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Gattungswesen and universality: Feuerbach, Marx and German idealism

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Abstract. The concept *Gattungswesen*, while evidently central to Marx's early thought, has received surprisingly little detailed philosophical examination. An obstacle to progress when it comes to understanding the concept is a tendency to miss the import of the dimension of universality that Marx says is crucial to the concept. It has often been assumed that Marx must have in mind membership of the human species, where this is considered as one species among others. But an examination of the concept *Gattung* as it figures in Hegel (in particular in his *Philosophy of Nature*) and in particular as it passes to Marx through Feuerbach helps to reveal that a generality of a different order is involved. I trace this trajectory, giving special attention to early writings by Feuerbach (characterized by an uncompromising Hegelianism) that have been largely ignored, and show how a full appreciation of the generality of the *Gattung* can help with seeming puzzles that present themselves in the interpretation of the Marx of the early 1840s.

It is widely recognized that the concept of *Gattungswesen* is central to Marx's early thought. The way in which Marx understands the concept has, however, received surprisingly little detailed philosophical examination. Relatedly, the connections between Marx's use of the concept and the role it plays in the German idealist tradition have been insufficiently examined. While it is often acknowledged that Marx inherits the concept from Feuerbach (in particular as it is deployed in *The Essence of Christianity*), the roots of Feuerbach's own use of *Gattung* and associated concepts tend to be left out of account. In this paper I want to show that rectifying this helps in particular with understanding a dimension of *Gattungswesen* that Marx takes to be crucial: its universality. Tracing the career of *Gattungswesen* further back into German idealism will also, eventually, help us to understand the connections between what Marx calls 'naturalism or humanism' and communism.¹

Marx writes, in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* ('Paris Manuscripts') of 1844:

Der Mensch ist ein Gattungswesen, nicht nur indem er praktisch und theoretisch die Gattung, sowohl seine eigene als die der übrigen Dinge zu seinem Gegenstand macht, sondern—und dieß ist nur ein anderer Ausdruck für dieselbe Sache—sondern auch indem er sich zu sich selbst als der gegenwärtigen, lebendigen Gattung verhält, indem er sich zu sich als einem *universellen*, darum freien Wesen verhält. (MEGA² I/2: 239)

I translate this as follows (leaving the word 'Gattung' and cognates untranslated):

¹ A recent treatment of Hegel that gives a detailed account of *Gattung* and its role in Hegel's logical account of life is Ng 2020.

The human is a *Gattungswesen*, not only since he practically and theoretically makes the *Gattung*, both his own and that of all remaining things, his object, but—and this is merely a different expression for the same thing—since he relates himself to himself as the present, living *Gattung*, since he relates himself to himself as a *universal* and therefore free being.²

The term ‘*Gattungswesen*’ functions in two different ways in German. First, *Wesen* means ‘essence’; and so ‘*Gattungswesen*’ can designate the essence of the human. But a *Wesen* is also a being or creature; and so each human is *a Gattungswesen*. (Note also that in German the word remains unchanged when the latter usage is pluralized: we may speak of a *Gattungswesen*, and of many *Gattungswesen*.) Marx’s claim can be spelled out in terms of either usage. I participate in an essence (in *Gattungswesen*); I, this one here, am a *Gattungswesen*.

I translate ‘*der Mensch*’ by ‘the human’. Traditionally, the sexist term ‘man’ has been used in English to function as ‘*der Mensch*’ does in German and *ho anthrōpos* in Greek. (I have preserved the sexist pronoun ‘he’, as tracking Marx’s use of ‘er’.) What’s important is that ‘*der Mensch*’ here figures as the subject in what Michael Thompson has called a ‘natural-historical judgement’ (Thompson 2008). That is, reference is made not to some individual human being, nor to the totality of human beings, nor to some statistically relevant sample of human beings, but to *the human being* as bearer of a life-form. It is important that a

² Cf. Rodney Livingstone’s translation: ‘Man is a species-being, not only because he practically and theoretically makes the species – both his own and those of other things – his object, but also – and this is simply another way of saying the same thing – because he looks upon himself as the present, living species, because he looks upon himself as a *universal* and therefore free being’ (EW 327). My surmise is that Livingstone’s translation choices, in particular the language of ‘looking upon’, have, in a number of ways, been responsible for various problematic interpretative trends I discuss in section 1. In what follows, I have throughout tacitly emended English translations cited where appropriate.

plural not be used here: Marx does not say that *human beings* are Gattungswesen. The subject of the natural-historical judgement is not a collectivity.

