

# Towards an Emancipatory Empiricism

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...[N]atural science will lose its abstractly material—or rather, its idealistic—tendency, and will become the basis of *human science*, as it has already become the basis of actual human life, albeit in an estranged form. *One* basis for life and another basis for science is *a priori* a lie.

-Karl Marx. *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.

A transformation of consciousness (or lack thereof), rather than another of its inventions, will determine whether the inventions of consciousness are humanity's saving grace or its *coup de grâce*. In order to steer the future towards the former result, humanity must embrace a new, emancipatory empiricism. To achieve this rather unscientific-sounding, apparently normative goal we only need understand emergent causality (as opposed to Cartesian, linear causality). The emancipatory teleology of science and empiricism follows as a corollary, as does the normative character of the subject-object dichotomization of reality on which scientific endeavor is currently premised.

Of course, if history up to now has been any indication, humanity has not done much steering of anything, but has rather been steered by events and circumstances. Indeed, to believe that one is the author of one's fate is very nearly the definition of hubris, which is something best avoided. Historical causality is a non-linear, emergent phenomenon. Human beings are protagonists in this process—we engage our environment (socially, ecologically, technologically, and otherwise), we manipulate and transform it towards some perceived advantage, but the transformed environment then has a transformative effect on us, often with tragic results (global warming, proliferation of nuclear weapons, etc.). If you take a snapshot of historical developments at any given moment, it may seem that there is a clearly defined subject acting upon a well-defined object. However, dynamically, there is no chicken and no egg in this process, no subject and no object. People like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Shakespeare understood this well. Their works are case-studies in emergent causality at the level of private lives.

Unfortunately, in fleeing the hubris of subjectivism many of us run into the arms of the opposite, equally pathological view—i.e., a fatalistic objectivism that construes humanity as the hapless plaything of random events and circumstances, or of some

inexorable force. Religious fundamentalists call this force “God,” while so-called “free-thinkers” think up a more “sciency” name. For some it is economic determinism, while for others it is genetic determinism, or technological determinism, or cultural determinism, or what have you. It is quite astounding to contemplate the zeal and piety with which our most talented minds bow down slavishly before their own historical powers, promise, and protagonism, projected in alienated form onto perverse abstractions. And then there is the monotonous drone of dystopian books, movies, lectures, all having titles along the lines of “When the Machines Take Over,” “When the Aliens Take Over,” “When the Nuclear War Happens,” etc., each one being received and critically acclaimed as though it were the first of its kind.

It can be said without exaggeration that the discourse in any field often boils down to an oscillation between the hubris of subjectivism and the fatalism of objectivism—under various guises. Sociologists talk about agency and structuralism. Philosophers, about freedom and necessity. The debate goes on and on because neither of these antitheses is the “correct view.” Both articulate half the reality, suppress the other half, and thus result in disfigured, alienated visions of the world. If one wants to understand what a magnet is, one cannot set out from the premise that only positive poles exist. Likewise, subjectivism and objectivism are poles of a single emergent reality which synthesizes their apparent contradiction. A mature perspective capable of embracing the paradox is required to understand the phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

Hegel called such a perspective “dialectical.” He described it using the following, rather longwinded analogy [1]:

[In] the building of a house,...[t]he elements are made use of: fire to melt the iron, wind to blow the fire, water to set wheels in motion, in order to cut the wood, etc. The result is that the wind, which has helped to build the house, is shut out by the house; so also are the violence of rains and floods, and the destructive powers of fire.... Likewise are the passions of men gratified; they develop themselves and their aims in accordance with their natural tendencies, and build up the edifice of human society; thus fortifying a position for order *against themselves*.

Hegel thus constructs an historical perspective in which the historical reality is a synthesis of subjective and objective forces (freedom and necessity, or the passions of human individuals versus the will of God) which are superficially antagonistic. “The two together form the weft and the warp in the fabric that world history spreads before us” [1].

This was a start. However, to Hegel, “world history is not a soil of happiness; in history the periods of happiness are blank pages,” and his dialectical inquiry effectively

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<sup>1</sup> Eloquent examples of such a perspective can be found in the Vedas, the Tao Te Ching, the Avatamsaka Sutra, and other ancient texts. In this essay it will be more instructive to refer to a more recent, and, quite frankly, less beautiful, authority.

relapses into a fatalistic objectivism which casts humans in the familiar role of hapless playthings, in this case of the “Idea” or the “World Spirit” (Hegel’s names for God).

Or, as Karl Marx later said, “With [Hegel, the dialectic] is standing on its head. One must put it on its feet again if one would discover the rational grain inside the mystical shell.” Marx then worked out the consequences of a dialectical method built empirically, without reference to abstractions or absolute categories [2]:

In direct contrast to German [i.e. Hegel’s] philosophy, which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men...conceive...in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We begin with real, active men, and from their real life-process show the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process....

The result was a sort of tensor calculus of history in which there are no fixed, absolute categories—no “man-as-such”—but rather a human nature which is conditioned by the “local curvature,” if you will, of each particular historical time and place.<sup>2</sup> The analogue of the gravity which causes this local curvature was, for Marx, the way in which the given society produces, procures, organizes, and distributes its wealth (the “forces of production” and “social relations of production,” in his words).

