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Question Three

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What is human nature?

A confusing and endless concept to explore, yet within every major human rights movement you find discussion of human nature in depth. Perhaps human nature is a tool to understand the oppression once faced or necessary to plot the best path out of oppression. In any case, the discussion of human nature within specific movements reveals the basic values on which a group operates and the reasoning behind their tactics and ideals. In this paper, I look specifically at the concepts of human nature within segments of the Feminist and Gay Movements, concluding with a personal argument for the advantage of one concept over the rest.

**Feminism**

Within the Feminist Movement, actions vary from Slut Walks to legislative lobbies to female-only communes. The ideas that lead to these actions vary just as widely. All feminists want equality between genders and see a need for social change, yet they often have little else to agree on. Differing concepts of human nature lay the foundations for specific movements and for the differences between them. Discussed below are the ideas of Liberal, Socialist, Radical and Separatist Feminists:

The most known and familiar form of feminist ideology is often that of Liberal Feminism. This frame places feminist theory within the accepted and dominant ideology of Liberalism. At its core, Liberalism espouses that *‘All men are created equal’—*a philosophy that lends its self well to feminists, if you ignore the gender-specified subject. In this view, the basic unit of society is the individual, creating ideals of meritocracy and equality of opportunity. Liberal feminists believe that human nature is based on rational beings, created equally across time and space. It is important to note that this is a single, consistent nature, an idea that will be shook by others with the malleability of human nature according to situation and society. Liberal Feminists connect the uniquely human characteristic of rationality to emphasize the need for liberty and its guarantee of individual autonomy. (Jagger, p. 174) Seeing all people as rational beings, capable of making their own decisions, makes the feminist case of equality between men and women. This group rejects any major natural differences between genders that would be worthy of creating a lesser status for women. While admitting that some differences do exist, they do not believe any of these differences matter when looking for basic equality. Furthermore, Liberal Feminists point out that true differences between genders will not be known until women and men are given equal opportunity in society. (Friedman, p. 115) For example, Liberal Feminists argue that women have historically been assigned to unskilled work that does not require rational thought. (Jagger, p. 177) Women may have the same capacities as men, but, because they have been constrained by availability of opportunity, they can be seen as a lesser gender. As far as sexuality, Liberal Feminists support legal equality of gays, such as with same-sex marriage. (Baumgarder & Richards, 316) Although they do not connect issues of race and sexuality to their definitions of human nature, it can be reasoned that the rationality and equality of all people would be equally applied to gays, as it would be to women. We will see this thought in the coming discussion of the Liberal Gay Movement.

Another form of feminist theory draws its essential ideas from the work of Socialism. The founding unit of society, in Socialist Feminism, is the group and the driving force of society is economics. Socialist Feminism puts much of their focus on economic systems citing Capitalism as the major oppressive institution against women. Rather than looking at individual equality, Socialists Feminists seek a new structuring of society and economics that will change the balance of power. (Bellin, p. 2) When looking at human nature, Socialist Feminists do not believe that there is a single human nature. Rather than having one truth, they see human nature as an adaptable state dependent on the economic system in place in any society. For example, they would agree that human nature in a capitalist system tends to be selfish and individualistic. (Bright, SF Lecture) The restructuring of society that they seek is most dependent on a move away from the current oppressive economic system and into a more communal mode of economics that they believe would bring about a change in human nature. This human nature would be more cooperative, more equal, and beneficial to women and society as a whole. As far as differences between men and women, Socialist Feminists agree with their Liberal counterparts that any differences are minor. Because of how society has developed around private property and the nuclear family, women have been placed into a secondary role, rather than because of biological reasons. (Radical Women Manifesto, p. 4) Socialist Feminists look to history showing that past community structures have led to strong, respected women that were equal with men, even when responsible for different work and spheres of life. (Radical Women Manifesto, p. 5) This possibility of equality for women in human nature and society is simply reflective of the economic system of a given time and leads Socialist Feminists to promote economic institutional change as a solution for women’s issues.

