilisation (society) into something set apart from its members, we obtain a human civilisation (society) that lives its own life, increasingly contrary to the human lives of its members. A society divergent from human lives may evolve to the point of opposing them, and to becoming, from any human perspective, a source of death.

Thus, it is not surprising that the three paradigms have been pushed to unbearable extremes – those of naturalist and technical projects fulfilling an anti-humanist mission: chronic poverty, and the destruction of human rights, freedom, security, democracy, the physical destruction of an unprecedented number of human lives; a destruction which then extended to social structures and to nature itself: war and irreconcilable conflicts, the irreversible destruction of the environment. It became clear that the extremes were nothing but the aberrant pursuit of goals whose meaning had been eroded by repeated reductionist adjustments.

The pursuit of infinite improvability according to one-dimensional criteria understood in a technical sense has the tendency to exile these criteria into meaninglessness, e.g. the fastest phones at the expense of real communication, the most precise surgery and physical life-maintenance techniques at the expense of real healing, the accumulation of material wealth at the expense of human wealth, the perfection of political control and planning at the expense of authentic interaction with one's social and natural environment. As the classical 'sense of limits'<sup>18</sup> implied in the belief that human beings are *finite* beings disappears with the subsequent generations of theories, leaving room for conceptions of progress *ad infinitum* (of infinite improvability rather than perfectibility), the practical consequences of this evolution appear, from any humanist perspective, irrational (absurd). Any of the criteria provided by emphasis on a particular valued dimension of human life and activity (e.g. knowledge, skill, wealth, political organisation) can

improve in a perceived quantitative sense, in a measurable way; it can increase. It can also be abstracted from its original human-scale context and pulverise all limits. Is it possible to conceive of an infinite progress of knowledge, power, speed, wealth, and so on? Not only is it possible, it is often inspirational. But what is bound to happen when this athletic, record-breaking type of pursuit is taken beyond the natural sphere of the humanity from which it has emerged? As we race all along the axis of technically conceivable possibilities, is the end in view likely to have the same rich meaning it initially had for our human existence? Or are we locked into the creation of improved means to an unimproved end, as suggested by Thoreau<sup>19</sup>? And if all other valued dimensions of our lives are arrested in waiting for the priority fulfilment of this one, are we not condemning all our other faculties and possibilities to eternal unfulfilment?<sup>20</sup>

As it is difficult to make sense of a social progress in a purely technical sense, devoid of any humanist implications, then the path each of the three social projects has taken so far is (quite literally) a dead end. This partly explains the nihilist and agnostic despair produced by much of post-modern thought in response.

How was it possible that models originally developed in response to profound concerns for the human condition were modified into anti-humanist ideologies? Let us note that in each of the three cases discussed above, the turning point has been a reduction of the scope of certainty or knowledge required for the initial launch into the social project. In each case there is the suggestion of an initial creative phase, in which human input is consistently required for the setup of a universal social system. As this system is perfected, based on the key assumptions of the pyramidal model, human beings can safely take advantage of the efficiencies created through the system, reduce this creative input and direct their energy towards other, self-fulfilling activities.

But in each case an important mutation has occurred, from the classical theory to the later conception, with respect to the level of human input originally required and to the moment when the withdrawal of human vigilance can become legitimate. In Condorcet's perspective, the social project requires that *all* sciences and arts be

*equally* perfected and unified through the universal method and language. It is only when this universal perfection has been achieved that one can expect the enlightened results he predicts, and only then can it safely be said that the system can self-maintain within the humanist constraints within which it has been conceived. Consequently, real social progress can only occur when the development of all sciences and arts is properly managed. This is clearly not the case in Webster's conception, where social progress has been reduced to advancements in the natural sciences and the technologies derived from these sciences (in Condorcet's language, 'the mechanical arts'). By applying the assumptions of the pyramidal model to this narrowed scope, we have relaxed too soon, by Condorcet's standards.

Similarly, in Smith's case, the successful implementation of a perfect system of natural liberty through economic policy requires, from the outset, our fairly precise ability to distinguish between natural and artificial economic phenomena. This is a rational capacity we must have prior to the creation of any free market. In Hayek's conception, it is not human reason but the market who decides, in ways somewhat obscure to human understanding, what is natural and what is not in economic practices. Again, the human input has been withdrawn too soon. Likewise, in Marx's terms the system proposed can be considered as established only if *all* individuals adopt the proletarian ethics and have *equal* input in the management of the new social order. The universal base of civic voluntarism proposed by Marx is narrowed by Lenin to a small, privileged group of professional revolutionaries, developing a system which – far from enabling everyone, sooner or later, to equally partake in the newly created social power – breaks loose from any humanist constraints.

Although we may strongly disagree with the three mutations described above, they are explicable in at least three ways. Firstly, there may be the consideration that all exigences of the theory may be difficult to meet in practice at a particular point in time. This consideration must heavily rely on the universalist assumptions of the theory, especially on the premise that once the driving values are promoted the rest will look after itself.



Secondly, the validation tests proposed by the classical theories are actually very difficult to carry out. In Condorcet's case, how do we know when we have attained perfect knowledge and we are not prey to some prejudice or superstition? He does not provide sufficient elements to define absolute reason independently of human and social progress. This renders idle both the concept of reason and the principle of accordance with nature. A similar difficulty occurs in Smith's conception, where our capacity to distinguishing between natural and artificial economic phenomena is somewhat assumed. With Marx, the individual has a freedom to choose how to create and develop oneself (and, thus, others) but does not have the freedom to choose *not* to develop oneself in that social, universal sense. How do we know when self-creative activity of the truly social human being has occurred, and not some illicit pursuit of local material ends? Marx does not say that the duty of individuals to self-create should be policed by a communal authority. He leaves it to the conscience of the enlightened, social individual, and to the absolute point of view of 'universal man'. In all three cases, too much hinges on an absolute perspective which is not easily verifiable in practice. In the face of such exigences, any contingent authority is likely to employ, in practice, questionable solutions.

Thirdly, there is the false comfort of the safety net provided by the assumption of absolute, universal and static empirical relations among dimensions of humanness, as well as – more generally – among social goods and values. As the beneficial systemic instrument to our fulfilment is assumed to be authentic, general and unchanging, and as the dimensions of our ideal of humanness are also locked in an order of beneficial relationships which are genuine, universal and immutable, the task of the social project becomes so much simpler. There is no need to account for unpredictable changes to the circumstances in which the social project develops, or to our ideal of humanness, because the universality characterising both the social project and the ideal of humanness renders circumstances irrelevant.

A possible fourth way is, of course, the misuse of static-universalist conceptions as *ideologies* (in the ideological sense of progress mentioned in Chapter One).

## 5.5 The pyramidal model: an apparent inconsistency

One can remark that in each ideal of humanness espoused by the three classical theories the highlighted dimensions of humanness are perceived as desirable and not empirically given, ultimately perfectible but actually imperfect. However, the relations among these dimensions (especially the universally beneficial instrumentality) are assumed to be empirically given and always perfect.

Furthermore, it is considered that we are still in need of increasing our knowledge about what constitutes each perfect dimension of humanness, in its ideal state, but we seem to already possess perfect knowledge about the relations among these dimensions. This discrepancy between our imperfect knowledge of the universal ideal dimensions of humanness and our perfect knowledge of the relations among these dimensions is never explained or justified in any of the three theories.

How can we then reconcile an acceptance that our understanding of the *real* values is imperfect and subject to progress, while the relationships among the imperfect values (under our imperfect actions resulting from this imperfect counsel) are assumed to always function perfectly, according to the perfect laws of nature? Somehow, while our knowledge of the real values is assumed to be partial, our understanding of the relationships among these values always seems to be complete (the absolute understanding of the absolute dynamic principles of the universe), and sufficient to produce always correct observations of absolute harmony and discord.

In postulating that we know that we are getting closer to absolute truth when harmony obtains in the relationships among our values (ends), the difficulty is not so much in perceiving harmony as in establishing that what we perceive is not some individual or collective delusion. Is apparent, perceived harmony (as the apparent absence of tensions or contradictions) enough to give us a confirmation of the *real* thing? In practice, when we appreciate that something is beneficial, we usually judge it in relation to some other partial end, according to our circumstantial, limited knowledge. How do we infer from here that we are on the right path to the absolute good, the *real* good?

This difficulty brings us back to the observation made earlier about the difficulty of applying the validation tests proposed by these theories, i.e. by reference to an absolute truth we somehow have access to. The classical theories themselves discuss examples of apparent harmony that is in fact false. In Condorcet, ignorance attracts vice just the same as knowledge attracts virtue; prejudice is supported by prejudice, and ignorance feeds on ignorance. In Smith as well, just as real wisdom can only be recognised by real wisdom, so folly receives encouragement and validation from folly (*TMS*, p. 253). Neither of these theories provides us with a reliable, independent instrument or criterion to distinguish between essence and appearance.

## **Summary**

While establishing that none of the three classical theories can be directly accused of anti-humanism and uni-dimensionality, it must be admitted that these theories are vulnerable to undesirable distortions. This vulnerability is largely due to the absolutism and universalism characterising the key premises in each theory – premises referring to the human essence or human nature, to the unique ideal of humanness recommended, and especially to the empirically given relationships among the ideal dimensions of humanness.

In particular, for each social project I have illustrated a possible explanation of the historical distortions of the original theories and identified the turning point to be, in each case, a reduction of the original requirements for knowledge and certainty.

Finally, I have shown that the pyramidal perspective on the relations among dimensions of humanness (a perspective which characterises all three theories) contains an unexplained inconsistency between the perfectibility of the dimensions of humanness and the already attained perfection of the relations among these dimensions.

These findings will guide the suggestions for improvement presented in Chapter Six.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This assumption of desirable sameness in individuals has been challenged on at least three empirical accounts: (1) people and groups also present fundamental differences in power and other attributes; (2) our capacities to know, as well as our various modalities of knowing, may be limited; and (3) the ecological argument for survival and sustainability is increasingly relying on difference and diversity rather than on sameness.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Bronk, *Progress and the Invisible Hand: The Philosophy and Economics of Human Advance* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1998) – abbreviated as *PIH* in the text.

<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Leo Marx's article, 'Does improved technology mean progress?', in the *Technology Review*, January 1987, v.90, p.31 – abbreviated as *DITMP* in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Hayek first exposed his theory in *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960) – abbreviated as *CL* in the text.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of Hayek's approach to this issue, see Andrew Gamble, *Hayek: The Iron Cage of Liberty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), pp. 28–30.

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive evaluation of Hayek's attack on 'constructivist thinking', see A. Gamble, *op.cit.*, p. 32, pp. 68–69 and 192–193.

<sup>7</sup> Hayek's idea that civilisation has been formed not by deliberation but through a spontaneous process of cultural selection has led to an interpretation of social interaction as a discovery process rather than as a conscious or planned decision of a rational agent. The connection between these two ideas is competently discussed by Andrew Gamble in A. Gamble, *op.cit.*, pp. 30 and 193.

<sup>8</sup> See V. I. Lenin, *What is to be done?* ([transl. by S. V. and P. Utechin], Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).

<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, this conclusion contradicts Marx's prediction that communism is bound to occur in the advanced capitalist societies, and that this sequence of modes of production is inevitable.

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<sup>10</sup> V. I. Lenin, *'Left Wing' Communism – An Infantile Disorder* ([ed. Doug Lorimer], Chippendale, NSW: Resistance Books, 1999), pp. 27–28.

<sup>11</sup> V. I. Lenin, *State and Revolution* ([ed. D. Lorimer], Sydney: Resistance Books, 1999), pp. 43–44.

<sup>12</sup> V. I. Lenin, *op.cit.*, pp. 44–45, 48, 52, 75–77 and 86.

<sup>13</sup> V. I. Lenin, *op.cit.*, pp. 47, 77–78, 80, 82–83 and 86–87.

<sup>14</sup> See L. Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* ([transl. by M. Eastman], New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), pp. 49–52, 55–58, 122–123, 125, 128, 132, 135, 142, 238–239, 243–244, 248–251, 261–264, 279 and 284–286.

<sup>15</sup> A. M. Orum, *Introduction to Political Sociology* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1989), p. 45.

<sup>16</sup> W. L. McBride, *The Philosophy of Marx* (London: Hutchinson, 1977), p. 149.

<sup>17</sup> See E. Aarons, *Lenin's Theories on Revolution* (Sydney: D. B. Young Pty Ltd, 1970) – abbreviated as *LTR* in the text.

<sup>18</sup> In *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991), Christopher Lasch refers to the 'sense of limits' experienced by certain moderates and critics of progressivism such as Georges Sorel, G.D.H. Cole, Josiah Royce, Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King – under 'the dependence of happiness on the recognition that humans are not made for happiness' (p. 16). Lasch concludes that 'an exploration of the idea of limits in various guises enables us to reconstruct not so much an intellectual tradition as a sensibility, one that runs against the dominant currents of modern life but exerts considerable force, even today.' (p. 17).

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed analysis of the different values defining human life in primitive and industrial ('civilized') societies, see D. Thoreau's chapter on 'Economy', in *Walden and Civil Disobedience* ([ed. Paul Lauter], Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2000), pp. 39–93.

<sup>20</sup> 'If, instead of infinite duration, eternity is timelessness, then eternal life is here and now. If, furthermore, the future becomes an alibi for eluding the responsibilities demanded from us by the present, let us construct a generous daily life, in order to make our eternity worthwhile.' (Manfred Max-Neef, quoted in Jacques Boulet, 'Borderlands Sub-Versity: A Neighbourhood Place for Local-Global Reflection and Action', in *Community Quarterly*, No. 44/45, Sep/Dec 1997, pp. 3–10).

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# **BUILDING AN IDEAL OF HUMANNESS: A DYNAMIC-RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

## **- Chapter Six -**

*Bring then these blessings to a strict account,  
Make fair deductions, see to what they mount.  
How much of other each is sure to cost;  
How each for other oft is wholly lost...*

### **Introduction**

So far I have analysed and evaluated some conceptions of human fulfilment and ideals of humanness believed to have provided the ideological foundations for three universalist social projects dominating the modern era. Having identified certain key weaknesses in the construction of these ideals, I would now like to make some suggestions for improvement, and, in particular, to propose a dynamic-relational approach to evaluating human progress.

#### **1. Criteria for human progress: proposed selection**

Let us reflect again on the criteria of human progress (based on dimensions of humanness) discussed so far. The candidates brought to our attention have been, in the order of appearance: knowledge (inclusive of control), virtue, material wealth, liberty, equality, political status, admiration of others, security, and creative activity.

Despite the absolutist aspirations of the three social projects discussed in this thesis, one may find it extremely difficult to identify *the* one universally acceptable conception of human progress, as well as universally accepted ways of proving (or justifying) the value or weight of any given criterion in that conception. This is apparent in the considerably different weights and functions assigned to each of the criteria above in the three theories.

Interestingly, the conclusion that there is a grain of truth (or a more or less limited empirical basis) to support each of these different valuations challenges the absolutist and universalist claims of these theories: if none of them is entirely wrong, then (based on the obvious points where these theories contradict one another) none of them (i.e. not one single theory out of the three) can be entirely correct either.

Having said this, from a normative point of view it is still possible (and the three theories have definitely made it easier) to identify a number of values with which most of us would agree and which we would see no reason to abandon, despite the lack of evidence to guarantee their absolute and/or universal status. This is the case, in principle, with all the values listed above (and with a few others which I shall add below): they are not *the* answer to all our concerns, but they do constitute legitimate co-ordinates of (at least partial) human fulfilment.

Accordingly, *knowledge* is revered by Condorcet as *the* ultimate value, while Smith makes it part of wisdom (itself regarded as a prominent virtue), and Marx absorbs it in both creative activity and the socio-economic production of material wealth. Importantly, Condorcet and (to some extent) Marx seem to assume that knowledge guarantees *control* as a by-product. There is, I believe, insufficient empirical ground for this assumption. On the other hand, the intuitions of the three authors are correct in selecting both knowledge and control as important aspects of humanness. Consequently, I would like to consider knowledge and control as separate (non-reducible) but equally legitimate criteria for human progress.

Similarly, *virtue* (a function of knowledge for Condorcet, *the* supreme value for Smith and a redefined attribute of the social individual for Marx) is a serious candidate to our list of criteria, which cannot be ignored. The ability to achieve moral progress, as part of general human fulfilment, is not only sublime to contemplate (as Smith considers it) but also relevant for supporting other areas of human development, such as knowledge, material wealth, liberty, security, etc. Again, it cannot be assumed that virtue is invariably the result of another value but it should rather be considered as an independent value, whose vital importance for

human fulfilment is obvious when defining human life as significant life (as suggested in Section 6 below). In terms of *which* virtues are more relevant to human fulfilment in a universal sense, Aristotle's pluralist, open and non-relativist account of the virtues (as discussed by Martha Nussbaum, 1993) can be particularly helpful<sup>1</sup>. I will not expand on this substantive point here.

Although emphasised as merely instrumental by all three theorists (mainly due to their primarily non-material perspective on general human fulfilment), *material wealth* is perhaps the most constantly valued criterion for human progress across these theories. Smith's insight that material wealth is the progress factor to which most people tend to relate most easily appears confirmed: the totality of material goods required for the satisfaction of human needs (both for subsistence and for development) is an 'objective', simple, easily measurable, relatively unproblematic criterion. Moderately attended to by Condorcet, condescended to by Smith and loathed by Marx, material wealth (the necessary evil) is here to stay. As will be illustrated in Subsection 9.2 below, the idea that achieving a minimum of the respective value is much more important than achieving the maximum physically possible is nowhere more compelling than in the context of material wealth. It is for this reason that, in the dynamic-relational model proposed here, I would like to emphasise the association of material wealth (as a general good) with the idea of material subsistence.

Particularly interesting to the discussion here is the criterion of *liberty*, which in fact appears as (overall) more highly ranked than any other criterion across the three theories. While for Condorcet liberty and material wealth score about the same, Marx and Smith (within his preferred 'path of wisdom and virtue') clearly value the former more than the latter. However, unlike material wealth, liberty is a more problematic criterion. As the concept of liberty is usually shaped around conditions for particular actions, it acquires meaning only when properly predicated: liberty *to do what?* On this point, Condorcet and Smith adopt similar perspectives on liberty: the criterion of progress envisaged by them is the individual liberty to satisfy one's (true) needs and pursue one's (true) interests, in order to better one's condition. By contrast, Marx's concept of liberty is far more demanding: what he is interested in



is the liberty of the social individual to self-create *and* thereby create for ‘universal man’, or for the sake of the community. Furthermore, there is the significant interplay (present, to different extents, in all three theories) between negative liberty (as freedom of the individual from external constraints) and positive liberty (as freedom of the individual to initiate action). In the perspective proposed here, liberty as criterion for human progress is understood to refer to the freedom to purposefully act in accordance with one’s chosen life goals.

Highly regarded by Smith, the criterion of *security* seems obscured in Condorcet’s conception, and omitted in that of Marx. Its presence, however, is felt in the almost obsessive aspiration of all three authors to certainty, as well as in their preoccupation for systemic guarantees of individual prerogatives. The need for a particular degree of stability and constancy in one’s life and experiences is an undeniable (physical and psychological) condition for human fulfilment, and this is the sense in which the criterion of security (as an independent, non-reducible dimension of humanness) will be referred to in the perspective proposed here.

Another criterion which (I believe) is at work in the three theories, without being properly defined and discussed, is that of *political status*. By this phrase I refer to the human attribute to enjoy certain power(s) and/or position(s) within the polis (the social structures). For Condorcet and Marx (where the language and doctrine of rights are well developed), political status is a function of (equal) citizenship, and in that sense the requirement for it is universal. For Smith, however, political status is absorbed by the idea of ‘greatness’ (a criterion understood in a relative rather than minimalist-universal sense). Under the heading of ‘greatness’, Smith also mixes up political status with the *admiration of others*. In the perspective proposed here, I assume that the two criteria (political status versus admiration of others) are clearly different and not reducible to each other. I also assume that they both represent vital dimensions of humanness whose progress is, to a certain extent, desirable.