Now, what does Marx mean by saying that the human, qua Gattungswesen, is a *universal* being?

Marx's claim remains enigmatic if we take what it is to be a Gattungswesen in a way that has seemed natural to many, i.e. in terms of membership of a species amongst other species—sometimes, specifically, of a biological species amongst other biological species (section 1). Such readings encounter difficulties that stem from their failure to recognize the lineage of the concept Gattung from Hegel through Feuerbach to Marx. Although commentators tend to recognize that Marx's use of the concept of Gattungswesen is indebted to Feuerbach, they tend to confine their attention to *The Essence of Christianity*. I examine Feuerbach's earlier writings, in which the connection with Hegel's conception of Gattung is explicit (section 2). Feuerbach's position can be read as a high-strength, uncompromising Hegelianism. I then return to Marx's texts of 1843 and 1844 to show how a proper appreciation of his conception of Gattung and Gattungswesen as a development of this Hegelian-Feuerbachian line helps with the apparent puzzles with which we started (section 3). Finally, I ask whether Marx is effectively returning us to the conception of the human as concretely universal to be found in Hegel himself (section 4).

1. The apparent puzzle

It is a not unreasonable supposition that being a Gattungswesen is a matter of membership of a species. On that supposition, Marx's further claims about the Gattungswesen seem to require interpretation as features, or consequences, of such membership. So, for instance, the freedom and universality he talks about are to be understood as trappings of the species-membership in question.

The seeming naturalness of this supposition may be in part underwritten by the standard English translation of ‘Gattungswesen’ as ‘species-being’. But this is by no means the whole story. It is right to point out that it can often be more appropriate to translate the pair of terms *Gattung* and *Art* as ‘genus’ and ‘species’ respectively, and some have advocated translating ‘Gattungswesen’ as ‘genus-being’.³ One issue with this is that the suggestion simply comes too late; ‘species-being’ is now the accepted translation throughout the literature on Marx. Another is that ‘genus’ and ‘species’ are relative terms: the generality of some given species gets to be fixed with respect to some greater or higher generality—that of a genus. Furthermore, Marx himself is happy to assimilate ‘species’ and ‘Gattung’, as when he writes: ‘In der Art der Lebensthätigkeit liegt der ganze Charakter einer species, ihr Gattungscharakter’ (‘The entire character of a species, its Gattung-character, lies in its kind of life-activity’, MEGA² I/2: 240; cf. EW 328).

The philosophical difficulty that has seemed to present itself to some interpreters of Marx and that I want to bring out in this section cannot be resolved by reflection on terminology. However, such terminological reflection can prime us for what I want to show in section 2: that the generality of *Gattung* is not what we assume it to be if we think in terms of an all-too-familiar conception of species.

Commentators often observe that Marx, in telling us that the human is a *Gattungswesen*, is telling us both that human beings are characterized by belonging to a kind (to the *Gattung* in question), and also that this kind to which we belong is something like an essence from which certain consequences flow about how we *ought to be*. The relevant *Gattung*, that is, not only brings out something that we have in common but also, in some sense, sets a standard for what it is for us to do well.⁴ Some have worried about how to unify

³ E.g. Skempton (2011), and most recently Khurana (2022). See also French translations as ‘être générique’ (e.g. in Toàn 1971, and in the writings of Louis Althusser).

⁴ Commentators who have concentrated on the second dimension include Leopold (2007) and Brudney (1998).

what seem like a descriptive and a normative dimension here, but I will set this to one side. That worry in any case rests on a fact–value dichotomy of which Marx is innocent. What I want to bring out is instead a structural issue that can be revealed, and does indeed reveal itself in the literature, whichever of the two dimensions in question.