In Marx’s conception, then, the deterministic necessity which appears to rise over us and condition our behavior and actions is not some mystical force, but is itself constituted by past human behavior and actions [4]:

In history up to the present it is certainly an empirical fact that separate individuals have...become more and more enslaved under a power alien to them (a pressure which they have conceived of as a dirty trick on the part of the so-called *world spirit*, etc.), a power which has become more and more enormous and, in the last instance, turns out to be the *world market*.

Marx’s dialectic, unlike Hegel’s, is thus inherently emancipatory on two counts. First of all, it divests the abstract categories of their sway over our thoughts and inquiries. It shows that the content of supposedly absolute categories has no real existence independent of us, but is rather the content of our own powers and innovations projected in an alienated form onto concepts and things. Secondly, in demystifying the social reality and bringing it down to earth, it reveals the real, concrete roots of oppression and injustice.

If children are starving in the very midst of vast affluence and wealth, for example, that is not because of a real lack of resources, nor because “such is human nature,” but because of a set of pathological social relations which systematically expropriate the vast surpluses generated by a technologically advanced society.

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<sup>2</sup> Marx, of course, did not refer to his theory as a tensor calculus. He called his theory historical materialism, in contradistinction to Hegel’s theory of history, which was called historical idealism. Note that the usage of “materialism” and “idealism” here has nothing to do with the popular modern connotations of these words.

If machines seem to be “taking over,” that is not because of anything inherently sinister in machines or human innovation, but because the capitalists who invest in machines and employ them do so in order to pocket the surpluses generated by the machines (they would not be capitalists otherwise). If the social relations of production were organized in such a way that these surpluses were distributed equitably, then we would have a 10 hour work week and a much friendlier attitude towards machines.

Note, moreover, how assessments such as “Life is worth living,” or “children starving in the street is a bad thing” become empirical, not normative, statements, while the dichotomization of reality is shown to be a normative stance, a cultural reification of deeply alienated social underpinnings.

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The etymological evolution of the word “observe” is an instructive cultural story. “Observe” derives from the Latin roots *ob + servare*, which means “to keep safe” or “watch over.” In its original connotation, then, “observe” suggested a stewardship, a union of observer and observed. Today, of course, it has come to mean the exact opposite. “To observe” (especially in scientific contexts) presupposes an act of amputation whereby the observing subject is completely severed from the observed object.

The resulting subject-object dichotomy is assumed to be inherently empirical, and has become all but synonymous with science itself; and yet the triumphs of empiricism and the scientific method in no way require nor imply nor warrant this dichotomization. On the contrary, what we find empirically is that our subject-object prejudice is inconsistent with reality at its most fundamental level. Our empiricism is laying a trail of bread crumbs which leads us back to the original connotation of observe.<sup>3</sup>

Theorizing and empirical inquiry do not take place in a special compartment held in abstraction from the rest of the human experience, but rather within it, as one of its momenta, and are teleologically oriented towards action and transformation of the world— and this is not only “methodologically o.k.” but necessary in a fundamental, ontological sense [3]:

We see how subjectivism and objectivism...only lose their antithetical character...we see how the resolution of *theoretical* antitheses is *only* possible in a *practical* way. Their resolution is by no means, therefore, a task only of the understanding, but is a *real* task of life, a task which philosophy [and science] was unable to accomplish precisely because it saw there a *purely* theoretical problem.

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<sup>3</sup> On another count, science has come to be synonymous with the repression of “normative” dimensions of human experience (love, inspiration, instinct, etc.), as epitomized in sci-fi characters like Star Trek’s Mr. Spock. But what if love is a 3+1 sensory experience of some higher dimensional phenomenon?

These are subtle points which must be implemented with great care. In other writings Marx himself relapses into deterministic talk of “iron fisted necessity” [2], and the abuses of many of his disciples are, of course, a well-known story which must never be repeated.<sup>4</sup>

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Physicists are in hot pursuit of the grand unified theory, the “God equation,” the theory of everything, and so forth, curiously oblivious that they follow in the footsteps of David Hilbert and the other 19<sup>th</sup> century mathematicians who also cried “we can know, we must know!” That march of hubris reached its bitter end, of course, with the publication of Kurt Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorems in 1931. This does not mean that the opposing, fatalist view of “*ignoramus et ignorabimus*”<sup>5</sup> was proven correct, but it does hold an important 19<sup>th</sup> century lesson for a 21<sup>st</sup> century pursuit.

In some sense the Incompleteness Theorems just mean that the theorist cannot make the whole universe her object, because she is, after all, a part of it. And in some further sense this may just mean that the whole truth about the universe cannot be rendered in subject-object duality. Indeed, it may be that the ultimate nature of reality is something that must be *lived*, and is not just collected as another nugget of knowledge for theorists to add to their intellectual trophy rooms.

A true TOE will unify not only the strong and the weak force, but also the consciousness of the theorist. It will unify theory and practice (praxis), and it will be deeply transformative of the local historical curvature. To paraphrase Marx one last time, it will be “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....” It is “the riddle of history solved, and knows itself to be this solution” [3].

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<sup>4</sup> Near the end of his life, when he saw the direction in which his followers were taking his ideas, Marx famously said “I am not a Marxist!”

<sup>5</sup> A fatalist slogan of the 19<sup>th</sup> century made popular by Emil du Bois-Reymond, to which Hilbert and his followers were reacting.

## References

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