Superlative in Marx’s theory, the criterion of *creative activity* is not taken into account by Condorcet and Smith, and I believe this is largely due to their less developed reflections on the nature of human fulfilment. The perspective proposed

here welcomes Marx's insight as a historic turning point in our understanding of human fulfilment. Indeed, creative activity can be acknowledged as a crucial factor in self-realisation. However, Marx himself broadens the concept enough to make it almost synonymous with 'self-development'. Such tautologies must be carefully avoided, so that the concept can be meaningfully applied. The semantic elements preserved in my perspective are: (1) the human capacity to produce *and* innovate; (2) the human capacity to produce *and* experience; and (3) the individuals' capacity to direct their creative powers towards the whole of humankind.

Having now reconsidered the fertile contributions of the three theories to our list of legitimate criteria for human progress, it is time to stop and ask ourselves whether we feel the list is complete. Have we considered all the aspects of humanness that may become prominent in our whole-of-life valuations? Let us remember that the historically dominant paradigms of thought on progress have had to fight for their position with some recessive paradigms, some of which are currently on an ascending trajectory in public conscience. The criteria promoted by these paradigms are: *supportive social relations, ecological awareness, beauty, spirituality and health.*

With war and conflict still a distressing epidemic, unresolved by any of the traditional panacea (knowledge, control, material wealth, political organisation), it has become clearer than ever before that, while affected by these factors, social relations have a life of their own, and that they can ultimately develop and flourish if they are addressed in their own right, without mediation from other values. This valuable lesson is a significant development away from the three traditions. With Condorcet, for example, social harmony can be achieved through the universal, enlightened constitution of natural human rights, while with Marx the introduction of a non-exploitative and non-alienating mode of production would be sufficient to resolve the issue of social conflict altogether. Our contemporary experiences tell us that none of these other values can act as a guarantee or substitute for socially supportive qualities like trust, friendship and peace. On the other hand, although Smith displays a fairly complex understanding of the importance of the 'social passions' (like benevolence) for both society and human fulfilment, he

contemplates these in the context of (absolute) virtue. The progress of supportive social relations (to some extent implied in the aspiration to harmony apparent in all three theories) is, however, not necessarily identifiable with moral progress. All these considerations provide sufficient arguments to include supportive social relations as an independent criterion of human progress in the proposed list.

Another social concern of increasing magnitude in our times, not in sight in the days of Condorcet, Smith or Marx, is the prospect of ecological disasters caused by the excessive use of humankind's technological capabilities. This concern has an important implication for human progress, namely the need to focus on ecological awareness as a desirable dimension of humanness. Although acquiring unprecedented relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the idea of ecological awareness is not entirely new. It is implied in most naturalist conceptions of the relations between human beings and the universe, but somehow submerged out of our critical sight by the belief that nature is too powerful and perfectly balanced to require our special care.

Although (with some qualified exceptions) artists and monks have hardly ever ruled over the earthly affairs of humankind, they have definitely represented history-shaping minorities. These minorities are of interest to our discussion simply because they provide coherent examples of how human beings can choose to live for the sake of *beauty* or *spirituality*. Besides, one cannot deny the fact that the aesthetic and the spiritual are independent (non-reducible) dimensions of humanness, indispensable to human development in a rich (complex) sense.

Last but not least, I would like to add to the proposed list the criterion of *health*, which again requires separate attention from all others, and can legitimately be regarded as vital to human fulfilment.

While deciding to finish the list at this point, I am fully aware of other criteria knocking at the door, such as those criteria more relevant to collective (rather than individual) human progress, e.g. justice, equality and solidarity. In particular, justice and solidarity are clearly aspects of humanness which can be developed at the level

of individuals, but there are good arguments to not consider them independently from virtue or supportive social relations.

Having concurred with the basic meanings of the criteria of human progress promoted by Condorcet, Smith and Marx, there is one important sense in which my understanding of these values is different. As suggested in Chapter Five, I am not in possession of any infallible method for the identification of *true* knowledge, *true* virtue, *true* liberty, etc., therefore I can only assume that my understanding of these concepts here and now is historically and culturally contingent rather than absolute. This emphasises the need to explore alternatives to absolutism and universalism, a task I shall briefly undertake below.

## **2. Between universalism and nihilism: a moderating option**

I have previously remarked that most criticisms directed against universalist projects and their foundational theories tend to rely on the argument that there is no such thing as absolute truth, or that if there is, it is not something that human beings can have access to.

The trouble with this approach is that, while correctly observing that absolutist premises tend to be too strong (in that they seem to readily assume too much, both about the capacities of human beings and about their actual performance), it refutes these premises by adopting a counter-premise that can also be too strong, in that it is too categorical about the impossibility of human access to the absolute. Based on the evidence currently available, it is not certain whether this access is possible or not.

A similar dilemma confronts us when contemplating the possibility of universal features of human nature, universal needs, universal values and interests, etc. Assuming that such universal elements exist, and specifying them without sufficient validation is indeed a problem. However, assuming that they do not exist, and that all cultures produce incommunicable values that prevent the cross-cultural sharing

or generalisation of these values<sup>2</sup>, is an equally insufficiently tested, *a priori* presumption.

A minimalist approach to this issue may seem wise, *prima facie*. When too much is at stake, it is better to err on the side of caution. However, excessive minimalism is also problematic. What we decide to assume about the potential of human nature, needs and values to be universalised is extremely important for the soundness and flexibility of our approach to human and social progress. On the one hand, the communication and unification of human needs, interests and values under collective human goals is highly desirable, because – as the history of human civilisation has proven – human experiences accumulated over generations in systems, practices and institutions are a rich source of goods, enhancing the natural potential for human fulfilment. But this resource can only rely on the humanly fulfilling values inherent in what makes people similar. There is nothing to say that such humanly fulfilling values cannot be derived from what makes people different. Thus, on the other hand, performed without proper consideration for creative, fulfilling values inherent in specific differences among human beings, (untested) generalisations can be the source of tremendous suffering.

Are the efficiencies we can gain from our similarities always necessarily more significant than the fulfilling potential residing in our differences, or the other way round? Although universalism and nihilism are radically opposed in their choice of emphasis (i.e. universalism focuses on similarities, whereas nihilism focuses on differences), they both suffer from the same categorical *over*-emphasis of the importance of one source of humanly fulfilling value over the other. What we require here is an approach that allows for both sources of value to be enhanced, without preconceived and limiting assumptions, in the most balanced manner we can devise. Clearly, neither universalism nor nihilism make good candidates for such an approach.

An interesting and helpful perspective is provided, on this point, by Aristotle's approach to the virtues and their role in human fulfilment. For Aristotle, the virtuous mean in our conduct and feelings is both context-sensitive and non-

relativistic. It depends very much on circumstances, but it is 'objectively' there to be found, and in fact it is due to the former that the latter is a difficult task rather than no task at all:

[I]t is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle, e.g. to find the middle of a circle is not for everyone but for him who knows; so, too, anyone can get angry - that is easy - or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, *that* is not for everyone, nor is it easy.<sup>3</sup>

Nussbaum's interpretation of Aristotle's contextualist method of reaching absolute truth is illuminating: 'If another situation should ever arise with all the same ethically relevant features, including contextual features, the same decision would again be absolutely right'<sup>4</sup>.

Having clarified that a both non-relative and particularist position of the Aristotelian type can be adopted, and that the difficulties presented by both universalism and nihilism can be thus avoided, let us return to the evaluation undertaken in Chapter Five. This reveals that, from an intellectual point of view, what has essentially contributed to the undesirable historical developments resulting into anti-humanism and uni-dimensionality can be summarised by reference to two highly questionable (criticisable) moves.

Firstly, as previously observed, the absolute testing requirements contained in the classical theories had to be *specified* by the later practitioners and thus narrowed down from their initial, all-encompassing level of abstraction. The implementation of the theories had to start with what was 'of this world', so to speak, i.e. easier to measure, verify and/or control: the physical sciences and technologies (Webster), the laissez-faire market (Hayek), and the group of professional revolutionaries (Lenin). There is nothing in the classical theories to predict or validate *these* particular further specifications, and to prefer these specifications over others. The only way in which we could imagine Condorcet, Smith or Marx agreeing with the particular specification proposed would be if this was assumed as a temporary option, aimed at eventually expanding the narrowed agency into the universal factor

of progress originally recommended. Unfortunately, collapse into systemic unidimensionality and infinite improvability cannot produce this expansion because it necessarily locks the evaluation of social progress into an identification with a particular type of progress (e.g. scientific-technological, economic, or political).

Secondly, this identification has been made possible by an illicit transfer of desirable attributes or qualities from people to systems (especially systems imbued with power differentials, such as ownership of technology, economic or political status). Falling into this trap is easier than we might think. Such a transfer is easily conceivable because our mind can abstract attributes or features of certain entities and contemplate these concepts (ideas) independently of the entities originally enjoying the respective attributes. Moreover, it can be said that, in this abstract form, such attributes are not exclusive to human beings, and can be observed in other entities as well. For example, technological advancement may refer to the increased power, speed, or precision of a machine to perform certain tasks; the tasks may originally be of the human realm but power, speed, precision, as such, are not attributes confined to human life. They can belong to planets, magnetic waves, animals, etc. Similarly, material productivity (and systematic approaches to it) can be observed, in some form, in any organism seeking self-maintenance. Organisation and distribution of power or roles among members of the same species or category can also be seen in any group or combination that manifests collaborative action. But human beings have the capacity to create systems that model human attributes. We need to be very careful, however, about the nature of this modelling and how it should be qualified. As this modelling is performed in an abstracted sense, this sense is also abstracting. When trying to model human processes (e.g. thinking, behaviour) or even human beings, what is created is not human thinking or human behaviour or human beings but independent, abstract copies of attributes that happen to be enjoyed or possessed by humans, without necessarily capturing in this model what is *essentially* (definingly) human. The successful modelling of the human essence appears to elude us, as it is illustrated by the well-known debates around the Turing machine and around android-producing experiments. It therefore becomes crucial to understand that selected criteria for human progress and

fulfilment only make sense if it is clearly human beings who enjoy the desirable attributes, and not some abstract system modelling those attributes.

The two questionable moves discussed above highlight that both *specification* (i.e. applying general principles to particular circumstances) and *abstraction* or *generalisation* (i.e. deriving general principles from particular circumstances) are complex processes, which require adequate understanding and attention. In moving back and forth between theory and practice, we are frequently constrained to both specify and generalise. As illustrated by the historical avatars of the three social projects, there are serious dangers associated with these activities. How can we avoid these dangers or, at least, remain aware of them (if they turn out to be associated with limitations of human nature or of the human mind)?

In my opinion, this question ties very closely with the issue of aiming to construct an argument base which is less radical than both universalism and nihilism (as hyper-specificity of the single instance). What seems to harm both kinds of theories is not so much the answer they give to possibilities for specifications or generalisations but that the theories themselves are constructed (structured) in a way that relies too heavily on the content of this answer. What should concern us, for example, is not just that universalist premises are too strong (which makes them vulnerable to empirical refutations) but that they are too important for the whole theoretical construct, and that they carry too much of its weight. It is sufficient to invalidate these premises, and the whole pyramidal construction of the proposed ideal of humanness will collapse.

Furthermore, as both universalism and nihilism may cause us to overlook important considerations about the potential for human fulfilment and social progress, perhaps what we should try is an inductive-precautionary approach which consistently tests the power of generalisation of each local judgement from the 'grassroots' to increasingly broader categories. Accordingly, instead of assuming the universal unless otherwise proven, we should assume the contingent and aspire to approximations of a possible universal under sound conditions of proof.



There are at least three good reasons for taking this kind of approach: (1) crucial difficulties we have experienced in defining the human essence; (2) the high probability for ideals of humanness to be plural and to undergo changes in time; and (3) the observation that generalisations less than universal can be very valuable in identifying human and social progress. I would like to elaborate on these three points in the next three sections.

### **3. Defining humanness: between finding the answers and rephrasing the questions**

I have previously observed that each of the three classical theories recommends a universal social project which heavily relies on a universal conception of human fulfilment and a universal ideal of humanness.

As discussed in Chapter One, any conception of human fulfilment must rely on premises about: (a) human nature – which set up the scope and limits of the physical possibilities for human development or for improvements in human life; (b) human needs – as factors guiding us in selecting what is desirable out of what is physically possible; and (c) human value or human wealth – as the standards placed on what is desirable, thus determining the criteria for fulfilment and the priority relations among these criteria. In this context, the ideal of humanness is the supreme, ultimate standard against which human progress is evaluated.

In this evaluative process, the need to define humanness is, in a clear sense, indispensable. An ideal of humanness can only be adequately formulated within the scope and limits of what humanness is understood to be, as given and as physical potential. However, defining humanness is extremely problematic.

In formulating an ideal of humanness, as well as in justifying the appropriateness (moral legitimacy) of the social project, each author attempts to define humanness in two ways: (1) by identifying what is specific, uniquely distinguishing, in human

beings; and (2) by speculating on what appears to be general, common, to be found in all human beings.

As illustrated in Chapters Two, Three and Four, humanness is recurrently defined in terms of significant differences from animals. As a reminder, with Condorcet, the main difference lies in articulated speech. With Adam Smith, the key human differences are barter and exchange (in *The Wealth of Nations*) and the inner conscience (in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*). With Marx, what makes all the difference is the capacity to create oneself by choosing the co-ordinates of realising one's potential. He talks about human *essence* in relation to the ability of human beings to produce their own means of subsistence, and also with respect to their capacity to produce universally, for the sake of the species as a whole.

The main objection to the difference criterion is that the implicit connection made between essence of one entity and mere difference from other entities remains unproven. How can we be sure that, by focusing strictly on the differences between human beings and other (non-human) entities we may not leave out significant aspects constitutive of humanness, if our constitution happens to be shared or partly shared with those other entities?

As mentioned above, another recurrent formula is to define humanness in terms of what is universal, that is to be found in all humans. Condorcet, for instance, suggests that the universal human can be described in terms of certain basic and invariable needs, which form the justificatory foundation for his doctrine of universal natural rights to equality and liberty. Adam Smith also searches for the universal human, and finds it in the propensity for self-interest (in *The Wealth of Nations*) and for justice (in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*). For Marx, 'universal man' is fairly strongly specified, as a species-being and a social being who can liberate himself or herself from both natural and social necessity, and who is destined to self-realisation through free creative activity.

However, there are problems with this approach as well. What are those features that can certainly be said to be shared by all humans? In all cases so far presented

to us, we can identify exceptions, without considering that these isolated omissions could make the individuals in question non-human or less human. If the notion of humanness is more than just a biological concept (e.g. referring to all living beings that have a human DNA), then the condition itself of having a human DNA can become altogether secondary. Furthermore, we can remark that the biological condition is perhaps one of the least relevant in forming values and goals for either self-realisation or living a good life. It may, according to the strongest deterministic views, establish the negative boundaries, but it certainly cannot, by itself, launch any positive directions.

To forge a more constructive path, we should then perhaps identify everything humans *are* and *can be*. This involves determining both what is given (human nature) and what is possible (human potential), but without unduly strong conditions like originality (difference from other entities) or universality (features shared by all individuals).

Most traditional approaches to this issue have focused on distinguishing between the *essential* and the *contingent*. The difficulties we face here are not just related to complex controversies around establishing which aspects of humanness are essential to it and which are contingent. As remarked before, looking for the essential can be too hardline in itself, for it is akin to seeking to determine conditions of universality. On the other hand, there is hardly anything meaningful we can say about humanness as an enduring reality if we cannot identify at least some aspects of it that appear to us more than accidental.

Let us return to our initial goal, namely forming an ideal of humanness. Perhaps what we should ask ourselves at this point is: to form an ideal of humanness, do we need to define humanness exhaustively? If not, what requirements must be met by our definition of humanness to satisfy our purpose? If we can form some guiding empirical ideas of human nature and human potential, enough to sketch a scope and limits of humanness in our mind, is it any longer imperative to rigorously and exhaustively distinguish between essential and contingent attributes of humanness?

What seems more important than obtaining a complete picture of the horizon of humanness as a foundation for identifying physical potential is now identifying the desirable potential. Doing this is no longer a matter of consulting our experiences but rather one of making choices and decisions about what we should aspire to. This means that forming an ideal of humanness, although it requires an empirical foundation, is in effect a normative act, requiring evaluative ideas and principles.

Human beings *can* develop in many directions but making choices about the directions in which they *should* develop is the distinctive requirement of value-driven thinking. Thus, the normative approach to humanness removes the burden of having to define the essence of humanness completely and exclusively by appeal to experience, at the same time presenting us with all the difficulties inherent in justifying choices and decisions.

Importantly, an ideal of humanness provides the normative basis not only for selecting the desirable dimensions of humanness out of all those dimensions that are physically possible, but also for selecting the desirable relations among these dimensions out of all those relations that are physically possible.

In this context, the empirical assumptions made about the nature of the relations among dimensions of humanness become just as important as the empirical assumptions made about the nature of each dimension of humanness in question. In other words, we have to establish, among other things, whether the assumptions made about the possible relations among criteria for human progress are empirically sound, as well as life-sustaining in their own right.

In conclusion, here is the first hypothesis I believe worth promoting: by defining humanness, we do not necessarily expect to provide an exhaustive description of its essence. On the other hand, being unable to exhaust the essence of humanness through perfect knowledge does not mean that we cannot say anything meaningful about humanness. Much of what we can (tentatively) say humanness *is* is directed by what we can (definitely) say humanness *is not*. When we enunciate what we mean by humanness we point to those attributes or aspects of it which are more

visible to us, and we refer to those aspects as signs of humanness. By using these signs or indicators, we (as signifiers or indicating agents) signify or indicate the nature of humanness (as the signified or the indicated).

In Chapter One I defined the concept of *dimension* of an entity as a *qualitative* attribute or feature of that entity, whose variations are only expressed *quantitatively* or comparatively. In this context, I discussed the example of the dimension of knowledge as the abstracted attribute of a knowledgeable person, an attribute whose progress we apprehend linearly, as an extension or increase of the same thing: in a progressive sense, someone who is found to be *more* knowledgeable is someone who has *more* knowledge. We must ask ourselves, however, to what extent this delimitation of humanness in dimensions is reflective of the nature of the observed object or of features inherent in the perception of the subject. To elaborate on our example, someone with a more refined understanding of the nature of knowledge may be able to further divide the qualitative attribute of knowledge into several qualitative components. If we consider knowledge of different areas of enquiry separately (e.g. knowledge of technological systems, knowledge of economic systems, knowledge of political systems, knowledge of society, knowledge of humanness), we may consider that they are kinds of knowledge whose progress can be simply added up, and thus the sum of these subcategorised advancements can be regarded as progress of knowledge overall. However, if advancement in general knowledge is not assumed to be the simple sum of each of these subcategories, we may need to identify each type of knowledge as a separate dimension. Consider, for instance, distinguishing different types of knowledge according to the different methods of enquiry, e.g. observation (experience), induction, deduction (logical demonstration), mystical revelation, creative impulse (inspiration, invention, imagination, speculation). It becomes clearer here that, if this distinction (based on methods of enquiry) is treated as being of primary importance to establishing the co-ordinates of desirable humanness, these different kinds of knowledge will not meaningfully add up, so each will probably have to be conceived as a separate dimension.

In this context, the second hypothesis I would like to promote here is that defining and describing humanness in terms of dimensions may be the only manner in which we can apprehend humanness, and this manner is inherent in the discursive and abstracting nature of our analytical faculties. If human essence cannot in fact be defined by way of dimensions, then it is not impossible that an approximation to the content of this idea may forever elude us.

Consequently, it may well be that humanness, and from here human flourishing and fulfilment, are indefinable exhaustively. This should alert us to the possibility that further specifications or explanations of human fulfilment are not *it* but possible indicators (or signifiers) of *it* under certain conditions. These conditions also need specification and validation. There is never a guarantee that the identified indicators or signifiers are intrinsically related to human flourishing and fulfilment anywhere anytime, therefore their conditions or relationships must remain open for verification and validation.