This is clearly seen in Adam Schaff's *Marxism and the Human Individual*. In the following passage, we see Schaff distinguish between the two dimensions, and we see the issue to which I want to draw attention exhibited along both dimensions. Schaff writes:

What matters here above all is to draw a line between two meanings of the phrase 'species-being': First, one stresses that man belongs to a biological species as a specimen sharing some general characteristics with all other specimens of this species; and second, one emphasizes that man possesses a certain model of what man should be like, which is a result of his own reflection on the properties and tasks of his own species—a model which is a source of the norms of human conduct as a 'species-being', that is a being which fits in with a certain model or stereotype of man (the 'essence' of man). (Schaff 1970, 82–3)

Schaff is perhaps unusual in stating explicitly that, when it comes to the first dimension, the conception of species he is operating with is a 'biological' one (although we see that assumptions that are best made sense of on a biological conception of Gattung animate other interpreters). Conceiving Gattung in this way, Schaff lands us with two problems—one along each dimension. Along the first dimension, individual human beings must somehow come to recognize or ascertain that they belong to the species they belong to. Along the second dimension, each individual human being must, further, engage in a process of reflection 'on the properties and tasks of his own species', in order to discover the standards for human

conduct. This raises a set of epistemological issues about how the individual negotiates this mediation with the species to which she belongs.

Although Schaff brings out the issue particularly starkly, it can be seen to recur in the literature. John Plamenatz asks: ‘What was it that Marx had in mind when he called man a species-being?’ In response, he tells us that Marx ‘appears to have used the term in two senses, of which one at least is clear’. Here is Plamenatz’s first sense:

Man is a species-being in the sense that he is aware of himself as a being of a certain kind; he is conscious of his humanity, of what is common to him with other men.

(Plamenatz 1975, 68)

This is akin to Schaff’s first sense. Plamenatz directs us towards the second sense, which he finds more difficult to understand, by pointing to Marx’s remark that (as Plamenatz quotes it) “‘man is a species-being ... in the sense that he makes the community ... his object both practically and theoretically’” (Plamenatz 1975, 69). The word translated here as ‘community’ is: *Gattung*.

So for Plamenatz the dual problem is that individual human beings must, on the one hand, recognize themselves to belong to a species, by seeing what they have in common with other members of the species, and, on the other hand, they must come to see something general (the entire ‘community’, in the translation Plamenatz quotes) as their ‘object’. Plamenatz rightly finds this idea difficult, given his conception of membership of a *Gattung*, and he proceeds to give a tentative reconstruction of what Marx may have meant by considering ways in which some individual might come to be ‘aware of himself as a member of a community’ (Plamenatz 1975, 70).

A further difficulty shows up in Joseph O’Malley’s reading:

To say that man is a species-being is to say that he can apprehend in thought not only his own individual self, but also his own species-character, his own essential nature. Human consciousness differs from animal consciousness by reason of the fact that it includes an awareness of the self as being a member of a species, as sharing a common nature with others, as being one kind of being among other kinds of beings. Human consciousness thus includes, among other capacities, the ability to define and to classify, and therefore to be scientific. (O'Malley 1970, xli)

When O'Malley tells us that human consciousness 'includes an awareness of the self as being a member of a species', that is so far like Schaff and Plamenatz. But when he writes that human consciousness 'thus' includes the ability to define and to classify, the non sequitur is evident. That non sequitur again shows up that something must be amiss with Marx's conception of *Gattungswesen* if the general line of interpretation found in Schaff, Plamenatz and O'Malley is correct.

The general problematic that these commentators experience as emerging from Marx's handling of *Gattungswesen* is one that is exhibited particularly clearly in Allen Wood's reflections on the supposed issue of how our universal capacities get established. Wood writes:

For both Feuerbach and Marx, the human being's species being is bound up very closely with the fact of our own self-consciousness, as well as with our characteristically human intellectual abilities. Feuerbach believes that it is our consciousness of our own species nature which makes it possible for us to be conscious of the species nature of other things, and hence that our species being is the

foundation of our ability to form universal concepts. There are some passages in Marx which may be read as endorsing this thesis. Neither philosopher, however, presents any real argument in favor of the thesis, and I confess that I see no way in which one could be made out. Prima facie, in fact, the truth would seem to be just the opposite, that it is the human ability to form universal concepts which makes it possible for people to know themselves as members of a species. (Wood 2004, 19)

The argument that Wood demands is one that is only needed on the assumption that the self-conscious universality of *Gattungswesen* is something that an individual *Gattungswesen* has first to ascertain, and that this is something independent of the capacity for universal thought. As I will demonstrate in the remainder of this essay, that assumption is mistaken, as can be illuminated by careful attention to the concept as it is handed down from Hegel, through Feuerbach, to Marx.⁵

2. Gattung in Feuerbach's Hegelian phase

I want to begin from the way in which Feuerbach handles the concept of *Gattung* in his earliest writings, in a manner derived from Hegel.