Radical Feminists formed their own approach and ideas in response to women’s issues, rather than borrowing from a liberal or socialist base. In this way, they created a very different view of human nature than their more conventional counterparts. At a very basic level, Radical Feminists believe that all people are androgynous and have the same ‘humanness.’ Any differences between men and women today are there because of socialization under a highly patriarchal society. Radicals can view the ‘nature’ of women as what she is grown and molded into rather than what she is born as. (Kreps, p. 235) Women are often socialized to believe that their true nature should be to find fulfillment in marriage and motherhood. Radicals cite oppression within society for any ideas of a women’s ‘nature’ that is not totally androgynous. Another view looks to the school of psychology, “The Third Force.” Within each person is an essential core and drive to achieve an optimal potential. When that drive is not fulfilled, frustration and mental sickness can result. (Kreps, p. 237) They see women as victims of this kind of oppression, not ever fully able to achieve their potential, which would be possible in an androgynous society. Overall, Radicals are less concerned with the exact nature of human beings and more so with the structural barriers that restrict women from becoming their own people. Radicals were also more involved with ideas of sexuality related to human nature than other feminist groups. Human beings, they believe, are polysexual. This rejects any notions of heteronormativity and suggests that people fall across a range of sexualities, none of these being better or more natural than another. Because Radical Feminists place much of their focus on oppression as a whole, their notions of the double-blind situation and structural limitations can be applied to racial and gay issues. (Frye, p. 10) With their inclusive views on human nature and focus on oppression as a whole, Radical Feminists more often expand their ideas to other groups as well as share many thoughts with the Radical Gays to be discussed.

Capital “S” Separatists take a completely different view of human nature than the three prior groups. Rather than trying to create a society of gender sameness, Separatists assert that men and women are completely different. Accordingly, Separatists do not think there is one human nature. Men and women in this view are seen as totally separate species, affirming significant biological differences. While they assign different qualities to men and women, they reject notions that women-related qualities are any lesser than men-related qualities. Separatists, being women, favor the qualities of other women. They often stress the parasitism of men, meaning that men are in greater need of females than vice versa. (Frye, p. 99) Women have become materially dependent on men through institutions of the dominant society, whereas men need the nurture and emotional support of women naturally—a service they cannot provide for themselves. Parasitism of men on women reveals a view of the genders rooted in fundamentally different natures. Rather than fight to be the same as other feminist groups, Separatists accept these differences, and thus choose to live apart from men, leading women-centered lives.

**Gay Movement**

The Gay Movement has come to life in the last half-century making incredible progress within institutions and public discourse. Within this movement, however, are many vastly different schools of thought. Three of the most dominant groups in action and academia are the Liberals or Reformists, Radical or Leftist, and Queerism. Each group understands and approaches gay issues differently. These differences can be traced back to core beliefs about human nature and the specific natures of groups of people.

The Liberal or Reformist Gay movement stresses the sameness of gays with the mainstream and emphasizes the common rationality of humans, similarly to Liberal Feminists. They agree with the basic tenants of the American system—such as basic liberal values of freedom, choice, and equality. One important value when looking at concepts of human nature is the Liberals’ belief in the right to self-determination. In this view, Liberal Gays are able to relate sexuality to the value of individual agency. (Cruikshank, p. 52) Their idea of human nature agrees with Liberal Feminists in stressing the importance of allowing individuals to make their own life choices and having the legal freedom to do so. Additionally, when looking at human nature, Liberal gays agree that being gay, as well as gay sex, is natural and has been prevalent throughout history. (Cruikshank, p. 52) There are numerous historical examples of homosexuality, yet, as a behavior in modern history, being gay was thought to be abnormal and wrong, under moral and medical reasoning. This abnormality is what allowed people to see being gay as unnatural and is what Liberal Gays work to combat. As far as the choice to be gay, this group makes the argument that being gay is biologically determined and therefore gay people have no choice in their sexuality. Additionally, Liberal Gays show that the only difference between gay and straight people is their sexual orientation and do not believe that this is a prominent difference, most definitely not a difference warranting a denial of basic rights. Based on a belief in shared humanity, Liberal Gay activists seek to promote their cause by connecting with others, as Elizabeth Birch with the Christian Coalition. In just this one example, Liberal Gays consistently preach ideas of sameness of gay people and stress the worthiness of gay people to be seen as equal. (Birch, p. 285-286) Overall, Liberal Gays see all people as equal and rational and use this concept to promote the legal equality of gay people.