We do not know to what extent our values may, accidentally or causally, articulate with the absolute and the universal but we can take a precautionary approach of how we are to improve our valuing processes as a result of our interactions with the world. How can we then best approximate through dimensions something ultimately indefinable? Here is where I would like to propose a third hypothesis: let us imagine that the considered dimensions of humanness form a cluster or constellation of inter-limiting and inter-defining (probably even overlapping) features, and that in this way we have managed to define by circumscribing, rather than by describing. Improving upon our conception of humanness is thus not so much a matter of growing or developing each value considered separately - but rather one of matching, balancing, articulating, integrating and harmonising all considered values in a meaningful whole. For this reason, the constellation model is less vulnerable to distortions leading to uni-dimensionality than the pyramidal model.

Importantly, the constellation model does not demand from us firm assumptions about (the content of) human essence. To form an ideal of humanness, it is

sufficient to observe that a limited set of dimensions of humanness is more enduringly desirable than others. This removes the difficulties associated with a model that would constrain us to make strong key assumptions like ‘human beings are essentially good’. Let us remember, in this context, Condorcet’s model, where his reliance on the idea that nature has indestructibly linked together knowledge, virtue and happiness necessarily relies on the premise that human beings are essentially good. What causes trouble here is not so much that we are required to make a judgement about human essence but that the substance of this judgement is decisive for the soundness of the whole theory. Certainly, it is because human beings are essentially good that we can consider vice to be entirely caused by ignorance, and then assume that knowledge can naturally, universally and unconditionally bring about virtue, happiness, etc. However, it is sufficient to cast the slightest doubt upon the essentiality of moral goodness to human beings, and the whole edifice of the theory, together with its justification for the proposed social project, is brought to ruin.

The more we learn about human nature, the more difficult it becomes – it seems – to establish with certainty whether human nature is either essentially good or essentially evil. Similarly, significant research in more recent times has already cast considerable doubt upon the hypotheses that human beings are either universally and primarily egoistic or universally and primarily altruistic. As successors of the Darwin-Kropotkin controversy<sup>5</sup>, we can state that no conclusive results have been proven as to whether humans (like or unlike animals) are naturally egoistic or naturally altruistic.

The difficulty I am focusing upon here is not something we experience in relation to the moral quality of human nature, but with respect to the (im)possibility to make any firm, universal assumptions about human essence. This has considerable impact on how we should understand the structure of an ideal of humanness and how it should work. If we cannot say anything definite about human nature being essentially good or bad, and if our judgements can only describe human beings or human behaviour being contingently good or bad, then cannot readily assume a relation of universal means and endless benefit between knowledge and virtue.

Extending this line of reasoning to all other dimensions of humanness in our limited set, if we cannot say anything about human nature being *essentially* in any particular way, according to any particular dimension, then none of these dimensions can establish amongst them relations that can be assumed as static and universal.

#### **4. The plurality and changeability of ideals of humanness**

As previously remarked, Condorcet, Smith and Marx seem to suggest, in turn, that they each found *the* unique, absolute and universal blueprint for human fulfilment, based on a universal ideal of humanness. Their claims appear unduly strong. If each of these models represents the unique truth, then they are mutually exclusive. In contemplating all these theories at once, we are urged to vote for one and discard the others.

In this context, the fourth hypothesis I am proposing is that, in evaluating such theories, rather than seek to vote for one at the expense of the others, or rather than looking for a fourth or fifth theory which may better meet the conditions of universality imposed by their recurrent pattern, we should try to transcend this pattern and aim for a structure that avoids assumptions of universality altogether. If, in forming an ideal of humanness, we start only from premises of contingency and generalise under rigorous validation tests, then the structure of our ideal of humanness would be more open and flexible. We may be possibly reaching conclusions similar to Aristotle's<sup>6</sup>, but coming from the opposite direction (particular to general, rather than general to particular).

I have also remarked that the pyramidal model of ideal humanness (recurrent in Condorcet, Smith and Marx) is based on a *static* perspective on the relations among dimensions of humanness. These relations (e.g. universal means, endless benefit) are considered to obtain at all times. As they never change, they are fully predictable.



However, as we have by now accumulated some important reasons not to maintain absolute confidence in the absolute quality of the particular ideal of humanness we may hold, it becomes obvious that this static view should be replaced by a *dynamic* perspective, to account for circumstantial and perhaps unpredictable changes in the nature of the relations among dimensions of humanness within the same ideal. This constitutes a fifth hypothesis I would like to suggest here.

The relevance of openness, flexibility and dynamism as key features of the constellation model recommended in this chapter will be further illustrated in Section 9 of this chapter.

## **5. The guiding value of less than universal generalisations**

Due to its absolutism and universalism, each of the three classical theories tends to suggest (with a qualified exception in Smith's treatment of the path of wealth and greatness) that human fulfilment is an 'all or nothing' kind of achievement, in which only attainment of the universal ideal of humanness, as envisaged by the author, can confirm success.

However, as we need to accept, more modestly, that we may not be in possession of absolute truth in advance (i.e. prior to setting out on our journey towards human fulfilment), we may legitimately ask ourselves why we should not, at times, consider to have scored gradual successes along the way.

Accordingly, we are very likely to find that generalisations of empirical and normative conclusions from individuals to progressively broader categories are usually more accurate and more appropriate (therefore more useful in a guiding role) than universal untested generalisations.

One cannot help finding grains of truth in each of the three classical theories. We are then tempted to ask ourselves at what point principles which initially seemed to

verify, in certain (described or assumed) circumstances, started to part with this initial truth.

Let us consider Smith's and Marx's conceptions of human fulfilment, for example. In his model, Smith assumes that satisfaction of limited needs must always take precedence over higher aspirations. This is apparent in his suggestion that no human being can relinquish the duty of primary carer of one's own self, and that virtuous persons will properly exercise self-love and prudence to meet their own needs. Accordingly, the few followers of the path of wisdom and virtue can choose to pursue material wealth only insofar as it satisfies their limited, inescapable natural needs, and not beyond that threshold (e.g. to obtain superiority over others or the admiration of others). However, they cannot choose *not* to pursue material wealth *at all*. They cannot assume God's position of contemplating the world in a self-sufficient manner, because one's basic needs (including those of the wise and virtuous) require one's attention.

Moreover, there is in Smith the suggestion that these basic, limited needs tend to be satisfied by goods which are material in nature. That needs satisfiable by material goods have priority over needs satisfiable otherwise (e.g. through skill-diversifying activity) is made clear by Smith's acceptance of division of labour as preceding the many-sided education of the labourer, the latter being perceived by Smith as an unfortunate side effect of the former. Accordingly, Smith looks for redress not in questioning the soundness of division of labour as a socio-economic practice (as Marx does) but in the government's effort for implementing a high-quality, heavily subsidised public education system.

In criticising Smith's assumptions, Marx proposes a counter-perspective which is, in the first instance, sensible and invigorating. Why should one regard satisfaction of needs through material products as invariably more fundamental than self-development through creative activity? However, in launching his counter-perspective, Marx absolutises and universalises the reversed order of priority. His argument is that what is in fact fundamental (therefore essential) to human beings and human life is *invariably* free creative activity, and not the satisfaction of needs

through material products. As the latter does not properly reflect the human essence, it is a residual necessity from which human beings must seek liberation. As Elster correctly points out (*MSM*, pp. 82–83), Marx over-emphasises production (as activity) at the expense of consumption. He also elaborates upon the difficulties presented by a society whose members always act, produce and give, and never rest, consume and receive.

To absorb valid partial findings in both Smith and Marx, we must abandon the temptation to engage in making a choice between satisfaction of needs through material products and satisfaction of needs through free creative activity, as to which of the two is universally more fundamental than the other. Instead, we should assume that, until otherwise proven, the relation between the two is contingent rather than universal. Hence, no assumption about the quality of this relation can be made without a careful analysis of circumstances.

Consequently, more general conclusions can only be drawn as unifying features are empirically observed or normatively agreed upon, and cannot be pushed in advance, beyond the boundaries of these validation processes. As generalisation is desirable, but only within these conditions, it appears highly probable that universality in the classical sense may never be achieved but on the other hand any partial generalisation may constitute success, in variable degrees. To use an ‘earthly’ version of the Platonic perspective, one can say that, while an ideal may be unattainable, striving to come as close to it as one can may constitute one’s most worthwhile endeavour, with any smaller victory on the journey counting as genuine progress.

## **6. A dynamic-relational perspective on humanness: five premises**

Under the starting assumption that all relations among dimensions of humanness are contingent unless otherwise proven, a dynamic and fluid perspective on humanness, which addresses the role of human perception in identifying and distinguishing between dimensions of humanness, it becomes apparent that the means-end

relationship too is likely to be contingent rather than universal. Moreover, it becomes less likely that we could find any single dimension of humanness which we could treat purely as an end or purely as a means. A sounder premise to adopt in this context (the *first premise*) seems to be that each dimension of humanness selected as desirable should be considered, contingently, as both a means and an end. In other words, the relationships operating in the means should prefigure those imagined or aspired to in the end. As I shall illustrate in Section 9 below, this does not exclude the possibility that one particular dimension of humanness may generally be valued more than another.

One must remark that formulating an ideal of humanness is primarily a valuing process, which is not limited to selecting out of all physical possibilities those dimensions of humanness whose development is considered desirable. These valued dimensions of humanness can affect each other's development in different ways. More specifically, a particular action recommended by the advancement of one particular dimension may be beneficial, neutral or detrimental to other dimensions. Experience provides us with a rich array of examples for all cases, and this state of affairs reinforces the contingent nature of these relations. Accordingly, a *second premise* can be recommended here, which states that, in terms of the impact of the progress of one dimension over the progress of another, relations among dimensions of humanness can be *supportive, indifferent* or *conflictual*.

There is another significant criterion one should use to distinguish between relations among dimensions of humanness, namely *necessity (conditionality, dependency)*. Again, in certain circumstances, the progress of a particular dimension of humanness may be not just beneficial but indispensable to the progress or maintenance of another. According to the *third premise* I would like to propose here, the criterion of necessity divides relations into *conditional* and *independent*. As conditional relations are in fact a stronger case of supportiveness, usually more enduring, conditionality tends to be an area where generalisations are likely to verify more often. On the other hand, independent relations tend to be neutral or indifferent but the other possibilities (supportiveness or conflict) are not excluded. Illustrations of these points will be provided in Section 9 below.

The *fourth premise* that must be introduced stems from the observation that the ideal of humanness *as a whole* is the outcome of a valuation process. While dimensions of humanness are valued on the basis of their desirability (e.g. satisfaction of inescapable needs, or some broader conception of human fulfilment), the relations among these dimensions should also be selected according to their desirability. Goals should be set in this respect as well. I have remarked previously that the three classical models tend to assume that absolute values obtain as perfect harmony is achieved among them. This relation is interpreted as empirical: as Condorcet suggests, for example, it is a given, objective fact that knowledge, virtue and happiness are linked in a universally and eternally beneficial relation. As the assumption of contingency replaces that of universality, and absolute perfection seems more remote to us than ever, a new horizon has opened to a variety of intermediary possibilities, in which imperfect degrees of success may count as progress. In this context, perhaps some priority rules can be formulated and degrees of desirability be sought according to these rules, e.g. (1) obtain support wherever possible; (2) obtain indifference where support is not possible; (3) allow conflict where support or indifference are not possible, but without affecting minimal conditionality. The desirability rules expressed in this fourth premise will be further discussed, with examples, in Subsection 9.3.

As all dimensions of humanness can in turn be both means and ends, depending on circumstances, we can enhance our ideal of humanness by applying equal treatment to each dimension in our ideal. This equal treatment involves considering each valued dimension of humanness, in turn, as pure end to whose progress all other dimensions are called to contribute, and then as pure means to each of the other dimensions. The circular dialectics (of multiple reciprocity) of the constellation model proposed here will be elaborated upon in Subsection 9.3, as part of discussing a proposed thought experiment. The circular treatment of each dimension of humanness as pure end is the *fifth premise* announced here.

Based on the five premises presented above, the constellation model proposed in this thesis as an alternative to the pyramidal model identified in the three classical

ideals of humanness can be visualised as an expanding sphere which pays equal attention to all its radiating directions. Using the spherical (rather than pyramidal) metaphor, we become more perceptive of the suggestion that human progress is not so much a matter of linear advancement as it is a matter of matching, balancing and integrating a multitude of directions into one cohesive whole. I therefore recommend that we replace the image of the racing spear (*Fig. I, a-d<sup>7</sup>*) with that of the expanding sphere (*Fig. II*).

Starting from these general premises, I would now like to submit to analysis my own ideal of humanness, as currently upheld, as an example of how the constellation model should be understood to work. The foundation of this ideal is provided by certain premises about human nature, human needs, desirable human potential, human value (wealth) and human fulfilment, which will be briefly presented below.

## **7. An alternative conception of humanness and human fulfilment: basic premises**

In upholding an ideal of humanness as a guide in evaluating human progress, I necessarily make assumptions about human nature, human needs, human potential and human fulfilment.

For example, in relation to human nature, I believe that: (a) human beings generally have an instinct for survival and self-preservation; (b) human beings also have a general propensity towards the preservation of the species; (c) human beings can be both self-centred and other-centred, in ways that are not systematically predictable; and (d) human beings are valuing beings.

Directly connected with premise (d) is the remark that characteristic of human life is the attribute of *significance*. This attribute contains two key ideas: (1) that human life must be meaningful, or have meaning (make sense), to the human being(s) who live(s) it; and (2) that human life must be valuable, or have value, for the human

being(s) who live(s) it. Within the concept of significance, these two key ideas are closely interconnected. As Durkheim's study on suicide appears to suggest<sup>8</sup>, it is not the possibility of suffering or unhappiness that tends to oppress people's will to live, but the prospect of meaninglessness and loss of value (*anomy*).

In addition, from these premises (a), (b) and (c) one can derive the possibility for valuing one's significant life in a complex manner, not simply by measuring one's fulfilment as the direct satisfaction of one's immediate needs but also by relating one's happiness and fulfilment to the happiness and fulfilment of others, as well as to the realisation of more abstract goals.

In relation to human needs and potential, I assume that: (1) human beings generally have basic physical needs which are inescapable, e.g. the need for nourishment, protection against cold, security against physical danger; (2) beyond basics, human needs and potential are indefinite in the sense that they are variable, i.e. they change their limits and scope as they are realised<sup>9</sup>; (3) human needs and potential are also indefinite in the overall scheme of things because no limits may be proven to be pre-set (as previously shown, this suggestion is made, albeit with different implications, by Condorcet in *Esquisse*); (4) human needs and potential are finite as *realisable at a certain point in time*<sup>10</sup>, an assumption used by both Smith and Marx in their respective conceptions of human needs. Premises (1) to (4), which stem from the idea of needs as the strongest reasons for valuing, provide a justification for the ideas of (inter)conditionality and (inter)dependence among valued (desired) dimensions of humanness, as well as for the general framework I am proposing. As previously suggested, this framework informs particular conceptions adopted by particular subjects in their particular (necessarily limited and limiting) circumstances, but remains open to unprecedented experiences. Most importantly, these premises outline the scope and limits of need and potential realisation, which will be very helpful in formulating the four main types of inter-dimensional relations, as described further in this chapter.

In assuming any limits to human nature and potential, there is a dilemma. On the one hand, it is useful to place the desirable within the scope of the physically

possible, otherwise pursuit of such a misguided desire would only be doomed to failure. On the other hand, interpreting how we are (the given) in a limiting way can prevent us from evolving as much as we should, if our appraisal of the physically possible is inaccurate. Marx's conception of human fulfilment, for example, features the premise that human beings have the essential, self-defining capacity to act upon the limits of physical possibility and modify them, guided by their aims and desires. What we need to achieve, therefore, is a balancing act between being realistic and avoiding self-limitation. In pushing the limits and forging new paths, it is not uncommon to be met with unhappiness and suffering. As frustration of desires may usually come sooner than the creation of new possibilities, we come to realise – as advised by Nietzsche<sup>11</sup> – that to achieve great things one may need to be prepared to trade off some of one's happiness, or even to accept and develop the discipline of suffering, in the sense (one may add) of understanding that enjoyment is not the primary criterion in defining either a significant life or human development.

In this context, human value (human wealth) is the totality of selected dimensions of humanness, in desirable relations as prioritised in Subsection 9.3 below.

Furthermore, human fulfilment is not so much the attainment of the projected ideal of humanness, as it is the journey towards it, with the means prefiguring the end, and with the goals of the significant life and those of self-development in close inter-connection. Although we may adopt a conception of human progress in which the idea of self-development and that of enjoyment merge or coincide, the two ideas are clearly not identical. While with self-realisation the emphasis is inwards, on qualities intrinsic to the individual, inseparable from his or her identity, and on the development and achievement of an inherent potential, in the case of the good life the focus moves outwards, including the self, more broadly, within external factors which require interaction, creation, appropriation and exchange.

Similarly, to what extent one can say a good life is more a state of enjoyment rather than a record of development, achievement and creation of the self is perhaps a matter of personal option, but it is a choice that must be made, one way or another.



If we are to understand human fulfilment as Marx does, by pushing the limits and creating new potential, then we may have to settle for a secondary part played by enjoyment in this sort of fulfilment.

Enjoyment is usually a natural psychological response we have to outcomes of development and creation, but it may be a response to many other experiences, which may hardly involve the self directly. Consider the state of pure contemplation: admiring the beauty of a sunset may be a profoundly enjoyable experience for a moment, although it may not result in an internalised (memorised) experience and it may not lead to any transformation (improvement) of the observer's self. Conversely, one may experience self-development along a multitude of criteria which do not necessarily involve enjoyment (and may, in fact, in the psychological joy-pain continuum, slide towards pain).

To be faithful to our most elementary experiences, we must recognise that the two processes (inward development and outward interaction) are inter-dependent and that, to some extent, there must always be some overlap. No self-fulfilment can properly be achieved without certain ingredients specific to the good life, and no good life can be lived without a certain degree of self-realisation. No good life can be lived purely as a process of self-development, or purely as one of enjoyment; it must be a combination of both.

The premises discussed in this section form the foundation for the ideal of humanness selection of primary values (desired dimensions of humanness), as presented below.

## **8. An alternative ideal of humanness: desirable dimensions**

Based on the selected list of criteria for human progress outlined in Section 1 above, I conceive of human fulfilment in terms of the following valued dimensions of humanness, considered in no particular order of priority: knowledge, control, virtue, material wealth, liberty, security, political status, admiration of others, creative

activity, supportive social relations, ecological awareness, beauty, spirituality and health.

I consider this list to be open and subject to change, depending on new experiences. However, this set of values is, at any particular point in time, limited (finite).

In the selection of these values for my list I have applied several principles:

- (1) Each value must reflect a level of generality which can adequately indicate what is enduring in the ways I value things in my life and in the way I value my life as a whole. In this sense, I may change my beliefs about what constitutes liberty, knowledge, social relations, beauty, etc., but in any case these values are treated as being of indispensable importance. Hence, each such value is a *primary* value.
- (2) Each value in this list stands alone and cannot be reduced to any of the other values. For example, as criteria for evaluating human progress, liberty, security, knowledge, virtue, etc. are clearly distinct concepts or ideas. This principle of non-reducibility is derived from the premise that humanness is necessarily complex (plural, multi-dimensional). An effective test for the non-reducibility of any of the values considered is that no particular value can constitute a sufficient condition for the attainment of any other. This point will be further discussed below.
- (3) Each value can be conceived both as an end in itself and as a means to other values. Furthermore, the instrumental function of these values is emphasised by the fact that each of these values, in certain minimal quantities, is a necessary condition for the achievement of a significant life.

In relation to (2) above, let us consider, for instance, liberty, or security, or benevolence (as a kind of virtue) – or, in turn, any other dimension of humanness in my ideal. Although a minimal level of security may be necessary for the advancement of my liberty or of my benevolence, ultimately nothing is sufficient to guarantee and realise my progress in liberty or benevolence but the exercise of liberty or benevolence. No amount of progress in security or any other necessary or supportive value will be able to substitute for that. This point is important in

understanding the empirical or objective element in defining dimensions of humanness, within a perspective that tends to emphasise the importance of the subject's perceptions or conceptions in these defining processes. Indeed, while the subject's perception is the active, normative factor in any dimension-identifying process, we must not forget that this subjective input is also empirically tested.