Hegel, in his *Philosophy of Nature*, presents nature in terms of a hierarchical *scala naturae*, culminating in the animal organism. All living beings engage in the *Gattungsprozess*. This process of self-reproduction takes different forms according to the form of life in question. But it is in the highest form of animal, the human being, that the *Gattungsprozess* is fully realized. Here the animal becomes for-itself 'the Gattung': that is to say, we now have individuals who not only belong to some Gattung or other, but are 'the

⁵ I have concentrated here on some instances from the Anglophone literature that I take to bring out something more widespread. I do not mean to imply that there exists no corrective to these tendencies, even within the Anglophone literature. An example of such a corrective is Gould (1978).

Gattung' as such. To say this is to say that the animal has now achieved universality. In this, it is revealed that 'spirit is the truth of nature'. In the last paragraph of the Philosophy of Nature (*Encyclopaedia* II, §376) Hegel announces: 'With this, Nature has passed over into its truth' (TWA 9: 537; Enc2: 443). He repeats the point that 'spirit is the truth of nature' at the outset of the Philosophy of Spirit at *Encyclopaedia* III §381, adding that spirit is 'the *absolutely first*' with respect to nature (TWA 10: 17; Enc3: 9).⁶

It is helpful to work up to Marx's handling of Gattung through an examination of Feuerbach's earliest writings, beginning with his doctoral dissertation, since here Hegel's conception of the Gattung is brought into particularly stark focus. I do not claim that Marx was directly influenced by Feuerbach's earliest writings.⁷

There has been considerable debate as to when Feuerbach turned away from Hegel, and whether he had even ever been a Hegelian at all.⁸ The evidence is clear, however, that the dissertation is a document that thinks of itself as thoroughly, and orthodoxly, Hegelian (even if, as I will go on to show, Feuerbach's understanding of Hegel is, in fact, unorthodox in important respects). It was written under a strong direct influence from Hegel. Feuerbach had attended Hegel's lectures in Berlin in the 1820s, and sent his dissertation with a praise-filled

⁶ On the relation between nature and spirit in Hegel, see Schuringa 2022.

⁷ We know that Marx read Feuerbach's *Vorläufige Thesen, Grundsätze* and *Wesen des Christentums*. We also know that he read Hegel extremely thoroughly, so the kind of Hegelian conception that Feuerbach crystallizes would have been familiar to him as the background to Feuerbach's talk of *Gattungswesen* in the texts that he did read. According to Wartofsky (1977: 163) 'the earliest discussion of this concept [*Gattungswesen*], in the form in which it becomes central for Feuerbach[,], occurs [...] in *Philosophy and Christianity*', i.e. in Feuerbach's 'last defense of Hegel' (1977: 160). It is perhaps more accurate to say that *Philosophy and Christianity* is a transitional text with respect to Feuerbach's conception of *Gattungswesen*. Here Feuerbach still locates the Gattung-character of humans in the power of thought, but there is the beginning of the idea that something more than sheer engagement in thought is required of human individuals in order to make good on this Gattung-character.

⁸ Simon Rawidowicz (1931) gives conclusive arguments for regarding Feuerbach as a devoted Hegelian at the time of the composition of the dissertation. He is followed in this by Kamenka (1970) and by Wartofsky (1977). Earlier readers and editors of Feuerbach's work such as Wilhelm Bolin and Friedrich Jodl had played down Feuerbach's Hegelianism as much as possible, in an attempt to secure the absoluteness of his originality. This anti-Hegelian strain in readings of Feuerbach continues to be found in non-specialized treatments of Feuerbach. There are of course grounds to take seriously the idea that Feuerbach harboured doubts about Hegel (even on his own idiosyncratic reading of him) even as he was writing the doctoral dissertation. This is evidenced by the 'Doubts' of 1827/8 reprinted in FB.

letter to his former professor. Hegel's own works are cited at philosophically crucial points in the dissertation.

The dissertation is written in Latin, and bears the title *De ratione, una, universali, infinita*. We find here that the relevant Latin term is *genus*, and that Feuerbach contrasts this with, and relates it to, *species*. This corresponds to a distinction between *Gattung* and *Art* found both in Hegel and the early (Hegelian) Feuerbach. The genus–species contrast is then deployed in a variety of ways, as will become clear.