Radical Gays place their focus on culture and liberation of gay people. They reject current society and institutions, much of this built from their radical view of human nature. They focus on liberation and self-determination differently than Liberals by critiquing existing structures and calling for a redrawn society. (Engel, p. 42) Radical Gays believe that human nature is androgynous, similarly to Radical Feminists; this assertion existing to rid society of the limitations imposed by heteronormativity. (Engel, p. 42) Looking at sexual orientation, Radicals believe that all people have a natural capacity to be gay. This capacity is merely suppressed by modern institutions of the family and gender roles. (Freedman & D’Emilio, p. 251) In this view, Radical Gays disagree with Liberals by claiming that sexual orientation is fluid and a choice to be made. Radicals argue that without the oppression of current society, people would be able to love and experience sexuality more freely. (D’Emilio, p. 57) Instead, people today are forced into rigidly defined, gendered roles within Capitalism and the nuclear family. Radicals follow this logic to explain gender roles, like their feminist counterparts, as socially learned. Similarly, the categorization of people as homosexual or heterosexual is learned, not naturally given. (D’Emilio, p. 57) Radicals all agree that people can fall anywhere across a wide spectrum of sexuality as allowed by shared human nature. All around, Radical Gays relate their ideas and struggles to other oppressed groups, perhaps because of their timing after other large Radical movements, as well as, because of a notion of humanity that recognizes a shared, but oppressed, nature.

Queerism is based on the tenants of Post-Modernism, which espouse a rejection of an objective Truth and identity politics. Queers take this opposition to the dominant sex and gender system, rejecting heteronormativity in all its forms. This dominant system encompasses all values and ideas that enforce heterosexuality as the only natural way and therefore oppress all other choices. The alternative essentialist view would assume that there is a universal sexuality and identity. Queerism challenges this notion by critiquing the basic and incomplete categorization of human sexuality and emphasizing the way that the meanings of sexual activities have changed over time and place. (Brown, p. 293) This leads to a different view of human nature, one purposefully not to be defined in one essence. Compared to the other gay movements, queers reject notions of a unifying human nature. The way, in which queer theory defines itself, anyone can be a member of the queer community; although a multitude of meanings exist within this community for the term ‘queer’ itself. (Duggan, p. 165) Sticking to queer theory, as we understand it, this group allows for individuals to share a belief in opposition but with out necessarily being gay. This rejection of the dominant system is just one aspect of a person, hopefully allowing for queer coalition across barriers of ethnicity, wealth, and gender. (Duggan, p. 170) Queers also reject identity politics and essentialism with the belief that there is no natural or stable personal identity. Their ‘constructionist’ theories acknowledge the flexibility of identity and desire, letting queers move fluidly without permanent identities or categories. (Cohen, p. 212) This too adds to an ambiguous definition of human nature. Queerism, as a whole, is an academic outlook based on opposition rather than affirmation, political standing rather than identity. Its rejection of an essential human nature also allows this philosophy to widely differ from other human rights movements.