For example, impact or effect duration is an important empirical factor in discerning whether a particular dimension of humanness merits being considered as a primary rather than secondary value. Establishing whether the effects of my particular action are short-term or long-term is also part of my achieving maturity and wisdom. It is like making a sudden move and then taking a while to allow the levels of all affected dimensions of humanness to settle. If it turns out that I can do with having a particular dimension at Level 0 for a long time, then I can say that this is not a genuine primary value. The indication is that this value can stay at a level of independence (i.e. without affecting other values) long enough for me to be able to do without it in a whole-of-life valuation process.

Although each of these values listed above can indicate a uni-dimensional criterion of human progress, it may also articulate with all other values into an overall criterion, where each dimension of humanness is limited by all the other dimensions. This limitation occurs in the sense of all other values acting as guiding constraints as to how much of that particular progress is desirable from an overall perspective.

In selecting the values for my list, I am aware that my outlook on these values may be culturally determined. As my life experiences are necessarily culturally and historically situated, the values resulting from generalising about these experiences will reflect the same situatedness. But recognising the relational-specific source of our values does not have to interfere with our ability to commit to them. Therefore, I make no apology in selecting my values as presented.

The impact of my actions (or of the actions of others, or of changes in circumstances in general) upon the development of my dimensions of humanness is examined across the co-ordinates of *kind* (quality) and *level* (quantity or

comparison). This way I can monitor both: (a) how the introduction or removal of particular dimensions of humanness from my ideal (or, otherwise put, my set of primary values) can affect the remaining dimensions; and (b) how acting for *more of the same* dimension is likely to affect *different* dimensions.

If we unfold the constellation (sphere), the dimensions of humanness considered for my ideal look somehow as shown in *Fig. IIIa*. Let us remember that these dimensions have been selected because a certain amount of each is considered indispensable for human fulfilment. I will therefore mark with a standard (or tolerance threshold) the minimal level or quantity of each value or good assumed to be indispensable for that fulfilment, as in *Fig. IIIb*.

The tolerance threshold, in each case, is the limit below which no dimension of humanness can fall without seriously affecting all other dimensions and thus impairing my capacity to live a significant life. At the level of these thresholds, all dimensions of humanness are inter-conditional, forming the value fabric of my existence. At this level, what strengthens one dimension strengthens all, and what weakens one weakens all.

It should be noted, however, that although all dimensions of humanness have such a threshold, its level may vary from one to another. This variability is a reflection of both normative and empirical factors. In a normative sense, it is an expression of the general priority I give to each dimension of humanness in relation to the others. This order of priority is not fixed and only has a guiding role. In an empirical sense, this variability indicates certain constraints and options I have become aware of through experience. Making choices is therefore an act placed at the intersection of empirical and normative judgements.

In this context, adjusting what is desirable to the scope and limits of what is physically possible, within the understanding that the physically possible can be modified under the pressure of the desirable, is the key function of *wisdom*<sup>12</sup>.

Let us consider, for example, liberty, security, and the admiration of others. Elaborating on Smith's insight, I remark that a high threshold placed on liberty and security should wisely be combined with a low threshold on the admiration of others. If I were to choose this admiration as more important, then I would have to be prepared to lower the thresholds on liberty and security. But Smith assumes that people only have a radical choice available to them between these two mutually exclusive paths. On the contrary, the model proposed here reveals a wider range of possibilities and choices. I may value admiration and superiority more than liberty and security but I may not be prepared to pursue admiration and superiority indefinitely. There may come a time when I may settle for a limit on this admiration and superiority in order to get the minimal liberty and security I require to live a significant life. A similar judgement may operate if the evaluative priority of these dimensions is reversed.

Interestingly, interpreting the admiration of others quantitatively (rather than qualitatively) calls for quantitative criteria or means of recognition, such as material wealth, which is measurable and obvious to everyone. But it is highly implausible that a great number of people will genuinely admire an excellent achievement if the ability to appraise that excellent is rare. A more refined understanding of the admiration of others may make our goals easier to achieve. The admiration of only a few, but who are capable of more sophisticated valuations, may be enough for our fulfilment in a rich human (rather than material) sense. Moreover, the ideal proposed here suggests that a minimal level of recognition or admiration from others is needed by any human life, no matter how exceptional. When this recognition is not forthcoming in one's own lifetime, the consequences are tragic, as the lives of people like Vincent Van Gogh or Georges Bizet seem to suggest.

Wisdom should also tell us that liberty and security themselves tend to come into conflict fairly often, so a balancing act is required between these two dimensions as well. For instance, if exploring new paths and unknown environments is in any way a measure of liberty, then the achievement of security, which is often a matter of confining oneself to the well-beaten track, appears to come in conflict with that of

liberty. Again, if I choose a significantly high threshold for liberty, then the threshold for security should be relatively low.

Another lesson from wisdom may be one that could change our perspective on the relation between knowledge and control. In Condorcet's and Marx's perspectives, knowledge and control always keep very close together. A more refined approach to this issue reveals that knowledge may often involve the empirical conclusion that control is not accessible, while partial control can be achieved by making decisions in conditions of uncertainty, a fact we have grown used to in practical life.

In forming inspiring ideals of humanness, we often tend to omit health, perhaps because it can be hardly conceived as an ultimate, pure end<sup>13</sup>. Within certain limits, however, health is clearly an indispensable means to (or ingredient of) human fulfilment, and this condition is sufficient to promote health into the selected value set.

Like with all other dimensions, there will be a minimum threshold under which one's health (or, more exactly, lack thereof) makes one's significant life and fulfilment impossible. In this context, when technologies can be perfected to maintain life in otherwise adverse conditions, it can be argued that the push for the development of such technologies is in fact humanist, because maintaining human life is obviously a criterion intrinsic to (inherent in) the human condition and not in the condition of technological systems, for it is human beings who directly benefit from the outcomes. However, within the more complex conception of human fulfilment presented here, there is a limit to which one can say that the application of these technologies is desirable or constitutes progress in an authentically humanist sense. If it becomes obvious that one's life is continued purely mechanically, in the absence of consciousness (or, even more strictly, in the absence of one's ability for self-fulfilment), then euthanasia would appear as justified. The recommended action would then be aimed at not allowing that life to fall under the quality, meaning and value prescribed by its standards. Furthermore, euthanasia appears increasingly justified within perspectives where the maintenance of social life takes priority over that of individual life<sup>14</sup>.

In the absence of one's consciousness (or ability to decide or choose for oneself), it may be universally acceptable that an important loss of capacity has occurred, and it can be assumed that a universal minimal standard is not being met: no significant life can be conceived to develop meaning or value in the absence of consciousness. But taking this idea even further, there can be situations where the person involved *is* able to make decisions and value judgements, and consider that the experienced loss of health and ability is so great that it has negatively affected all (or most) other dimensions of humanness, thus making significant life and fulfilment impossible.

In this context, resilience<sup>15</sup> is the capacity of human beings to test the physical limits and see to what extent, in conditions of severe, irreversible loss in one dimension of humanness, one can find resources to establish significance through the development of other dimensions. In the interaction between the normative and the empirical, the experiential tests performed through resilience help us distinguish between *subjective* and *objective* limits to making possible a significant life. The ideal of humanness presented here makes it clearer that these subjective and objective limits feed upon each other: by challenging what is perceived to be physically possible, one enlarges the scope of desirable potential, thus increasing human wealth and the significance of human life.

Finally, given that my ideal of humanness has a limited number of dimensions at any particular point in time, is there such a thing as an optimal number of dimensions? I shall briefly note here that there will always be a tension between aspiring to a maximal number, which should cover (as much as possible) all various dimensions of human life, and a minimal number, imposed by the requirement to consider as primary value only those dimensions of humanness which are enduring, non-reducible to and not substitutable by other dimensions. This tension ensures that the number of dimensions remains limited, and also guides towards the optimal structure for my ideal.

## 9. Relations among dimensions of humanness: four types

What happens when an action is taken with a view to advancing a particular dimension of humanness in the considered ideal or value set? How is this likely to affect not only the targeted dimension but also the other dimensions in my ideal or value set? There are four possibilities, emerging from the second and third premises stated in Section 6 above: conditionality (necessary condition), supportiveness, independence (indifference) and conflict – which I shall briefly illustrate in turn below.

Firstly, one can say that the relation of *conditionality* obtains when a particular dimension of humanness (in a particular quantity or at a particular level of development) is indispensable to the development of another dimension of humanness. Suppose, for instance, that I wish to advance the aesthetic dimension of my life or self-development. In focusing on various forms in which beauty can be manifested in the world, I realise that in order to contribute to increasing that beauty I must learn more about what constitutes beauty, what forms it can take, and how it can be enhanced. I may therefore conclude that one irreplaceable factor in my aesthetic development is a more advanced knowledge of the various arts and artistic achievements available in the world.

Secondly, the relation of *supportiveness* refers to the progressive or positive effect that the advancement of one dimension of humanness may have on another, without necessarily implying conditionality. As previously suggested, the relation of necessary condition is, in effect, a particular category of supportiveness. Let us consider, for example, a situation where I wish to develop the quality of my social relations. I generally contemplate this goal as enriching my interactions with other people in society. These interactions can involve sharing of ideas and interests, concern and care for another person's well being, neighbourliness, citizenship, friendship, etc. In pursuing the goal of improving my social relations, I realise that this goal can be approached in a variety of ways, e.g. focusing on creative activities for the sake of the community (to take Marx's advice), developing the social virtues such as benevolence (to take a page from Smith's book), advancing my knowledge



of the social art (to follow Condorcet), or simply developing a superior ecological or spiritual awareness. Each of these avenues can improve my social relations, and I may not absolutely need to follow any particular one more than another. As shown in Subsection 9.2 below, this non-conditional supportiveness can occur in a wide variety of contexts, between any of the dimensions of humanness in my ideal. A graphic representation of this kind of relation is shown in *Fig. IVa*.

Thirdly, the relation of *independence* can be defined as the neutral (zero) effect of the progress of a particular dimension of humanness on the development of another dimension in my ideal. For example, I may wish to improve my health by running twenty minutes on the beach every morning. There is no apparent reason to assume that this activity will necessarily make me more or less knowledgeable, more or less virtuous, richer or poorer, more or less spiritually inclined, etc. Graphically, relations of independence can be represented as in *Fig. IVb*.

Fourthly, the relation of *conflict* occurs in circumstances where the development of one particular dimension of humanness leads to the inhibition (repression, regress) of another. If I wish to increase my material wealth and, in order to do so, I seek a well-paid job, I may be required (as it often happens) to work a considerable amount of overtime, to the extent to which I may not be able to enjoy the liberty to go on holidays as often as I used to, the opportunity to develop my knowledge, social relations, or spirituality. This example refers to a situation where the negative effect is generated not by the advancement of the target dimension as such but by features of the particular *action* recommended for the progress of this dimension (the so-called side effects or associated consequences). There is, however, a sense in which the very progress of a particular dimension of humanness can have a negative impact on the progress of another – a phenomenon which I shall discuss in more detail in Subsection 9.2 below. A schematic image of a conflictual relation between dimensions of humanness is presented in *Fig. IVc*.

Having briefly illustrated the possible types of relations among dimensions of humanness, I would like to elaborate on several points: (1) there is an important category of necessary conditions, related not so much to a particular goal within a

significant life, as to a basis for pursuing any goal within a significant life, and this basis is generalisable; (2) any two dimensions of humanness in a constellation-type ideal can be found in any of the four types of relations, depending on circumstances – an observation which reinforces the contextual character of these relations; and (3) there are ways in which we can actively elicit resources from any dimensions of humanness to support the development of any other dimensions within my ideal. I shall now proceed to discuss each of these points under a separate subheading below.

### **9.1 Significant subsistence (the significant minimum)**

As previously mentioned, there are at least two levels where relations of necessary condition can occur. The example given in the introduction to this section refers to a relation of necessary condition which occurs for the particular development of the aesthetic dimension of humanness, most likely at a level beyond the minimal threshold. This is a form of *enhancing* conditionality.

There is, however, a sense in which we can say that certain minimal levels within each dimension of humanness in my ideal are not necessary conditions for the pursuit of a particular, advanced goal but for creating the general minimal environment for the pursuit of *any* possible specific goal within a significant life. One can say that this category of *minimal* conditionality contains the general necessary conditions for *significant subsistence*, as the conditions of achieving meaning and value are added to those of mere (physical) subsistence.

The level of significant subsistence contains only the minimal requirements, in a closely inter-conditional network. *Fig. V* below shows significant subsistence as a connection of all the thresholds as actually obtained. How is this inter-conditional network understood to function? For example, there is a minimum degree of security which is necessary to ensure a minimum degree of material wealth, knowledge, social relations, liberty, beauty, health, etc. – in a word, of other dimensions required for me to live a significant life understood as a life worth living. Any reduction of this minimum level of personal security may eventually

cause loss or damage in the other relevant dimensions, therefore it is not possible for me to trade off this dimension without seriously affecting the significance (as meaning and value) of my life overall. One can say that, within this sphere of inter-conditionality, a trade-off would not be a rational solution because it would not save or protect anything.

Let us consider this example: suppose I have to decide whether I should move into and live in a war zone or in a suburb dominated by crime. Whether living in this kind of place ensures that I am safe and secure enough to lead a significant life is a fundamental question for me. On the other hand, whether having the opportunity to travel and live absolutely anywhere I like is necessary for me to lead a significant life is also a fundamental question. But if living in this place is so dangerous that I can reasonably predict I will soon lose my life, my choosing to continue to live there will not make any sense: not only my personal security is threatened but also my freedom of movement, and perhaps other dimensions in my ideal of humanness.

Consequently, the way I value freedom of movement will have to be adjusted. The question then becomes: is there enough safe and secure space in this world to realise my primary need for freedom of movement? Despite the expansion of unsafe spaces on earth, I can probably reasonably expect to find such a place. But here it is not only my concept of freedom of movement as primary value that needs adjusting. My concept of personal security may require adjustment as well. If I feel I am threatened by the presence of any stranger in the street so much that I decide to carry a gun at all times and fill my house with the most sophisticated security gadgets, then a space safe and secure enough for me to lead a significant life may not be so easy to find. Here it must be remarked that the drastic limitation of opportunities to find what I am looking for may not come only from subjective sources, namely from what I believe as opposed to what really is out there. For example, in the aftermath of a nuclear war which has practically wiped out any opportunity to live above ground, I would be faced with the same dilemma. The difference between the two situations lies in the potential for solution to my valuation and decision crisis, for in most cases it is far easier for me to adjust my values to what is available to me in the world rather than change the world to suit

my values. The solutions to my crisis will be different but the tension between my valued dimensions of humanness is similar.

In a more limited analysis, let us now consider security (as personal safety and security) and liberty (as freedom of movement), in an inter-conditional relation. I can conclude, through observation and experience, that there will always be, subjectively or objectively, a minimal limit below which my life will suffer significant harm. To both survive and lead a significant life, I need *enough* personal safety and security, and I need *enough* freedom of movement. What is *enough* is determined by the interaction between my whole self and the world. If I have too little personal safety or not at all, I shall be harmed, my life will be harmed, my freedom of movement and everything else I value will be harmed – to the extent that it is no longer possible for me to live. Similarly, if my movements are confined to such an extent that I can no longer function normally (and this includes both the physical need to use one's muscles to move one's body, and the psychological need to envisage opportunities to move) this crisis may lead to a deterioration of my condition (including my physical condition), which is a threat to my life, to my personal safety and to everything else I value.

One can say that the totality of significant minima identified for each dimension of humanness in my ideal reflects my conception of significant life as a whole. For example, what would be the meaning of basic freedom in the absence of basic means of subsistence? What would minimal wealth without minimal security? What would be the meaning of security without minimal liberty, etc.?

The reality of minimal thresholds is implicitly acknowledged by Smith in his conception of human progress, as he clearly shows how certain virtues are indispensable to wealth and greatness, a certain amount of wealth is indispensable to the satisfaction of the immediate and limited needs of any human being, no matter how wise and virtuous, and certain (although variable) amounts of liberty and security are indispensable in the pursuit of either of the two mutually exclusive paths. Less obvious in Condorcet and Marx, the idea of minimal thresholds is however contained in these two theories as well: let us remember, for example, the

minimalist implications of knowledge of one's rights and interests (in Condorcet) or of natural and social necessity which must be reduced to liberate the human essence but cannot be eliminated (in Marx).

Obviously, the idea of minimal threshold will be present in any conception of human progress promoting limited needs as reasons for identifying and valuing dimensions of humanness. Furthermore, reflections on the nature of need satisfaction can be particularly useful in understanding the inter-limiting character of dimensions of humanness in my ideal and the human-scale constraints on the possible relations among these dimensions. This idea will be elaborated upon below.

## **9.2 A pattern of inter-dimensional relations**

It has broadly been noted that any of the four types of relations can obtain among any of the selected dimensions of humanness in my ideal, depending on circumstances. Although adopting contingency (context-dependence) as first premise is the best precautionary approach to be taken to this issue, let us remember that it is useful to seek to identify trans-circumstantial relational patterns wherever possible, and as far as they can be validated empirically.

To illustrate this point, I have selected two dimensions of humanness (benevolence and security) whose possible relations are, I believe, at the heart of Smith's ethics (considered both as economic behaviour, in *The Wealth of Nations*, and as advanced morality, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*).

Let us reflect on benevolence, as a kind of virtue, as good will, or wishing the good of another, or the good in general. In more specific terms, benevolence is manifested as kindness, care, altruism, concern for another, for the satisfaction of their needs, for their well-being, development or fulfilment. How can benevolence relate to security in my experiential journey?

Suppose one lives in extremely insecure circumstances, e.g. war, terror, or some other conditions of life-threatening danger. It is highly unlikely that under such pressures one can develop impulses for benevolence, and more likely that my self-preservation instincts will dominate one's behaviour, perhaps even fuelled by hatred for certain people or for the human race in general. As a certain minimum level of security is necessary for a human being to develop any level of benevolence at all, it is clear that a fall below the significant-subsistence level (significant minimum) of security impairs one's capacity for benevolence below its significant minimum as well. One can say that at this minimal level of security is a necessary condition for benevolence.

However, increasing security to a level where peace of mind, neighbourliness, trust and perhaps friendship become possible, then my resources for benevolence increase considerably. I may listen, understand, care, give freely, support another person in many creative ways, freed from the oppression of subsistence-threatening insecurity. Moreover, as my security increases in terms of having a home, a regular expectation of need-satisfying resources, or a strong sense of identity and belonging, if I am genuinely focused on developing my benevolence then I am likely to multiply my acts of benevolence progressively, as my security increases. In this case, one can say that security is supportive of benevolence.

Interestingly, this relation of supportiveness is unlikely to develop indefinitely through actions that promote uni-dimensional progress. Suppose my security continues to increase, e.g. by moving from a reasonably safe neighbourhood to one that is completely crime-free. One cannot assume that I shall become more benevolent every time crime levels drop. Consequently, one can clearly envisage a range of circumstances in which no direct connection can be made between my security and my benevolence. In such cases, the two dimensions of humanness are independent.

Even more interestingly, it is possible for my security to increase excessively, in the sense that being entrenched into regular guarantees of advanced levels may become an obstacle in understanding the needs and concerns of another. As an overly secure

individual, I may grow to believe that, like me, everyone is perfectly capable of looking after themselves, therefore care for another becomes superfluous, and the meaning of benevolence for my significant development is obscured. Not only excessive material wealth but also over-efficient social systems can feed this illusion. It is not uncommon for affluent or highly supportive welfare systems to impact adversely on genuine inter-personal or community resourcefulness for free giving, and to cause a reduction or withdrawal of care for another. This is an example of overly enhanced security in a *conflictual* relation with benevolence.