The dissertation makes a series of interconnected claims about the nature of reason. Reason is said to be (as the title announces) *una, universali, infinita*—one, universal and infinite. Its unity is manifested in its universality. As a sensible being, I have a particular character distinct from yours (as is true of animals in general). But *qua* rational being, I am not distinct from you. As a thinking being, I do not have my particular character distinct from yours. For what I think is available to be thought by you, and when we both think it what we think is the same. As Feuerbach pointedly puts it, '*in thinking, I myself am the human genus, not the individual human that I am in so far as I feel, live, and act, and not a particular human being (this or that one), but no one*'.⁹

Now, how is thought to be understood? Feuerbach claims that it is to be understood in terms of a genus–species relation. Namely, thought is the self-articulation of consciousness (the genus) into cognitions shaped by individual thought-determinations (species). Consciousness, *qua* genus, remains always the same, as it articulates itself into individual cognitions. Furthermore, consciousness (following Hegel) is self-consciousness.

⁹ Feuerbach, *De ratione*, §6 (GW 1: 30): '*cogitans ipse sum genus humanum non singularis homo, qualis sum, quum sentio, vivo, ago, neque certus quidam homo (hic vel ille) sed nemo.*'

One can rightly call consciousness a *genus*. As relation to itself it is the original relation, through which alone cognition can come into being. It is present no less in its thinking about itself than in cognition and it is ongoing and uninterrupted, true to itself and the same in all its cognitions and thought-determinations. And cognition, by contrast, in so far as it relates only to determinate and finite things [...] must be called a *species* of consciousness. (GW 1: 52)¹⁰

What we are, then, is thinking beings: as such (as what we *really* are) we are *genus*. We are all one.

The genus–species model is used not just for understanding the way in which individual cognitions fall under the genus *thought*, however. A similar picture applies to living nature, in which the various species (*Arten*) fall under (what is ultimately appropriately called) ‘*the genus*’. Here the genus, as for Hegel, does not exist other than through the generation and passing away of individuals. Any genus is mere form in relation to the individuals that fall under it.¹¹ Thus it is at the point of death that the individual is most truly its genus. There is a genus, however, in whom this *Gattungsprozess* is most fully realized. This is the human. Here the individual, we might say, becomes one with its genus. For it, the genus is present not just at death but throughout the lives of the individuals (in thought).

¹⁰ Feuerbach, *De ratione*, §11 (GW 1: 52). Feuerbach here draws for support directly on Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which he footnotes. The passage from *PhG* that Feuerbach cites is the following: ‘Denn die vielen Kategorien sind *Arten* der reinen Kategorie, heißt, *sie* ist noch ihre *Gattung* oder *Wesen*, nicht ihnen entgegengesetzt. Aber sie sind schon das Zweydeutige, welches zugleich das *Anderseyn gegen* die reine Kategorie in seiner *Vielheit* an sich hat. Sie widersprechen ihr durch diese *Vielheit* in der That, und die reine Einheit muß sie an sich aufheben, wodurch sie sich als *negative Einheit* der Unterschiede constituirt. [...]’ [pp. 168–9 of the first edn.; chapter ‘Gewißheit und Wahrheit der Vernunft’] This is ¶236 in Michael Inwood’s translation: ‘For to say that the many categories are *species* of the pure category means that *this latter* is still their *genus* or *essence*, not opposed to them. But they are already something ambiguous, which at the same time has in itself otherness in its *plurality* in *contrast* to the pure category. In fact, they contradict the pure category by this plurality, and the pure unity must sublimate them in itself, thereby constituting itself as *negative unity* of the differences. [...]’.

¹¹ Feuerbach, *De ratione*, §11 (GW 1: 52).

Two components of this picture come out particularly clearly in Feuerbach's text of 1830, *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*. Here Feuerbach argues that there is no such thing as individual immortality. It is not wrong to say that the human mind survives bodily death, but this is to be conceived as a dissolution back into the genus; it is not *I* who survive. (This view cost Feuerbach any prospect of academic employment.)

The first component that is particularly clear in *Thoughts* is the notion that the Gattung contains within itself a hierarchy of 'stages, levels, and kinds of life'. Feuerbach now emphasizes, secondly, that nature itself is to be conceived as Gattung: 'the earth is also a universal, infinite, meaningful measure' and 'terrestrial nature is the universal Gattung of all life, the Gattung that has developed all the possible modes of life as they exist on the earth'.¹² Not only is nature *the* Gattung; furthermore, no possible forms of life are left out.