**Comments**: Preferred Concept

As a person that values my own individualism, I am most immediately drawn to the values and ideas of the Liberal Feminist and Gay movements. Perhaps my socialization as an American led me to place greater value on the individual or my society as it is, but, for whatever reason, this is concept I find most attractive and compelling. Human nature seems to be an almost impossible term to define, but, through the eyes of Liberals, the argument of a rational human that has capacity for self-determination and a need for certain rights comes to light. I appreciate the credit this theory gives to the individual. As opposed to Socialist or Radical concepts that push a notion of exterior forces influencing human nature, Liberals contest that people always have their own rational capacity within any exterior situation. To say that people and their behaviors are entirely dependent on economics, oppression, or gender dangerously lacks complexity of the human experience. The simple contention that all humans are rational can be applied across situations to find human similarity while still allowing for differences in a complicated world. Furthermore, the Liberal depiction of human nature allows for people to change their own society. The chief oppressive institution in the mind of a Liberal is ignorance, and the answer for this ignorance is easily found in the rationality of all humanity. This connection gives me faith in the power of humanity and the individual and further supports the Liberal viewpoint.

Liberal ideas surrounding the natures of certain genders or sexualities also most appealed to me. As a woman that sees myself as equal to men, I could never subscribe to an ideology that preaches significant difference between genders such as Separatists. Moreover, the idea of the androgynous human is a bit uncomfortable to me. In the past, I often approached the men versus women argument with a simple view of equality and zero difference. The more I have struggled through this issue, I realize that, at least in today’s world, it is impossible to say genders are exactly the same—in the androgynous sense. As Liberals state, there are minor differences between men and women, but none that necessitate lesser treatment based on sex. Turning the tables to sexuality, Liberals argue similarly that being gay is a minor difference, not affecting the humanity of a person and still requiring people of all sexualities to be awarded the same rights. Liberal Gays also accept a biological disposition people have to be gay as opposed to a totally fluid capacity for all people to be gay as advocated by Radical Gays. While there must be some agency in how a person chooses to express their sexuality, I think that it is unrealistic to say that all people can choose any sexuality they want at any time. If this were the case, you would never see a person, raised conservatively religious, be gay. But you do. Both the Liberal positions on the nature of genders and sexualities make the most sense in today’s world, while leaving plenty of room for society to improve.

As opposed to other movements, Liberal ideas are far more advantageous in making societal progress for many reasons. When looking at other theories, it is difficult to see their concept of human nature manifesting itself in our world today. Seeing the Radical androgynous viewpoint is near impossible in any society today, while the Separatist view of complete difference between men and women seems to go against everything I’ve ever known or believed in with regard to women’s issues. Liberals pick up the values of our society that are redeemable and mold them in a way that creates equality for all. The notion that “All men are created equal” has been adjusted and broadened in the past and will continue to change and progress under the Liberal concept of human nature.

Additionally, many other theories do not offer a clear or desirable future. Queer theory has trouble getting any activists on the ground, let alone a clear picture of their ideal world. Socialist Feminism calls for a Communist, rule-by-the-people, class-less world, and, while there is an actual ideal here, it seems so utopian it could never actually come to fruition. Socialists even recognize there has not yet been a successful communist country, yet they strive for a communist world. On the other hand, Liberals embrace an ideal more compatible with our current societal values and expectations. Liberals continue to support free enterprise economy, but push a meritocracy in society. The idea that people should be judged on merit over other arbitrary characteristics is not new and is one that makes intuitive sense to most people. This ideal is most achievable as well as the most likely to be accepted by society at large, while still achieving goals of the feminist and gay movements.

The Liberal human nature concept lends its self best to making effective changes within the society we live in today. By accepting the basic values and beliefs of the United States as it is, Liberals are able to get straight to work trying to make the legal and societal changes they long for. Their goal is to get their respective oppressed groups into the mainstream with equality for all, and this can best be done through the many channels of progress that are already in existence. Liberal groups work to combat the ignorance in society that allows oppressed groups to be seen as others. Through advocacy and legal change, they can make concrete progress that moves alongside a change in societal conscious. The values of these groups are already consistent with dominant society giving them an advantage over other groups in changing the world as it is.

Each group discussed in this paper brings a unique and valuable approach to human nature and their struggles against oppression. Although I find Liberal Feminist and Gay values to be the most advantageous, other views highlight important issues within society and help to spread awareness of struggles faced by all oppressed groups. Each of these philosophies is therefore essential to the progress and equality of our society, as well as the coming together of all people to support the common call for equality.