One cannot help observing the relevance of the quantitative factor in each of the four cases illustrated above. While in the life-threatening contexts one tends to have *too little* security for benevolence to occur, one requires *enough* security to be able to develop their benevolent dimension meaningfully, to a limit where *too much* security diminishes one's resources for benevolence again. This pattern of evolution is illustrated in *Fig. VI*.

A hypothesis I would like to launch here is that any two dimensions of humanness in my ideal may develop a similar relational pattern. This clarifies the inter-limiting nature of all dimensions in my constellation-type ideal of humanness, and also identifies an intermediate zone of *sufficiency* for all these dimensions to develop supportively. On the linear representation of each dimension of humanness considered separately, as an abstracted concept, one can identify this intermediate zone as the *human-scale* segment of that particular uni-dimensional progress. A sketch of the human-scale segment of progress in security (relative to benevolence) is represented in *Fig. VI* as the segment SM – M1. The common denominator of these human-scale segments of progress in security, relative to each of the other dimensions of humanness in my ideal, is the human-scale segment of one's progress in security within one's overall development and fulfilment.

There is hardly any human-scale meaning in promoting one dimension of human (and social) progress indefinitely. While historically humankind's preoccupations with social progress have focused on resolving issues of scarcity, it becomes clear

that in a humanist perspective too much of one value can be as damaging to human progress as a whole as too little<sup>16</sup>.

### **9.3 Acting for human progress: a circular approach**

Let us remember that acting towards an ideal of humanness is about advancing primarily valued dimensions of humanness to desirable levels within a structure of desirable relations. Let us also remember that desirable relations can be pursued through a priority list of precautionary principles, which are theoretically distinct but can overlap or combine in practice. These principles are: (1) do not allow other dimensions of humanness to fall below acceptable levels; (2) reduce instances of conflict and increase instances of tolerance; and (3) reduce instances of tolerance and increase instances of support (benefit).

In other words, a change that effects the progress of one dimension is desirable if:

(a) it does not effect negative changes to the extent that it brings them below their subsistence limits;

and even more desirable if:

(b) it does not affect the level of development of other dimensions in any way;

and even more desirable if:

(c) it brings about progress in other dimensions.

We can also say that the level of development in one respect can relate to the level of development in another respect in one of the following ways: essential (necessary), substitutable, and enhancing (enriching).

Consequently, one way of testing (even ‘measuring’) the practical wisdom of one’s actions is by exploring the extent to which these actions release the conditional and supportive rather than conflicting potential of different dimensions of humanness.



By opting for the criteria of desirability listed above, I have formulated a more specific model of ideal humanness within the broader dynamic-relational perspective, which I shall refer to as the *constellation* model.

Within the constellation model proposed here, I would like to suggest the following thought experiment: let us conceive of each desirable dimension, in turn, as an end in itself, and regard all other dimensions as means to the selected end, then let us evaluate the results. Note that contemplating certain objects of value purely as ends is a useful exercise not because it is accurate but because it provides a proficient analytical starting point. It results in promoting tentative candidates for primary values, thus sourcing the material and raising the questions for the valuation process. Considering a particular object of value as ultimate goal involves asking myself: *what* do I need to achieve this value? Only then does it become possible to stop half way and qualify my question by asking: *how much* of *that* do I need to achieve this value? In other words, the progress of each dimension of humanness can be contemplated from an actual relational position which determines what kind of support it is desirable to get from the other dimensions and within what limits.

Suppose I aim for the progress of my benevolence as an ultimate end, and that I wish to promote this by multiplying my acts of free giving (of what I consider as significant material or non-material goods) to people around me and to the community, and thus contributing to the satisfaction of other people's needs. By contemplating this dimension of my humanness as a pure end, I enlist the participation of all my other dimensions of humanness. At this point I appeal to my experience to determine, for example, which of these other dimensions (and in what quantity, or at what level of development) are necessary conditions for the progress of my benevolence. As previously discussed, I will require a certain minimal level of security, but also a certain degree of knowledge (to be able to understand the nature of another person's needs and work out optimal methods for the satisfaction of those needs), of liberty, control and health (all three required to be able to carry out the intended actions). If the goods involved in the free giving are material, I will also require a certain degree of material wealth.

Similarly, I may note the availability of extra levels of material wealth, or of other dimensions (such as spirituality, creative activity, social relations, justice) to support the progress of my benevolence through my acts of free giving. Although not absolutely necessary to promote benevolence, a special relation with God may provide me with more complex insights into the nature of care and human need satisfaction. Committed to his atheism, Marx would easily replace the support of this dimension with the benefits derived from creative activity for the sake of 'universal man'. Furthermore, refined and mature social relations (based on peace, trust, neighbourliness, citizenship, friendship) are more likely to favour and multiply my acts of benevolence, in directions that may otherwise be unavailable to me. The virtue of justice, albeit not indispensable in this case, can likewise assist me in orienting and prioritising my free giving acts towards those persons and circumstances that genuinely claim the most attention.

Depending on the circumstances, I may also observe that in promoting these acts my political status or power, or my aesthetic sensibility, may hardly matter. On the other hand, my acts of free giving may come in conflict with the ecological dimension of my humanness if these acts involve providing heating to a poor community by cutting down an excessive amount of trees, or with the admiration of others if I live in a culture which strongly disapproves of (my approach to) acts of free giving.

It must be noted that the actual level of progress already achieved in all other dimensions of humanness is very important in my evaluation of the actions I am considering to take in the name of benevolence. If, for instance, my levels of material wealth and security are considerably high, then there is plenty of room to channel the support of these dimensions towards a greater number or increased quality of my acts of benevolence, and I am better prepared to accept a reduction in my current levels of material wealth or security. This resolution of possible conflicts between benevolence and material wealth (or security) in favour of benevolence is less likely to be forthcoming if I am struggling in poverty and insecurity.

Also important is the relative difference among minimal thresholds across dimensions of humanness in my ideal. Note, for example, that my threshold for the admiration of others is moderately low, while that of the ecological dimension is high. Consequently, I am more likely to favour my acts of benevolence in a potential conflict with the approval of others but less likely to do so in a potential conflict with care for the environment.

The thought experiment I am proposing here is to choose one dimension of humanness at a time (as in the example of benevolence discussed above) and consider it as an end in itself, that is contemplate its unlimited progress. I then propose to subordinate and use all other dimensions as means to pursue the chosen one. We are then in a position to observe, empirically, how far we can get before the other dimensions begin to suffer and establish normatively how much loss can be tolerated. We may not know how much of a particular value we need to obtain but we usually have a better idea of how much we can (or, more exactly, cannot) afford to lose, so all other values will act on the emphasised one as precautionary constraints. The prospect of loss in other dimensions will set the limit for gain in this one dimension. If we then perform the same exercise with each of the other dimensions in turn, each time empirical and normative limits will be set for how much progress of each criterion is desirable. Once the circle is complete and progress under all the considered constraints is achieved, our overall pursuit of excellence may continue towards new horizons of desirability.

What are the merits of this method? Firstly, it must be remarked that, to act towards progress, we are still conditioned into thinking about individual dimensions. This is perhaps inherent in our specifically human (sequential, discursive) apprehension of humanness: we set uni-dimensional targets as a first move, we have a hunch that this is a valuable and efficient move in relation to other values and to the whole value system, and then we have to test it. Our intermediary targets are uni-dimensional indeed but they are variable, and tested according to constraints from the other dimensions. We would not be able to act for progress in the overall, multi-dimensional sense, because we do not have a precise and definite concept of that, and we would not know where to start. Our multi-dimensional advancement

towards our ideal of humanness would be perhaps impossible to explain (account for, describe) as one integrated process. As desirable humanness is too complex to be exhaustively defined, the human mind may not be able to secure simultaneity of vision and action for all its inter-related dimensions at once. This is where a proper understanding of the sequential (but dynamic and eventually integrative) interchangeability of means and ends becomes extremely important.

Secondly, this method helps us also evaluate the merits of each particular action we may wish to undertake in the name of progress. It emphasises the appreciation we should give to resourceful actions or objects, namely those actions or goods whose outcomes or attributes are likely to promote or advance (within manageable risk limits) as many of the upheld dimensions of humanness as possible. However, possible convergent developments among these dimensions cannot be established a priori. These privileged instances of discovering resourceful actions or objects can only occur specifically, in the contextual interaction between our normative outlook and empirical reality. More often than not, this interaction leads to adjustments of our horizon of desirability within the scope and limits of physical possibility.

It is important to emphasise here the non-linear dynamics characterising the constellation model: our momentary focus on the relations of one particular dimension with all others, as proposed in the thought experiment, is in a sense artificial, and should not obliterate the background reality of all other dimensions maintaining all the relations among themselves, simultaneously. In this sense, it is perhaps sensible to interpret the 'behaviour' of our ideal of humanness through a model inspired by the principles of complexity theory, in particular by Fritjof Capra's application of this theory to living systems. According to Capra, the nature of living systems can be apprehended through the integration of three perspectives: the 'pattern perspective' ('the *pattern of organization* of a living system [is] the configuration of relationships among the system's components that determines the system's essential characteristics'), the 'structure perspective' ('the *structure* of the system [is] the material embodiment of its pattern of organization') and 'the process perspective' ('the *life process* [is] the continual process of this embodiment')<sup>17</sup>. In

similar terms, the constellation model is properly applied to our ideal of humanness only if we understand it as pattern, structure and process at the same time.

As previously suggested, despite its artificiality, there is a good reason why the thought experiment is designed in this way: by helping us focus on an easily identifiable criterion, it provides a starting point for our intellect to analyse and evaluate the complex material available. This thought experiment, however, is only effective if we maintain our awareness of its artificial sequentiality and if we understand that its main objective is to make action possible, not to predict exhaustively or to eliminate the requirements for continuous precaution and feedback.

To conclude on how our systematically variable<sup>18</sup> (circular) constellation of values forms an ideal of humanness, I note the following: (1) we commonly define the otherwise indefinable concept of humanness through a cluster of features which do not (cannot) exhaust the reality of humanness; (2) each of these features considered independently can diverge from the realm of humanness if it is not maintained within certain limits; (3) in the absence of a sufficiently specified overall criterion for humanness, in the case of each feature (dimension) these limits are provided by the application of the other features (dimensions) as constraints; and (4) we draw conclusions on how these dimensions of humanness interact empirically by observing the impact of recommended actions or valued objects upon each dimension, and by speculating on how inter-value relations should combine to obtain overall excellence. Guided by these conclusions, we can construct an overall ideal of humanness on a step-by-step basis, as an open value set, which can vary in time as our hypotheses are validated or modified by experience.

I have shown above that the values within our ideal of humanness should be viewed as making up a dynamic constellation rather than some fixed hierarchical pattern. Since all these values are held to have equal priority<sup>19</sup>, there is no hierarchy as such. We could picture these values at an equal distance from each other on our sphere in *Fig. II*.

Thirdly, the principle of equal treatment applied in this circular method emphasises that the integrity of the value system thus selected is ensured by the understanding that primary values form some kind of normative continuum, according to which no principle within it can be considered to be properly upheld unless all others are appropriately upheld as well.

#### **9.4 Features of the constellation model: conclusion**

The constellation model provides, I believe, an improved perspective on how we should deal with tensions or conflicts between our dimensions of humanness. One common understanding of conflict resolution seems to be in terms of making a definite choice, leading to total commitment to one value and total exclusion of the other. Unlike the pyramidal model, this model provides the capacity to tolerate conflicts in a wide variety of circumstances<sup>20</sup>.

Conceiving of one's ideal of humanness as *dynamic* is the result of understanding the inherent properties of possible relations between the various dimensions of human life and human flourishing (and, from there, of humanist social progress). *Tension* is an inherent feature of this dynamism, first and foremost generated by the realisation that human beings are *finite* creatures with a capacity to contemplate the *infinite*. This tension is the contrast between limited human resources and unlimited projections or desires. This openness to infinite potential accounts for the tragic beauty of the human condition – to always be able to contemplate further developments, and at the same time realise the inability to reach the object of contemplation.

However, the realisation that an ideal of humanness may be unattainable does not prevent us from being able to evaluate attempts at approximating to this ideal against the relevant criteria. In this context, I refer to *dynamic balance* as an essential attribute of my ideal of humanness aimed at ensuring its stability and durability. Dynamic balance is the co-existence of *harmony* and *tension* in a *dynamic relationship*. While dynamism reflects the fact that all relationships in my

value system are continuously subject to change, balance ensures that this change occurs within human-scale limits.

For example, my ideal would not tolerate changes that lead to any particular dimension falling below its level of subsistence. In this context, promoting one dimension to excessive levels (that is, to levels where it affects negatively other values in the system) may be tolerated, as long as it does not push any one of the other values below its significant minimum. This illustrates that harmony does not mean complete absence of conflict. On the contrary, it can contain conflict, within certain limits (as specified above). The concept of harmony thus defined also accommodates the realisation that there may be tensions that can never be resolved.

As mentioned previously, balance is different from linear progression in that it requires the matching of competing progressive states, across competing dimensions of progress. Such system has its own resilient, self-preserving qualities. One of these qualities, which I have just mentioned, is the capacity to contain tensions, within limits that do not destroy the stability of the system. Another such quality is the requirement to create and preserve meaning, that is to ensure continuity of meaning. This requirement refers to the system's inability to identify and evaluate radical change when it involves complete disruption with the past, simply because, to be apprehended at all, the new element must establish some constructive relationships with the existing elements in the system. Thus the requirement for the new value or valued object to articulate with a complex system of relationships protects us, for example, against uncritical enthusiasm for change for its own sake<sup>21</sup>.

At human scale, balance also has another important meaning. While adjusting means to acquire valued objects to human scale refers to evaluating competing human actions as pragmatic solutions, adjusting values themselves to human scale refers to something very different – namely to the psychological limits of how much of anything and everything anyone can enjoy before the significance of human life is eroded.

## 10. The potential for social progress

Appeal to a constellation model of ideals of humanness suggests that no uni-dimensional criterion for social progress, no matter how humanist in itself, can claim the status of universal means at social level. Similarly, just as the premise of endless benefit cannot hold within an individual ideal of humanness, it cannot hold within an ideal of society either. This is mainly because, in practice, to keep universality and instrumentality (subordination to higher goals) together, especially if the means are conceived as universal but the goals may be specific, diverging, anonymous or unknown.

Having said this, there are dimensions of humanness which can be generalised more than others. Thus, technological developments and welfare measures tend to be more successful in responding to basic rather than more sophisticated needs. For example, the lower a need is on Maslow's hierarchy (scale), for instance, the more likely it is to be satisfied by material (technological, economic) means. Our levels of material subsistence tend to be very similar, an observation made by Smith in both *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (as discussed in Chapter Three). Beyond that, at the other levels, we tend towards diversity and uniqueness.

The irreducible plurality of dimensions of humanness makes it very difficult to identify one particular dimension as a universal currency. Perhaps Marx was right in intuiting that what society *can* do in assisting the human progress of its members is to facilitate their own free pursuit of self-development, whatever that might be. In Marx's view, society can do that by reducing the individuals' time-consuming burden of attending to immediate, recurrent and irremovable needs. The ultimate *good* that society can provide to its members is *time for themselves*, an indeed universal currency which can then be converted into specific and plural values, according to each individual's needs and abilities. It is as far as society can ever speculate about the co-ordinates of human progress<sup>22</sup>.



For society to deliver any shared good, our individual conception of human progress must articulate with our individual conception of social progress in a certain way. Also, we need to communicate our values with others and actively seek avenues of generalising (and effectively utilising) our experiences. From there we need to explore the possibilities of articulating different conceptions of social progress. I believe these topics indicate crucial directions of further research, which will not be approached in this study.

At this point I will, however, reflect briefly upon how my proposed constellation model of desirable humanness can produce a conception of social progress. To start with, the humanist premise reinforces the indestructible connection between control and responsibility. Within a humanist perspective, social progress cannot occur independently of human progress. It may use the top outcomes achieved by minority groups, but meaningful social progress is obtained through human achievement, not just through perfecting institutions. A society where the institutions advance epistemically and morally while no such progress is expected of the individuals (e.g. the fair market populated by self-interested individuals) will encounter serious limitations in how far it can, itself, achieve progress.

Organisational decisions at social level may aim at facilitating human progress in a more general sense but the created systems cannot guarantee that such progress will occur. Human progress is achievable through free will; it is our liberty and prerogative to define the co-ordinates of our progress as individuals living a significant human life, and our responsibility to achieve it. We can create social practices and structures to assist us but it is ultimately our call; and we can achieve it, as individuals, even when social practices and structures act as obstacles to our progress.

In the context of systems inevitably being designed based on assumptions about human beings and their fulfilment, there is the issue of whether these assumptions should be about *how human beings actually are* or about *how they should be*. There are major strengths and difficulties either way. On the one hand, relying on how we are enables predictions that provide the respective social system with real (genuine)

chances of success. But such a system does not expect or facilitate human progress. On the contrary, some systems (like Smith's natural liberty in economic practices, where making decisions in economic transactions based on priorities other than economic appears as 'perfectly crazy') can be particularly inflexible in this respect. On the other hand, relying on how we should be pays proper attention to human progress. It does, however, present enormous practical problems, as Marx's model clearly shows. The communist society is particularly demanding of its individuals, and the fragility (vulnerability) of such a society lies especially in its intolerance for inferior levels of progress in the social individual. Again, we must call upon wisdom and experience to make local judgements about which systems should be conceived in response to actual humanness, which in response to ideal humanness, and in what circumstances.

As the humanist premise suggests, one cannot design social systems to facilitate the human progress of individuals whose aspirations and values are completely unknown. On the other hand, one cannot realistically assume that all people have the same aspirations and values. The constellation model provides, I believe, an improved basis to account for this plurality of aspirations and values, both in my own life (either simultaneously, or evolving in time) and in my interaction with the aspirations and values of other people. There is no reason to believe that the approach of balancing and negotiating among dimensions of humanness, an approach I regularly apply in my everyday decisions, cannot extend to balancing and negotiating between my priorities and those of others, at a higher level of generality which I assume in principle to be egalitarian. The aggregation of varying ideals of humanness in this manner may be technically complicated but not impossible.

While accepting the potentially infinite plurality of ideals of humanness that individuals may hold in society, the constellation model cannot aggregate with absolutist and universalist models like the pyramidal one. However, I do not consider this to be a regrettable limitation. It is, on the contrary, an improvement from an exclusivist pattern which does not allow a particular model to aggregate even with its own kind. As previously remarked, the models proposed by

Condorcet, Smith and Marx are all universalist (and in that sense similar), and it is precisely because they are universalist that they cannot coexist. Although the constellation model cannot aggregate with just any other model, it can combine with a wide variety of equally responsive and interactive models in ways that an absolutist-universalist model cannot be open to.

The dynamic-relational perspective adopted in the constellation model recommends that social systems should operate from an assumption of complexity rather than simplicity. Their generalisations should be cumulative rather than reductionist, and lead to more complex rather than simpler value sets. By compounding the value sets of individuals in order to obtain a more general model, a different level of generality can be obtained, which is inclusive (rather than exclusive) of exceptions. This is very different both from generalising around the common denominator and not generalising at all.

As the ultimate aim of any institution should be, in the humanist view, to facilitate the complex human fulfilment of as many individuals as possible, it means that no aggregation of individual ideals of humanness can lead to the promotion of one particular dimension of humanness (become criterion for social progress) in a position of static and universal evaluative priority.

In order to produce supportive social systems, individual ideals of humanness must be, in principle, equally considered, provided that this liberty and equal respect is recognised by all participating individuals, and that the liberty each individual takes with promoting their own ideal of humanness does not negatively affect the liberty of other individuals to do the same. In this context, the dynamic-relational perspective on ideals of humanness articulates harmoniously with J. S. Mill's conception of liberty in a democratic society, where maximum liberty is granted to each individual within the constraints of maximum liberty *equally* granted to all others<sup>23</sup>. The impact of Mill's social principle of liberty upon all individual ideals of humanness is that it will welcome all ideals of humanness recognising and internalising this equality, and reject all those ideals which fail to do so.