So there are two sides to the universality of the Gattung. Feuerbach maintains this view even in *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Philosophie* (1839). Here, despite all his differences with Hegel, Feuerbach can still write:

Human form cannot be regarded as limited and finite, because even if it were so the artistic-creative spirit could easily remove the limits and conjure up a higher form from it. The human form is rather the genus of the manifold animal species; it no longer exists as species in man, but as genus. The being of man is no longer a particular and subjective, but a universal being, for man has the whole universe as the object of his drive for knowledge. And only a cosmopolitan being can have the cosmos as its object.¹³ (GW 9: 61; FB 93)

¹² Feuerbach, *Gedanken* (GW 1: 277).

I submit that it is only in light of the above fuller picture that we can really appreciate what is in play in Feuerbach's conception of the human being as *Gattungswesen* in the much-cited passages from the Introduction to *The Essence of Christianity*. We can now see, in particular, why Feuerbach claims there that a human being 'can put himself in the place of another', and why 'science is the *consciousness of genera*'.

There are at least four key ingredients to Feuerbach's conception of *Gattungswesen* as set out here. One is the idea that there are different species of animals, but that there is one *Gattung* which stands at the apex of the hierarchy of animals (itself the top tier of an Aristotelian *scala naturae*), namely the human. This *Gattung*, since only it is a full realization of what it is to be a *Gattung* (by being that *Gattung* for-itself as well as in-itself), can properly be said to be *the Gattung*.

Second, there are two sides to the *Gattung*, and thereby two sides to its universality. Both subject (us) and object (nature) are *Gattung*. Without this conception of the *Gattung* as two-sided, we would be unable to understand what Marx will go on to make of this idea: namely, that the totality of nature is our inorganic body.

Third, it is only when we have a proper appreciation of *Gattungswesen* as expounded by the early Feuerbach that we can see why Marx takes universality to be *prior to* the individuals that bear it. Universality is not *to be arrived at* somehow through a process of recognition, or any other transaction carried out by individual bearers amongst themselves. Rather to understand what the human being is is *already* to understand it as universal (and free). *Gattungswesen* is a substance that is such as to be universal.

Fourth, there is a feature prominent in the Feuerbachian exposition that marks it out from Hegel's own presentation. This can serve as a reason for focusing on the early Feuerbach, rather than going back to Hegel's texts, even though Marx knew these texts well, and it is unlikely that he ever read Feuerbach's *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* (and still

less likely that he read the dissertation). Feuerbach consistently interprets Hegel as claiming that what constitutes human universality is located *in the realm of thought*. Feuerbach thereby develops a thesis that is certainly present in Hegel, to the effect that reason or thought is the mark of the human and that it lifts us out of nature into the realm of universality, but emphasizes the idea of the independence of what constitutes the human *Gattung* from the material reality of the organism in a way that Hegel does not. (Hegel's treatment of Geist in *Encyclopaedia* III spends a great deal of time reminding us of the material embodiment of *geistig* beings.) Feuerbach thereby prizes apart thought-like universality from embodied individuality in a manner that he subsequently has trouble repairing.¹⁴ It is clear that much of Marx's gripes with Hegel in the Paris manuscripts get their sustenance from this Feuerbachian reading of Hegel, which thinks everything of importance happens in the Logic, so that the transition to Nature must be construed as jumping across to what is, after all, a positively known independent reality (something that in turn motivates Feuerbach's notion that we can start with the positive). If we question this Feuerbachian reading, we thereby question Marx's own sense of his distance from Hegel. And, arguably, we can read Marx's development of a 'materialist' version of *Gattungswesen*, emphasizing the productive activity of living individuals, as prompted by the prizing apart of thought from life in Feuerbach's version of the Hegelian idea in a way that the Hegelian idea might not itself have suggested to him.¹⁵

I turn next to the Paris Manuscripts, in order to show that the Feuerbachian conception of *Gattungswesen* allows us to make better sense of Marx's claims than have the

¹⁴ Note John Edward Toews's perceptive remark: 'Feuerbach appears to have been self-consciously aware of his inability to provide an adequate account in his dissertation of the reconciliation of the individual and the universal. At least he noted in a letter to a Professor Harless at Erlangen that he failed to demonstrate clearly the necessary development from self-consciousness to the universality of thought' (Toews 1980: 193).