It can be said that the dynamic-relational perspective on ideals of humanness provides a democratic basis for the aggregation of very different ideals of humanness, as long as they are structured within the same dynamic-relational perspective. Unlike the universalist perspectives adopted by Condorcet, Smith and Marx, for example, this perspective favours more democratic approaches to the plurality of ideals of humanness and to the design of adequately responsive social systems.

Consequently, for human and social progress to articulate properly, adopting ideals of humanness within a dynamic-relational framework must become a universal requirement. Just as no democratic society can exist without some firm organising principle, no collaborative efforts for a humanist design of social systems can produce any meaningful results unless dynamic-relational perspectives are generally practised.

It is now apparent that the dynamic-relational perspective facilitates a more refined understanding of the humanist premise in particular and of humanism in general.

## **11. Refining our humanism**

One important respect in which the humanist premise of social progress as subordinated to human progress is modified within the dynamic-relational perspective is that, just as each dimension of humanness can in turn be regarded as an end in itself and as a means to all other dimensions, the means-end relation between social systems and human fulfilment must also be understood in a reciprocal sense. A static and universalist perspective does not seem to pay sufficient attention to the fact that regular human input in systems is indispensable. This fact, however, cannot possibly be ignored. Even Marx, whose ideal society relies heavily on the labour-reducing benefits of the automated workshop, finds himself constrained to work out a minimal (but consistent) level of involvement of human time and labour in the ideal production processes (this topic is particularly developed in *Grundrisse*).

Accordingly, the dynamic-relational perspective recommends that social systems and human life and fulfilment should be contemplated in a relation of reciprocal circularity, of *self as means to means to self*. Marx's ideal is that this instrumental mediation from human beings to social systems and back to human beings should disappear through the integrated self-development of the social individual. Thus, it is not surprising that Marx describes this integration as an exclusion of the support of certain social systems, e.g. the state should disappear, and (under the assumption that all individuals meet the ethical requirements of the new society) law enforcement may also be superfluous. However, as suggested above, Marx's society still cannot completely do away with social systems (e.g. the automated workshop). While Marx's objective of superseding self-alienation is commendable, one must question whether the complete elimination of social systems in this process is a realistic approach to achieving this supersession.

It is not surprising that Marx feels uneasy about this mediation and that he severely criticises capitalism for emphasising the 'self as means' part of the circular relation at the expense of the 'means to self' part. I am saying it is not surprising because the mediation of systems introduces the possibility of separating the circular relation into two linear (uni-directional) components. This possibility is considerably increased by the adoption of a pyramidal (static and universalist) perspective on relations among dimensions of humanness. One can always conceive of a social system aimed at providing means to self. If, however, there is one dimension of humanness which is universally of endless benefit to all others, then the infinite development of that social system is always justified. Unfortunately, universal means have the dangerous propensity of becoming universal ends, and the key feature that favours this illicit conversion is precisely their static universality. Marx is therefore right in feeling uneasy about all this.

A dynamic-relational perspective, however, may allow us to accept the reality of social systems while helping us feel more comfortable about their relationship with human life and human fulfilment. This perspective provides a method for testing and ensuring that all intermediary conditions in the interaction between self and means obtain simultaneously. Marx does make a similar suggestion in his attempt to

make productive labour coincide (as much as possible) with self-creative activity but, in trying to determine how this simultaneity can be achieved, he seems to imply that the ideal society or mode of production, in their eternal universality, will always safely generate this integrative effect. By adopting a dynamic-relational and contingent perspective, one does not have to await the advent of this perfect system before striving to achieve an appropriate integration of self and means, and succeeding. Rather than seek a unique and total solution, perhaps we should simply be vigilant and apply more refined criteria of social and human progress which do not allow the uni-directional evaluation of the relations between social systems and human fulfilment.

Institutional decision-makers, when applying humanism correctly, inevitably perform value judgements about humanness: human nature, human needs and potential, human fulfilment, criteria for human progress and the relationships among these criteria. However, when taking the technical view, they apply their value judgements uni-dimensionally and atomistically, according to what the given institutional structures have been set up to do. Both an anti-systemic humanist approach and an anti-humanist technocratic approach miss the point that they only represent half of the battle, and that to obtain a meaningful relationship between social progress and human fulfilment one must treat the two perspectives as complementary rather than competing. Amartya Sen correctly remarks, in his essay *On Ethics and Economics* (1987), that there are two kinds of approaches to economic issues, often perceived to be in conflict: the 'ethical' (i.e. value-based) approach (more preoccupied with the imperatives of human development, and applied by Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx) and the 'engineering' approach (focused on the developmental resources inherent in an economy, and used by William Petty, David Ricardo, Antoine Cournot, Leon Walras). Sen emphasises the need for both approaches to be practised harmoniously, complementarily, and the indispensable roles they play for each other: for instance, the end-value discussion elaborated in the ethical approach will provide the necessary human-scale constraints on the technical possibilities, whereas technical explorations will reshape the horizon of ethical possibilities. He deplores the unfortunate historical divorce and competition between the two approaches at the

expense of the progress of each and to the detriment of a superior, holistic (integrative) understanding of economics and its role in the life of humanity<sup>24</sup>.

Finally, in invoking a representative mandate, democratic institutions are in a dilemma: on the one hand, they must be responsive to human needs and aspirations, therefore their philosophy must necessarily be humanist. On the other hand, however, they abstain from revealing judgements about ideals of humanness, out of a misapplied respect for plurality. By achieving the integration of social systems and human fulfilment as recommended by the dynamic-relational and contingent perspective, we are then in a more comfortable position to accept, live with and reframe positively the given fact that even in a democracy assumptions about ideals of humanness at the level institutional decision-making are unavoidable.

Not properly understanding the nature of developing ourselves, it is not surprising that we have failed to develop a society that could assist us in facilitating a real and meaningful human development.

Individuals have, in a sense, a greater learning mobility than social institutions (which tend to lag behind) and they also have the instinct (propensity) to reject anything that attempts to confine them or define them too precisely or completely. In this sense there will always be a tension, perhaps, between human aspirations and technical specifications of how these aspirations may be achieved. The existence of this tension is a good thing, because within limits preserved by the possibility of feedback and communication between human aspirations and technical means, it is a constructive (creative) tension. It is only when communication and feedback cease to occur that the tension becomes destructive, and we come to be at war with nature, society, others and ourselves.

In denying that there is an inescapable connection between human beings, society and nature, post-modern nihilism and the discourse of the absurd tend to strip individuals bare of all humanity. However, as Capra<sup>25</sup> suggests, in accepting that such a connection does indeed exist, we must review and improve the modern understanding of these connections.

For this purpose, it is not enough to return to the classical principle of humanism as subordination of any social project to criteria of significant human life. We also have to develop and refine this humanism towards broader horizons. Marx was speaking, for example, about the social individual, recently we have extended this perspective towards the ecological individual<sup>26</sup>. We also have to adopt a responsible (rather than self-centred and self-indulgent) humanism, which provides a reasonable and sound foundation not only for conceptions of human rights but also for ideas about human responsibilities.

The dynamic-relational perspective can be extended from individuals and groups of individuals in society to future generations and to co-habitation with non-human entities. Certainly, one can only speculate on the meanings of benefit for these categories from the point of view of their inherent development, for its own sake. Objective judgements on these matters may be limited by the projections of the subject's values onto the entities considered.

Just as any particular dimension of humanness can be reified, the humanist principle itself can be separated from its rich contextual meaning. However, the contextualism inherent in the dynamic-relational perspective is more likely to prevent such reification. Once we understand that there is no true humanism where there is alienation of the attitude from its subject, and where the connections among human beings, society and nature are considered from the perspective of a master-slave relationship, this complex inter-connection of human beings with one another and with the world is better promoted by the dynamic-relational perspective. This perspective does not guarantee a broader, integrative and interactive humanism, but provides an improved theoretical basis which inherently facilitates the expansion of our humanist horizons.

By contrast, one of the weaknesses of universalist models is that they tend to assume as the recipient of progress not all concrete human beings considered individually but an altogether abstract notion of *humankind* which may lend itself to controversial interpretations. Too often advocates of technological progress mark



one-off, local achievements (the records of human performance) as universal achievements. But what exactly is the value of this universality? How can occasional top performance (sometimes manifested as an ad hoc, purist flirtation with extreme possibility) have a serious impact on the everyday, common life of real people? For example, no one denies that the image of Neil Armstrong hopping on the Moon has ignited the imagination of millions of people regarding the expanded potential of the human race. However, it has certainly not made the Moon look homely to us, it has not rushed us into buying real estate there and it has not made us wiser in improving the living conditions of people in arid areas on earth.

Furthermore, humankind as a singular, undivided entity in relation with Nature, even if granted free will, does not guarantee the exercise of individual free will, except for those who happen to be placed at the top of human performance as assumed exponents (representatives) of the potential or abilities of humankind. This clarifies why technology by itself cannot resolve the essentially political ideal of making all concrete individuals the genuine subject of social progress.

It is not clear that the attempt to *control* and *dominate* nature is the most appropriate response we humans should have to the issues of survival. Even if we had unquestionable reasons to believe that humans in the 'natural state' are the 'slaves' of nature, it may be that a simple reversal of roles between nature and us is not the answer, for the imperatives of conflict and destruction will not be removed this way but only reinforced. The destructive potential of technology as a human-made instrument of control (not only of nature but of other humans as well) is testimony to this fact.

When discussing the relationship between humanity and technology in master-slave terms, Langdon Winner<sup>27</sup> emphasises the inadequacy and undesirability of such a relationship in the first place. This type of relationship is paradoxical, because it is established with the intention to liberate the master from oppressive necessities; but in enforcing this masterhood, the master not only does not achieve the desired liberation but actually makes himself increasingly dependent upon the slave. In discussing this paradox, Winner also suggests that this relationship is intensely

anthropomorphic anyway, therefore there is no solid empirical basis to assume its 'objective' existence (or any meaning whatsoever) in defining relationships between human and non-human entities (such as the relationship between humanity and nature, or between humanity and technology).

Consequently, what we should perhaps do, instead of 'mastering' nature, is transcend the pattern of domination and control in which we tend to view our relationship with nature and reformulate it as one of collaboration and mutual respect, and of interaction in a climate of accepted uncertainty. This approach is not new. Many cultures and societies which modern Western history would characterise as backward or stagnant have already existed under this approach for thousands of years. To these communities, the Western quasi-absolute 'need' for control through technology would appear as a *malaise*, a social disease generated by a profoundly erroneous understanding of humanity's relationship with the outside world.

A Cartesian type of humanism, in which the individual is conceived as existing somehow independently and separately from community, society or nature, may well be the source of a reductionist and alienating kind of humanism. What we need is perhaps something closer to the Zulus' traditional concept of *ubuntu* (humanness), as defined in the maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a human being is a human being through other human beings)<sup>28</sup>.

By extending our areas of defining humanness, the aim is a harmonious and integrative reciprocity with nature. However, this is difficult to achieve and easy to anthropomorphise in conditions of uncertainty about the available means and forms of communication between ourselves and other forms of nature. The possibility of an unresponsive (or unintelligibly responsive) universe is not a complete fantasy.

Within this climate of uncertainty, what can we do? Perhaps the starting point should be us as individuals consciously placing ourselves in a constructive (creative), communicative and empathetic relationship with others, society and nature. As the limits of our access to absolute truths remains uncertain, the possibility for various avenues of cross-evaluation still exists. As both our limits and potential remain elusive, we should try and make of this situation the best we

can – by refining our knowledge and experience of our relations with the world, by articulating our specific perspective with other specific perspectives and seeing to what extent we can obtain valid generalisations, without losing sight of the invigorating (defining) contexts.

I believe, for example, that the subject of any ideal of humanness should be the human person in a rich sense, that is to include the Self in interaction with Other human selves (the social person) and the Self in interaction with anything that exists (the person-in-the-world). This is in recognition of the fact that both human progress and (ultimately) social progress are about the self-actualisation or self-realisation of the human being, not in isolation but rather as person-in-the-world. The concept of person-in-the-world highlights the umbilical, non-essentialist, mutually defining relationship between the (human) Self and the Other (human or non-human).

## **Summary**

In trying to identify a moderating option between universalism and nihilism, I have remarked upon the need to review our approach to defining humanness and, especially, the traditional view of the pivotal role of defining humanness exhaustively in the formulation of an ideal of humanness. I have also shown that a both flexible and constructive approach to this elusive and incomplete concept of humanness is provided by a dynamic-relational perspective on dimensions of humanness, recommended here to replace the traditional static-universalist perspective adopted by authors like Condorcet, Smith and Marx. The key to this shift in perspectives is the understanding that less than universal generalisations are possible and have considerable guiding value.

The dynamic-relational perspective has five main features: (1) within one's ideal of humanness, each dimension can be contemplated both as an end in itself and as a means to each of the other dimensions; (2) depending on circumstances (including its actual quantity or level of development), each dimension can be in a conditional, supportive, independent or conflictual relation with any other dimension in one's

ideal; (3) just as we pursue the progress of dimensions of humanness towards desirable levels, we should also select among possible relations between these dimensions according to certain guiding principles of desirability, e.g. generally favour relations of support over relations of independence, and relations of independence over those of conflict; (4) the equal treatment of each dimension of humanness, in turn, as a pure end, to elicit support from all the other dimensions is an effective method for testing and stimulating the cooperative and integrative resources of these dimensions; and (5) this perspective on humanness is characterised by a dynamic, contextual balance between harmony and tension.

The features summarised here have been analysed in an ideal of humanness proposed as an example – an ideal whose number of primarily valued dimensions is larger than usual, but nevertheless limited and (I believe) functional. The dynamic-relational perspective has certain important advantages over static-universalist approaches to ideals of humanness, such as an improved potential for sounder recommendations regarding the design of systems for collective human progress, a more complex understanding of the humanist principle, and the facilitation of a generally more inclusive and interactive humanism.

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<sup>1</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach', in Sen, A. and Nussbaum, M. (eds), *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 242–269.

<sup>2</sup> In *The Decline of the West* (1926–1928), Oswald Spengler writes: "Mankind"... has no aim, no idea, no plan, any more than the family of butterflies or orchids... I see, in place of that empty figment of *one* linear history which can only be kept up by shutting one's eyes to the overwhelming multitude of the facts, the drama of *a number* of mighty Cultures, each springing with primitive strength from the soil of a mother-region to which it remains firmly bound throughout its whole life-cycle; each stamping its material, its mankind, in *its own* image; each having *its own* idea, *its own* passions, *its own* life, will and feeling, *its own* death... Each culture has its own new possibilities of self-expression which arise, ripen, decay, and never return'. See O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (transl. by C. F. Atkinson, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959), p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* ([transl. by D. Ross, rev. J.L. Ackrill and J.O. Urmson], Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), II.9.

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<sup>4</sup> M. Nussbaum, *op.cit.*, p. 257.

<sup>5</sup> For Darwin and the natural egoism of humans, see *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Ed. University of Chicago Press, 1965; and the anthology compiled by A. Alland Jr. under the title *Human Nature, Darwin's View*, Columbia University Press, 1985. For Kropotkin's critique of the Darwinistic assumption, see his *Ethics: Origin and Development*, ([transl. by L.S Friedland & J.R.Piroshnikoff], New York: Black Rose Books, 1992; and *Mutual Aid, a Factor of Evolution*, ([ed. by P.Avrich], London: Allen Lane, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> Remarkably, Aristotle's given list of virtues is also structured in an open system. In describing how pursuit of the good should override the pursuit of customs and traditions, Aristotle insists that customary rules must be subject to revision. Thus, moral progress (which is primarily desirable) is only possible through opening traditional ethical evaluations of experience to future modifications. For a more elaborate analysis of this issue, see M. Nussbaum, *op.cit.*, p. 249.

<sup>7</sup> Figures I to VI in this chapter are included in the Appendix.

<sup>8</sup> See Durkheim, Emile, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* ([transl. by J. A. Spaulding and G. Simpson], Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1951), pp. 241–276.

<sup>9</sup> See this idea elaborated in Abraham Maslow's *Motivation and Personality* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, New York: Harper & Row, 1987, p. 7 and pp. 56–60.

<sup>10</sup> On this point, see M. Max-Neef *et al*, *Human Scale Development* (New York: Apex Press, 1991), pp. 17–18. Further, according to Max-Neef's theory of needs, 'human needs must be understood as a system: that is, all human needs are interrelated and interactive. With the sole exception of the need of subsistence, that is, to remain alive, no hierarchies exist within the system. On the contrary, simultaneities, complementarities and trade-offs are characteristics of the process of needs satisfaction' (p. 17).

<sup>11</sup> See F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 225 ([transl. by Marion Faber], Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 117).

<sup>12</sup> The concept of *wisdom* I am employing here, as defined above, is different from – and should not be taken in any way to refer to – Smith's notion of wisdom as superior, universal knowledge implicit in his description of 'the path of wisdom and greatness'.

<sup>13</sup> However, if one reflects on the etymology of 'health' (as derived from the term 'whole'), one can find it easier to contemplate health more as an end than a means.

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<sup>14</sup> See, in this sense, Kropotkin's conception (in the works cited before) and the survival philosophy of the Inuit people.

<sup>15</sup> Valuable insights into the nature and sources of resilience in human beings is provided by Anne Deveson in her recent book, *Resilience* (London: Allen & Unwin, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> The idea of limited and universally comparable basic needs (as survival or course-of-life needs) appears in Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, for example in his account of the natural distribution of material wealth from the rich to poor, which occurs when the former pursue luxuries or purchase labour (WN, I, p. 440–441). Smith also talks about the repugnance we tend to experience towards the goods which have satisfied our basic and limited needs after these needs have been satisfied (TMS, p. 28). Recently, in his article on 'Needs, Capabilities, and Distributive Justice', Sirku Hellsten discusses how a quantitative increase in need-satisfying goods beyond a certain limit can lead to an oversatisfaction of needs and to an impairment of human functionings and capabilities (as defined by A. Sen and M. Nussbaum). He remarks, for instance, that diseases recurrent in affluent societies (conditions usually characterised by excess rather than lack of material resources) are just as harmful to human health as those diseases which afflict poor communities (S. Hellsten, 'Needs, Capabilities, and Distributive Justice', in Y. Hudson and W. Creighton Peden, eds., *The Social Power of Ideas*, Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> Fritjof Capra, *The Hidden Connections: Integrating the Biological, Cognitive, and Social Dimensions of Life into a Science of Sustainability* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> By a *systematically variable* order of priority I understand change or variation in value priorities according to certain rules of judgement, such as a similar end-means test being applied in the case of each value.

<sup>19</sup> In a formal sense, it can be said that all the considered dimensions of humanness have equal priority but they are only equal in the sense that they are all applied the same end-means test. The different results of this test in the case of each dimension may indicate these values as constitutively unequal, with different subsistence, growth, tolerance and excess thresholds.

<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, informed by grassroots experiences of decision-making under constraints and uncertainty, management theorists like R. E. Quinn, T. Peters and A. T. Belasen have developed organisational models which illustrate the need for a replacement of the *either-or* approach by a *both-and* approach aimed at helping us cope with (and even more, live and do our best with) possibly unresolvable tensions. On this topic, see: T. Peters, *Striving on Chaos* (New York: Knopf, 1987); R. E. Quinn, S. R. Faerman, M. P. Thompson and M. R. McGrath, *Becoming a master*

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*manager: A competency framework* (New York: Wiley, 1996); and Alan T. Belasen, 'Paradoxes and Leadership Roles: Assessing and Developing Managerial Competencies', in *Management Development Forum*, Vol.1, No. 2 (98).

<sup>21</sup> One important feature of the concept of progress as a change (transformation) process is that, while it emphasises difference, it can only be understood within a framework of continuity, of conservatism. The full meaning of change develops in our minds only if shadowed by a concept of constancy. In asking ourselves whether X has progressed (from time A to time B, for instance), we are not comparing two different entities (X at time A, and Y at time B). We assume that X is still X, at both times, irrespective of the changes. Although qualitative identity may not be preserved between the two moments, numerical identity must be. This semantic feature of the concept of progress (implying qualitative change but numerical continuity) has important consequences in understanding the scope and limits of change acceptable to any sound conception of progress.