¹⁵ Michael Quante has argued that Marx's conception of *gegenständliches Gattungswesen* 'represents a synthesis from three sources: the philosophical-anthropological conception of Feuerbach, Heß's social vision of unity and the objectification-model of action taken from Hegel' (Quante 2013: 75). This identification of the sources of the conception is not incorrect; however, where universality is concerned, I want to argue there is a single source in Hegel, filtered for Marx through Feuerbach.

interpreters discussed in section 1. I will then examine a series of other texts from 1843–44 to show up the difficulties that this conception threatens in terms of a bifurcation between the Gattung and the individuals that are its bearers.

3. Marx's texts of 1843 and 1844: universality and the threat of bifurcation

Let us return to the passage from the Paris Manuscripts with which we began. It might seem difficult to understand why Marx says that the human is ‘a *universal* and *therefore* free being,’ if Marx took the universality in question to be merely that of membership of some species or other. But he goes on to say, importantly, that ‘man is more universal than animals.’ This reflects his understanding of Gattungswesen as involving a higher generality than that of mere animal species. It is this higher generality, a generality that is *sui generis* with respect to animal Gattungen, that brings with it freedom. As for Hegel and other German idealists, universality and freedom go together, as marks of rationally self-determining life. Note that Marx speaks of the *Gattungsleben* of animals, but never says that they are Gattungswesen.¹⁶ Again, Marx ascribes to other animal species ‘Gattung-character’ (MEGA² I/2: 240; cf. EW 328: ‘species-character’), but never Gattungswesen. The human is the only Gattungswesen. Membership of an animal species does not bestow freedom, whatever other capacities it bestows.

Again, it is impossible to understand Marx's insistence that ‘the universality of man manifests itself in practice in that universality which makes the whole of nature his *inorganic* body’ unless it is recognized that the universality of the Gattung has two sides: both it as subject, and its object, are universal. ‘The practical creation of an *objective world*, the

¹⁶ Judith Butler draws attention to this usage in Marx. Butler writes: ‘When we speak about the life of the species, *das Gattungsleben*, we refer to that which commonly characterised both humans and animals’ (2019: 12). What Butler does not note is that, while humans and non-human animals alike participate in *Gattungsleben*, only the former are *Gattungswesen*.

fashioning of inorganic nature, is proof that man is a conscious Gattungswesen'; and 'it is [...] in his fashioning of the objective that man really proves himself to be a Gattungswesen' (MEGA² I/2: 241; EW 328, 329). The notion that the human, in virtue of their universality, produces a universal object, has perplexed many commentators. But if we take seriously the Feuerbachian conception of the Gattung, it follows immediately that both subject and object must be marked by universality.

Marx does not, I submit, experience the difficulties around the way in which individual Gattungswesen are supposed to set themselves in relation to their universality, and even discover or construct that universality, that some commentators have wrestled with simply because, for him, universality is constitutive of what a Gattungswesen is. This universality raises the human above other Gattungen—who are not truly Gattungswesen, but remain confined within a Gattungsleben that they cannot themselves make their object. And so humans are not members of a species among other species: they are members of *the Gattung*, where this figures as the apex of all species-hood, as it does in Hegel and in the Feuerbachian texts considered in section 2.

This conception of the human as Gattungswesen brings with it an important difficulty, however. This difficulty results directly from Feuerbach's uncompromising Hegelianism, according to which what marks the universality of the human is separated off from individual bearers of the life-form as one substance. This is the threat of a splitting off of the Gattung from its bearers, as a result of which the bearer experiences an internal bifurcation between their status as universal Gattung-bearer and as individual.¹⁷ This is an issue to which Marx shows himself to be alive in the texts of 1843 and 1844. The need to resolve this problem is a prominent concern of these texts ('On the Jewish Question,' published in 1843, and two

¹⁷ Arguably, as an anonymous reader pointed out, the problem of bifurcation is present already in Hegel. It would take more effort to show this; here I focus on Feuerbach's Hegelianism since it exhibits the bifurcation in a particularly stark form.

unpublished texts from 1844, the ‘Notes on James Mill’ and the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’).

Here Marx’s avowed concern is with the idea that it should be *individuals* who are universal (as opposed to universality being something, as it were, hovering over them, detachable from their individual being).