<sup>22</sup> One can say that Condorcet and Smith too advance universal currencies, such as natural rights and, respectively, material wealth. However, Marx's idea of free time as universal social good is placed at a superior level of abstraction. Time is not a dimension of humanness as such, it is simply another name for human life as a whole, more exactly the quantitative expression of its finiteness. By focusing on time, Marx proposes a restoration of the individual's ownership of their life without emphasising, in this process of empowerment, any particular dimension of humanness over any other.

<sup>23</sup> See J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* ([ed. by D. Bromwich and G. Kateb], New Haven : Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> A. Sen, *On Ethics and Economics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 6–10.

<sup>25</sup> Fritjof Capra, *The Hidden Connections: Integrating the Biological, Cognitive, and Social Dimensions of Life into a Science of Sustainability* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> See Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1990).

<sup>27</sup> Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology: Technics-Out-Of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought* (Cambridge-Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1977), p. 190.

<sup>28</sup> See Dirk Louw, *Ubuntu: An African Assessment of the Religious Other*, in 'Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion', San Francisco, 22–25 Nov. 1997.

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# A FUTURE FOR 'PROGRESS'

## - Afterword -

*Shall he alone, whom rational we call,  
Be pleased with nothing, if not blessed with  
all?*

### **1. Strengths and weaknesses of the modern social projects: lessons for today**

In the long and rather troubled history of the idea of progress, latest disillusionments appear to have given this idea a decisive blow. Yet, a more thorough exploration of the impact of evaluative perspectives on human life and development reveals that there are still important lessons to be learnt from past inadequacies, and still more (possibly better) ways to try and improve the human condition. These possibilities should not be lost or ignored.

I have remarked that the three classical theories (Condorcet, Smith, and Marx), although burdened by the excessive requirements of an absolutist and universalist perspective on values, were in fact superior to the theories developed by their later epigones in at least two important respects: (1) they were firmly founded on a generally well-defined and well-articulated humanism; and (2) they relied on ideals of humanness which recognised the plurality and complexity of dimensions of humanness. These two qualities, eroded in the subsequent theories, were equally praised by post-modern thinkers, who criticised the later outcomes of the three social projects mainly according to these two criteria. It is somehow refreshing, therefore, to be reminded that the premises of humanism and multi-dimensionality were indeed present in the original conceptions, and that achieving the appropriate emphasis on these premises is, historically speaking, a matter of recovery rather than a new discovery.

In addition, there are several other positive lessons worth retaining from the classical theories. Firstly, the pursuit of an ideal (understood in a regulative rather



than constitutive sense) has often proven to be a more realistic and effective approach to achieving progress than the problematic idea of infinite improvability. Although any preset limit is in principle challengeable, approaching human and social progress with a healthy ‘sense of limits’ (to reiterate Lasch’s phrase) is almost indispensable to preserving valued developments within humanly meaningful parameters.

Secondly, the three classical conceptions consolidate the idea of a strong correlation between the potential (as power and control) of human beings to achieve progress and the responsibilities that must be assumed by human beings for this potential to become reality. Not surprisingly, the demanding optimism of the original theorists, once replaced by the scepticism of the later practitioners regarding the ability of human beings to fulfil the envisaged responsibilities, also led to a substitution of normative perspectives with empirically deterministic interpretations of progress. Having now wondered why we should ponder over ideas of progress that do not seem to have any direct connection with significant human life (see in particular Hayek’s view of progress as ‘accident’), it is time for the pendulum to swing back towards accepting that there should be a direct correspondence between what we expect from social progress and what we undertake to achieve in terms of human progress (individual and collective).

Thirdly, it cannot be denied that each of the three classical theories has its ‘grains of truth’, contained in compelling (though not decisive) evidence in support of its key premises. In this context, there are important points to retain from some interesting and plausible conceptions of human nature and needs, human value (worth) and desirable potential, as well as human fulfilment. Similarly, the dimensions of humanness selected as desirable in each of these theories represent values we generally cherish as vital to our fulfilment. We may object to the prominence (or lack thereof) given to some of these values in the ideals of humanness promoted by these conceptions, but it would be far more difficult (if not plain unreasonable) to argue that these values (knowledge, virtue, wealth, creative activity, liberty, security) are things we can totally ignore and still live a significant human life.

Having recovered the (still) valid parts of these theories, it is equally important to keep in mind their weaknesses, so that the appropriate amendments are applied. By taking an absolutist and universalist approach to human values, needs and interests, Condorcet, Smith and Marx set up models whose comprehensiveness (considered by their authors as the key strength) was in effect the element that made them most vulnerable.

In this context, the identification of *one* dimension of humanness as *the* universal means of endless benefit to all others exposed a model of humanness otherwise sound and well-articulated to a series of dangerous propensities, especially to the presumption that, once the social systems designed to facilitate human fulfilment as originally conceived are in place, then our critical vigilance is no longer required.

## **2. The constellation model: a middle way**

Interestingly, both universalism and nihilism (see Spengler, O’Hear) display the same nostalgia for the absolute, and the same anxiety towards the prospect of living with uncertainty. What separates the two perspectives on progress is that, while the former is set on having it all, the latter is resigned (too soon) to having nothing.

However, while trying to have it all may seem like the immature impulse of the spoiled, having nothing is hardly the way to make significant life possible. Hence, the constellation model proposed in this study is offered as a possible constructive and precautionary answer to the important objections brought to the classical theories.

Through this model I propose a more refined understanding of the dialectics between ideals and experience, as what we are looking for shapes the scope of what we are likely to get, and what we get affects what we will be looking for. In our interaction with the world, our questions are always answered correctly but we may misunderstand the answer or even our original question. (We may get what we have

asked for, but we may have originally mis-imagined what it is that we really asked for.)

Similarly, the constellation model is likely to provide a better integration of humanist with technical meanings of progress. It only allows for those technical meanings which prove necessary or useful within a humanist scope, given a vague, open, non-exhaustible definability of humanness.

Nevertheless, the progress we can best evaluate as subjects has a normative (rather than empirical) and a humanist (rather than technical) meaning. It is progress as reflection of how we as individuals and human beings develop complex and dynamic relations with the world, how we improve (through experience as interaction and exchange with the world) our understanding of the quality of our values and of the quality of the relations among these values.

In addition, adopting a reflective perspective (aware of its own cultural and historical contingency) does not mean adopting an a priori limiting, relativist perspective on our evaluation processes. Evaluating human progress, for example, beyond our subjective perspective, remains possible, though the journey is likely to be a lot slower and more arduous. These side effects are to be accepted for the sake of more adequate and rewarding (meaningful and enduring) outcomes. By taking these precautions of contextual articulation at all times, and by performing relational-dynamic evaluations of our interaction with the world, we are performing crucial experiential tests before deciding what can be safely generalised. Thus, although it is impossible to anticipate every potential situation, the further application of a more general theory to specific circumstances is not likely to generate as many surprises.

In sum, the constellation model provides a framework for understanding the possible relations among our valued (ultimately desirable) dimensions of humanness, and also a framework for the desirable relations among these dimensions. A model like this also provides more flexibility and opportunity not only to reconcile the tensions, differences and contradictions among our own values

but also to try and articulate our ideal of humanness with ideals of humanness held by other people.

Where does the constellation model leave the future for social projects? Are such projects possible? Are they meaningful? Does it make sense to assume that social systems can be designed to facilitate human fulfilment understood in more than one (universal) way? While the constellation framework makes the justification and design of such projects considerably more difficult, it does not *a priori* reject the possibility of such projects. One can apply a constellation framework to one's conceptions of human and social progress and still welcome generalisations wherever they meet the constraints. Thus, generalisations can still be sought for reasons of efficiency but these reasons cannot override the need for both normative and empirical vigilance.

Consequently, a dynamic-relational perspective on humanness and progress provides an improved basis for the substantive debate on the meaning(s) of progress. It is a straightforward critical instrument for the detection of subtler uni-dimensional and technical discourses on progress which may pay lip service to humanism but in fact contain ill-formed and unsound premises about humanness, about its dimensions and the relations among these dimensions.

### **3. Suggested directions for future research**

One meaningful direction has already been suggested: exploring the possibility of designing social projects which can accommodate a plurality of conceptions of human progress (ideals of humanness). Furthermore, if it is found that such social projects can be designed, it would be interesting to find out how far reaching these projects can be.

For this purpose, the dynamic-relational perspective provides a more flexible basis for the articulation of plural conceptions of human progress. While a universalist model is uncompromisingly exclusive of any other models (including other

universalist models), the dynamic-relational perspective can allow the co-existence and interaction of a plurality of constellation models. Although it is obvious that a dynamic-relational perspective cannot support universalist models, it would be interesting to explore the possibility of alternative models that are specific-relational (rather than universal) but nevertheless different from the constellation model (e.g. different premises about the desirability of relations among dimensions of humanness, about the generally high desirability of harmony, or about the generally low desirability of conflict).

If several competing dynamic-relational models are identified, then it would be useful to analyse whether any one of these should be promoted as a framework for a social project (and if so, which model should be promoted, and based on what criteria). Speculating one step further, if none of the competing models provides a satisfactory framework for the design of a meaningful social project, there is still something left to do. The question for us would then be whether we can identify the unifying basis of the competing models (this unifying basis is usually the area of dispute) and find ways to transcend the plane of these models, namely a perspective which rearranges the conflicting elements of these models in a structure where these elements are no longer apprehended as conflicting but as co-existent and interactive.

After all, the constellation model itself has been arrived at by transcending the plane of previous conceptions as described above. There is nothing to stop us from speculating that, once more dynamic-relational models begin to populate our analyses of progress, the time will come when apparently irreconcilable differences among these competing models will bring our intellectual efforts to an impasse and will require a new transcending effort.

Successively widening the horizons of transcendence, in broader circles rather than in linear segments, seems to be the best way in which we can take genuinely novel and increasingly meaningful directions in understanding human and social progress, without losing or discarding any of the previously acquired insights into the subject, and without allowing reductionism to obliterate its increasing complexity.

Both realising the inter-limiting nature of dimensions of humanness and aspiring to their inter-supportiveness are valuable ideas, which help us better understand and do justice to the inherent complexities of human existence. While the dynamic-relational perspective casts doubt upon the possibility and relevance of designing and implementing successful large-scale social systems for the achievement of human progress, it nevertheless provides an effective critical instrument for safeguarding ideals of human fulfilment against technocratic and reductionist distortions.

In a more practical vein, returning to the original preoccupation for social indicators (as mentioned in the General Introduction), it is hoped that this holistic approach to understanding and assessing progress may help to develop a more balanced and sustainable framework for social indicator models.

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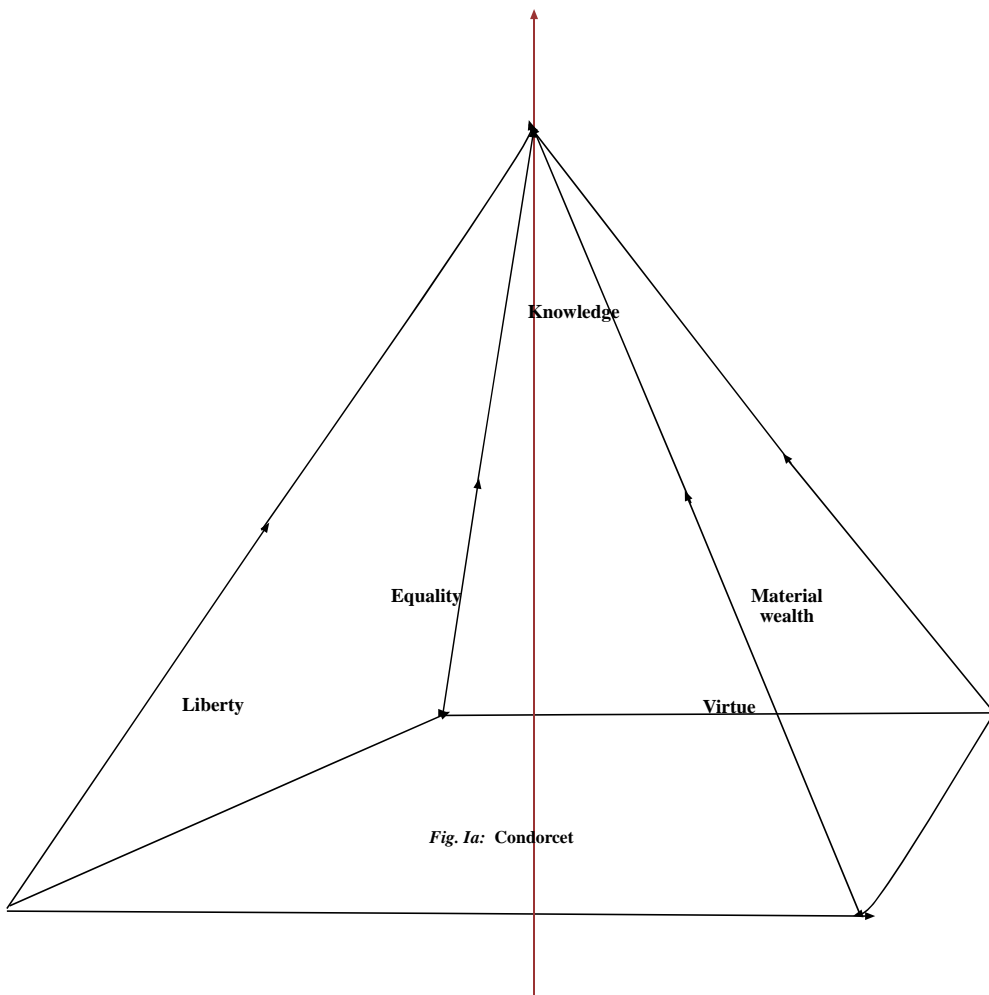
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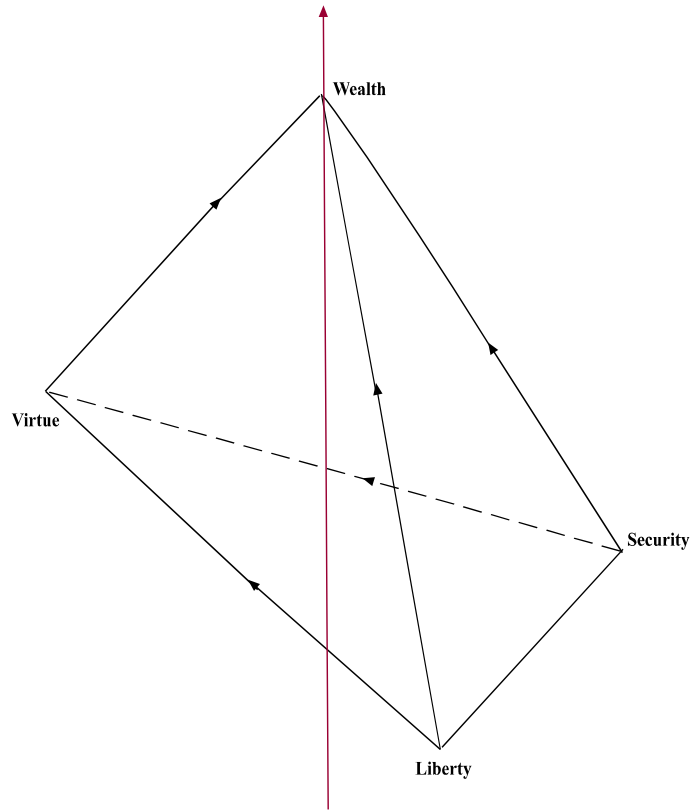
**- APPENDIX -**



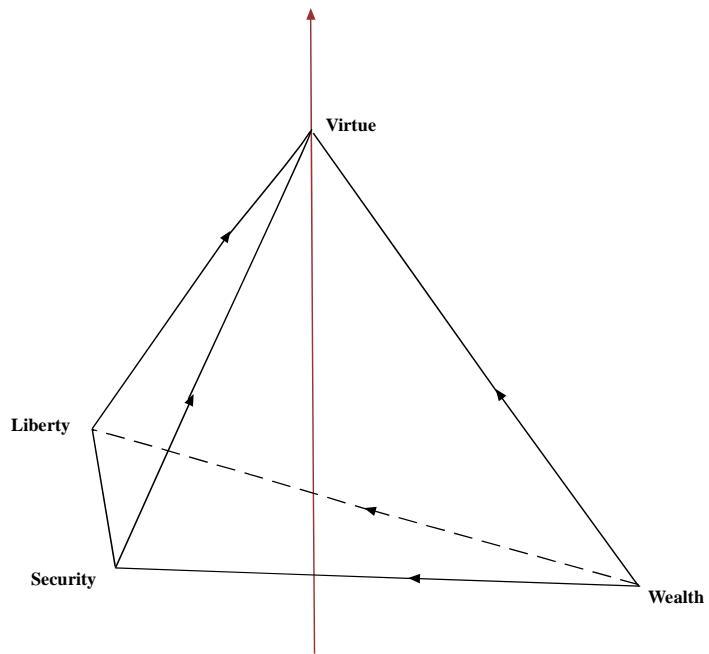
**Fig.I: ...from a racing spear**



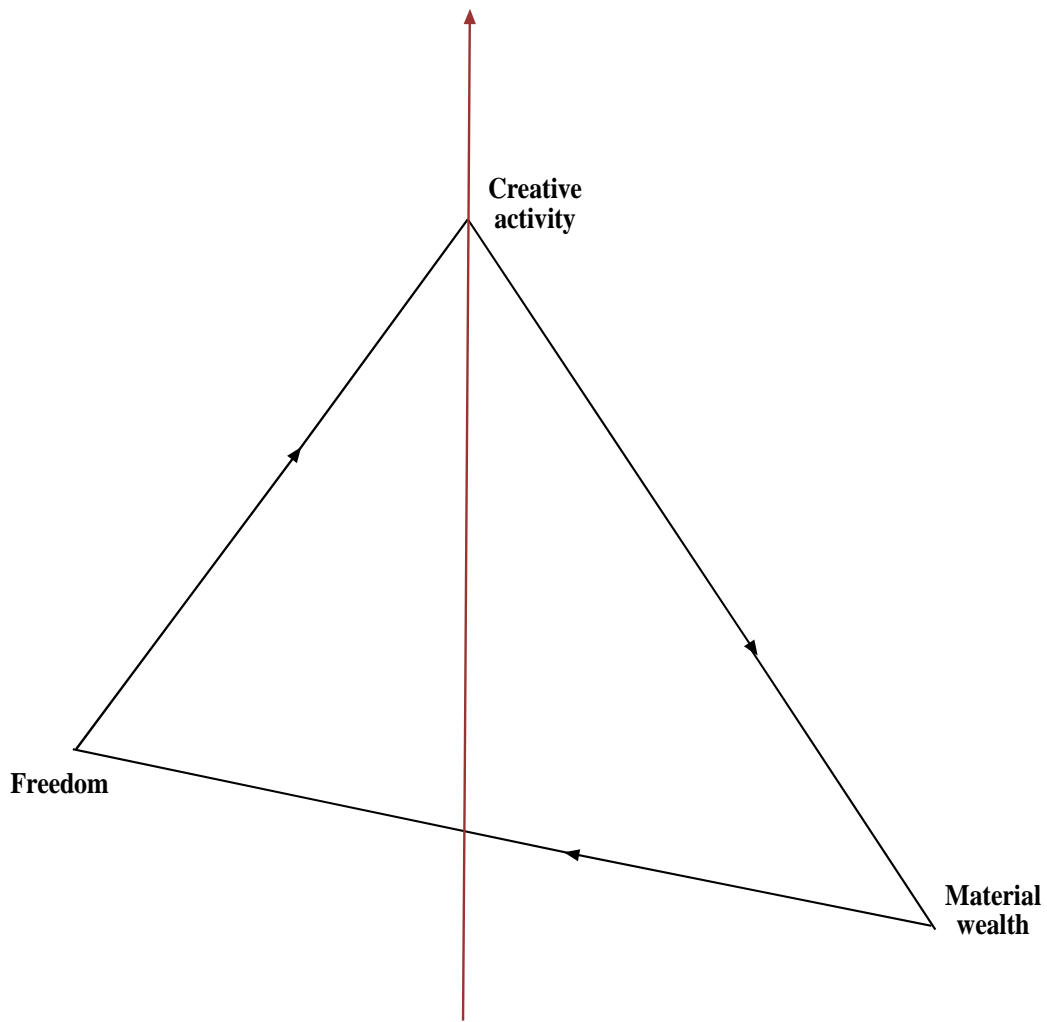
**Fig. Ia: Condorcet**



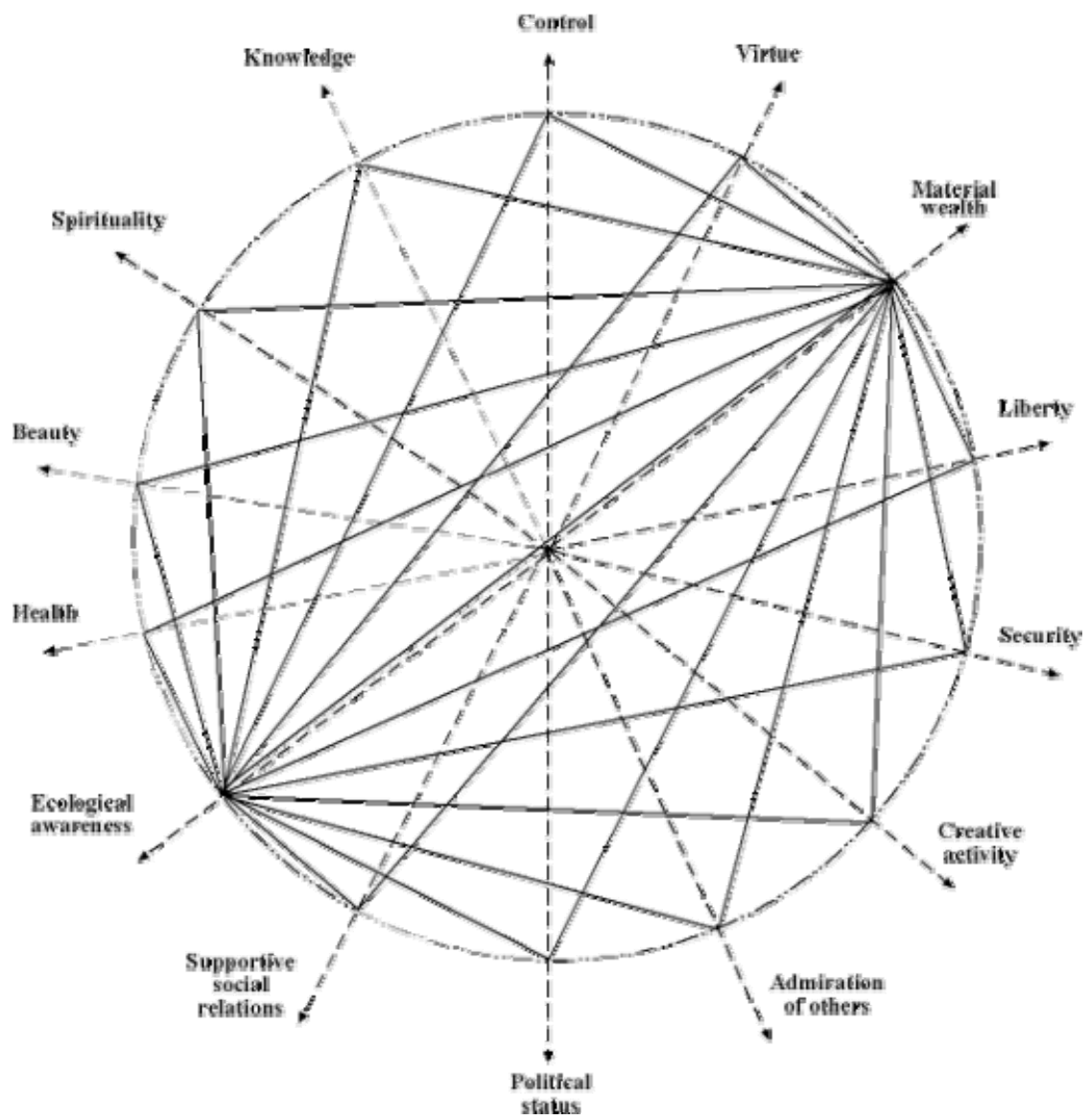
**Fig. 1b:** Smith: 'The path of wealth and greatness'



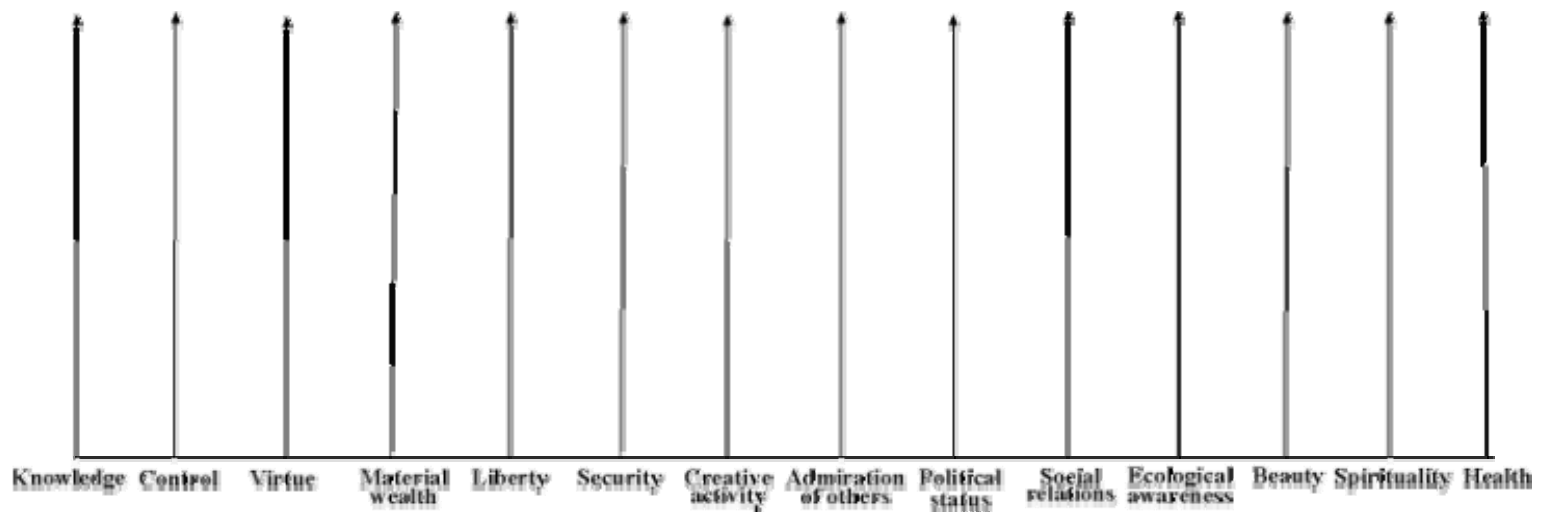
**Fig. 1c:** Smith: 'The path of wisdom and virtue'



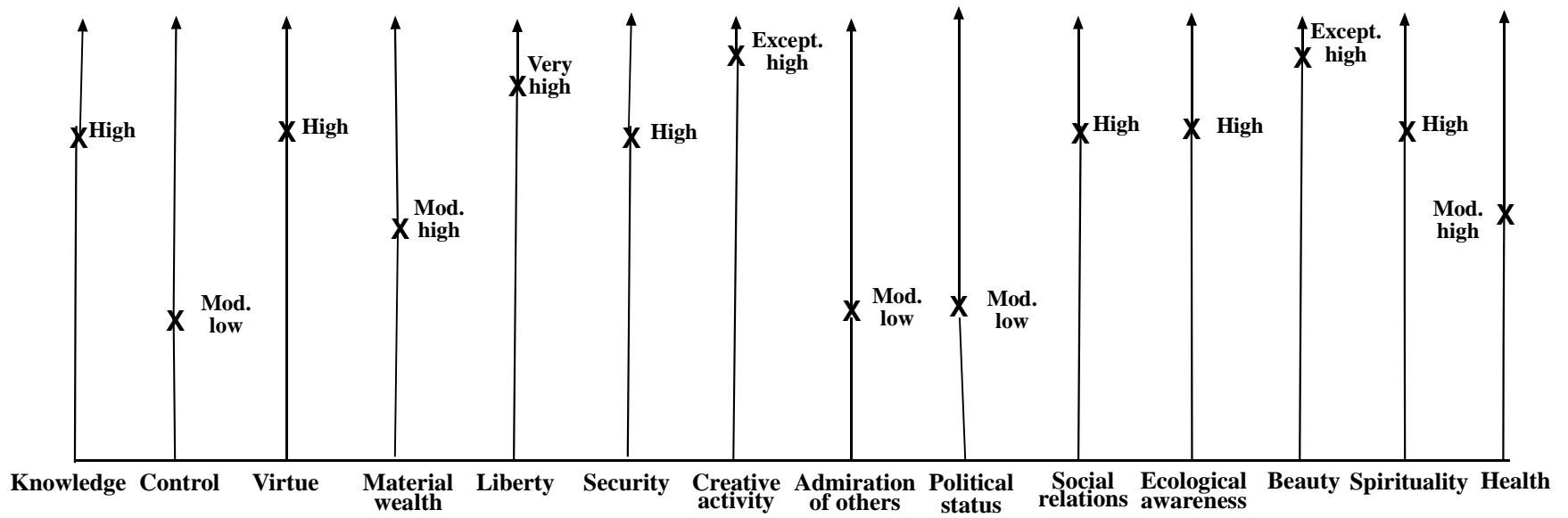
*Fig. 1d: Marx*



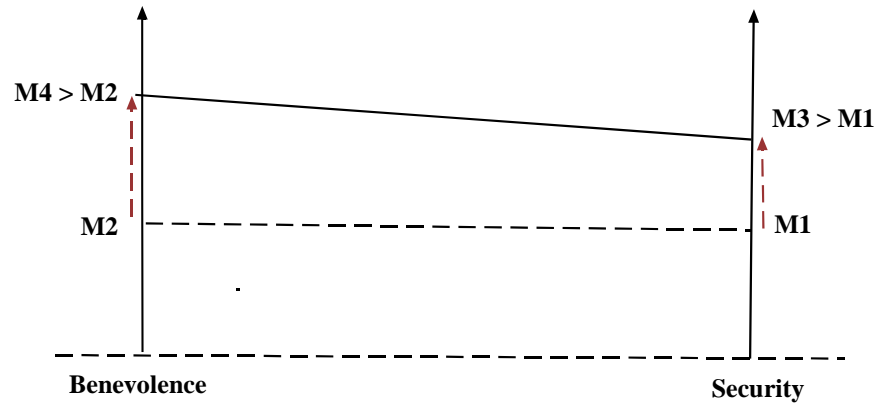
*Fig II: ... to an expanding sphere*



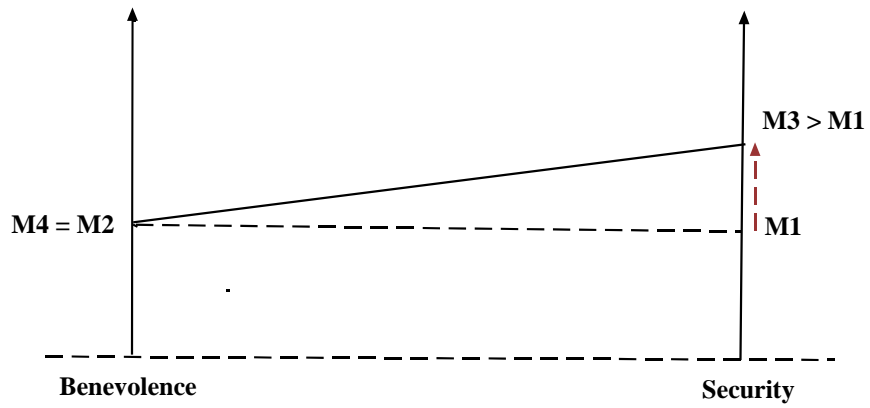
*Fig. IIIa: The dimensions of humanness unfolded.*



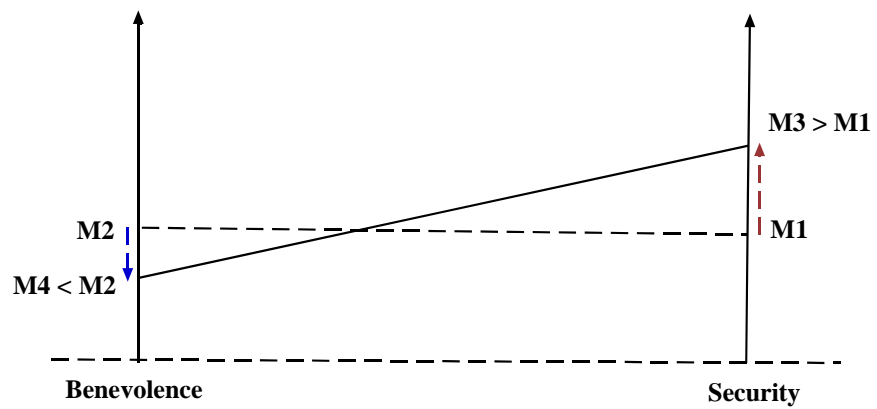
*Fig. IIIb: The significant minima of all dimensions*



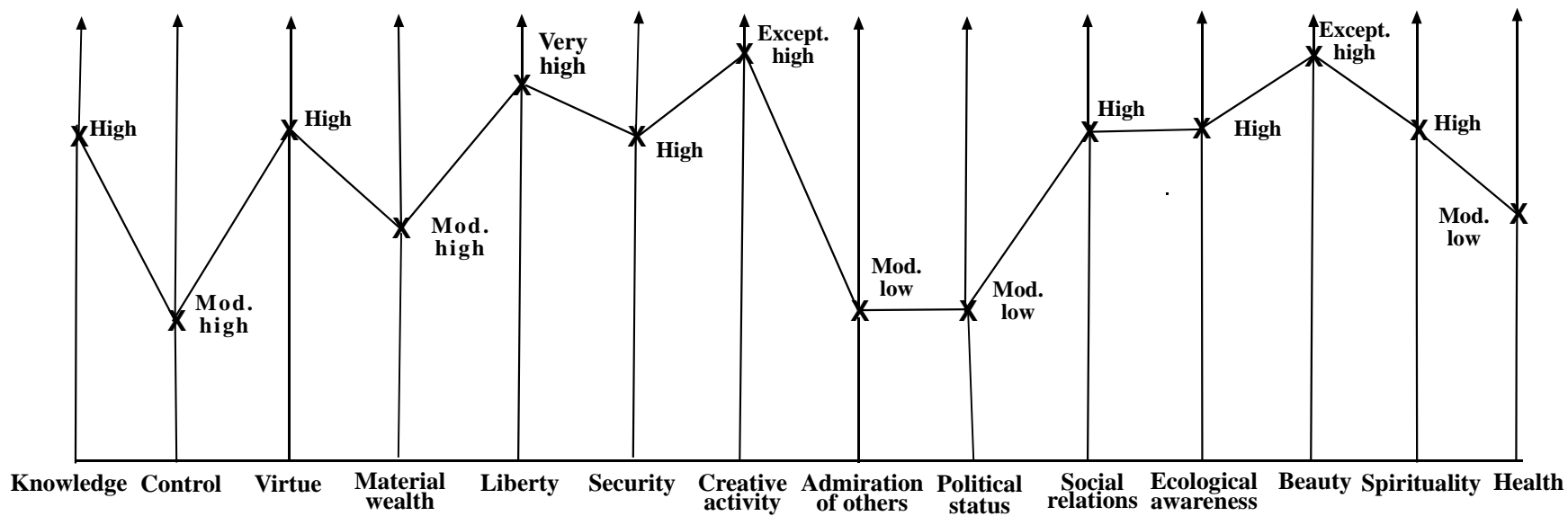
*Fig. IVa: Supportive relationship*



*Fig. IVb: Relation of independence*

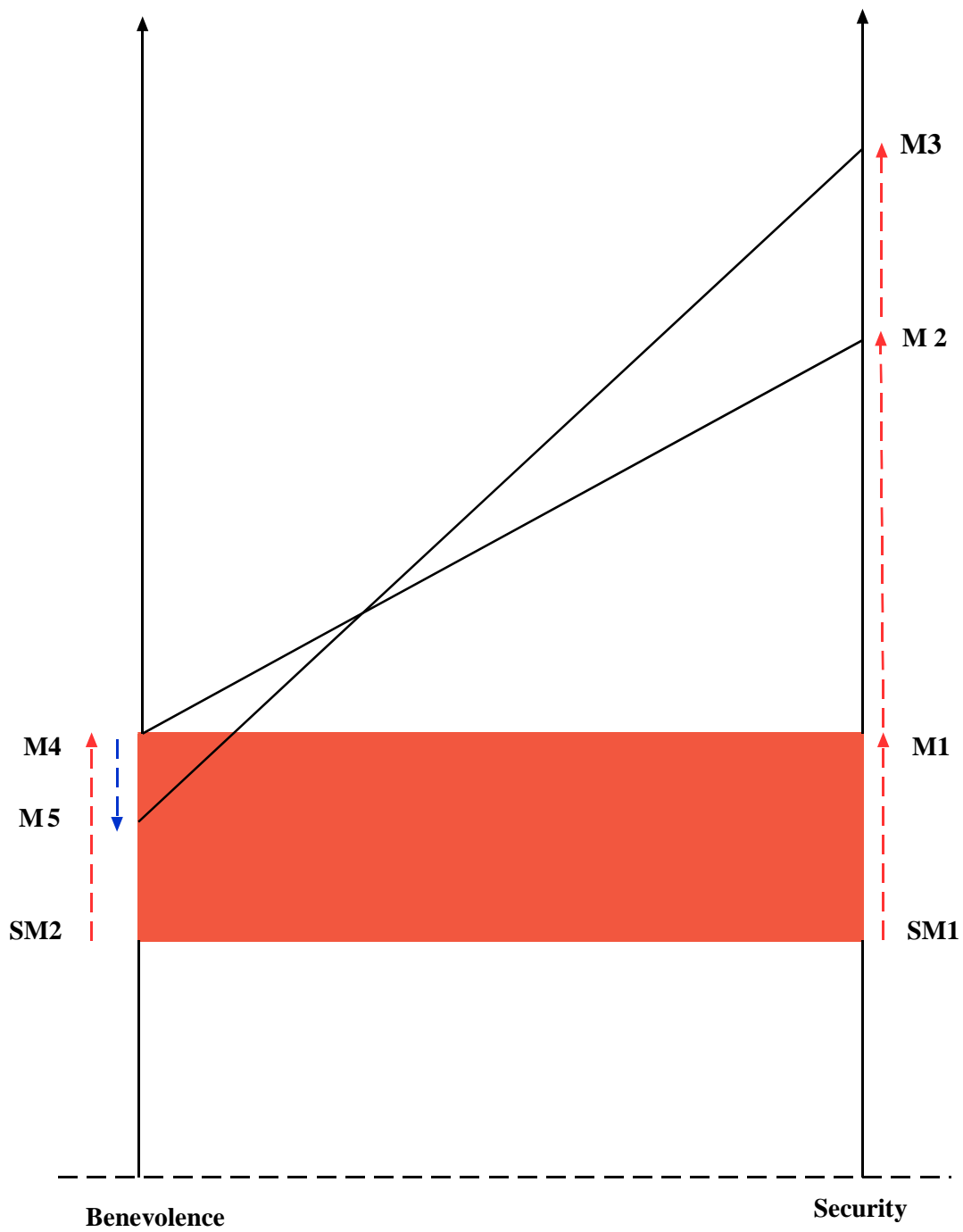


*Fig. IVc: Relation of conflict*



*Fig. V: The significant minima and significant subsistence*





*Fig. VI: A relational pattern between benevolence and security*



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