Marx elaborates this issue particularly clearly, and with reference to concrete reality, in ‘On the Jewish Question’, the text in which he first makes widespread use of the term ‘Gattungswesen’.¹⁸ This comes at a moment of transition in Marx’s thinking. Prior to the composition of this text, Marx had still had liberal inclinations. He had thought that it was in the nature of humans to be free (although they are everywhere in chains), and that the means to achieve such freedom was through the recognition of universal human rights. The question of Jewish emancipation leads him to a decisive reassessment of this conception of the realization of human freedom.

Part One of the essay is a lengthy response to Bruno Bauer’s *Zur Judenfrage*. (My comments here will be entirely about this part, although the second part, dealing with another text by Bauer on the ‘Jewish question’, also bears on the issue of forms of universality.)

Bauer claims in that text that demands for Jewish emancipation cannot be met in a state such as Germany. Germany is a Christian state, and as such all it can offer to Jews are privileges (exemptions with respect to religious observance), and it already offers these to Jews. True emancipation, according to Bauer, would be emancipation *from religion*. But since Christianity is a higher religion than Judaism, Jews would need to become Christians first.

¹⁸ Essential background to this discussion is provided by Marx’s *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State*. Here Marx (in one of his discussions of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* §307) speaks of the state, on Hegel’s view, as representing an abstract Gattungswesen. ‘It is here, in the sphere of the political state, that the individual moments of the state are related to themselves as to the being of the Gattung, the “Gattungswesen”, because the political state is the sphere of their universal character, i.e., their *religious sphere*. The *political* state is the *mirror of truth* for the various moments of the *concrete* state.’ (Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, MECW 3: 107). ‘Hier, in der Sphäre des politischen Staates, ist es, daß sich die einzelnen Staatsmomente zu sich als dem *Wesen der Gattung*, als dem “Gattungswesen” verhalten; weil der politische Staat die Sphäre ihrer allgemeinen Bestimmung, ihre *religiöse Sphäre* ist.’ (MEGA² I/2: 116–17). For a detailed exposition of Marx’s critique of Hegel in this text, see Schuringa (2021).

Then everyone can be emancipated from religion, in an atheist state. Marx chooses to focus on a structural aspect of Bauer's response that shows it to be fundamentally flawed.

It is not merely a question, Marx says, of who is to be emancipated and who emancipates, but of *what kind* of emancipation is in question. Bauer's concern, he takes it, has been with *political emancipation*. Now, the political emancipation of Jews or Christians, Marx says, would be the *emancipation of the state* from Judaism or Christianity; that would occur when the state no longer recognizes itself as a religious state, but as a political state. Marx shares with Bauer the assessment that this has not yet happened in Germany. Things are different, however, in France and the United States, where there is a political, non-religious state. (An effect of this, Marx points out, that can be seen very clearly in the United States is that religion thereby becomes a private matter, leading to a proliferation of different religious sects.) But Marx now offers a critique of political emancipation, in such a way, he says, as to make the Jewish question into 'the general question of our time'.

If we consider what political emancipation achieves in those countries, such as France and the United States, in which there is a political state, what we find is that the state becomes the locus of the *Gattungsleben* of the human *in contrast to* their material life. The individual leads two lives: a 'heavenly' political communal life, and an 'earthly' private, bourgeois life. The individual is thus bifurcated into a generalized entity as *citoyen* (as subject to the state), and a particular entity as *bourgeois* (as a private individual in pursuit of egoistic gain in a system of needs). This situation, Marx further shows, serves as an indictment of the conception that drives the various French bills of rights (1791, 1793, 1795). What appear in those bills of rights as the universal rights of man in fact turn out to apply to the private realm of the *bourgeois*.

Now, political emancipation is a significant step forward, and in fact the highest form of emancipation possible, Marx thought, under the circumstances and arrangements then

prevailing. Marx's diagnosis of where it remains defective is highly instructive, however, in the way it underscores how keen he is to avert the threat of bifurcation. Political democracy, he points out, retains something *religious* in so far as it regards *the human as such* as the highest being, and not *these individual humans here* ('der Mensch, wie er geht und steht'). What is needed is for the gap between the communal (manifested by the *citoyen*) and the individual (manifested by the *bourgeois*) to be closed. It is only then that *human emancipation* will appear on the horizon. Marx sets out the desideratum as follows in the closing paragraph of Part One of 'On the Jewish Question':

Only when actual individual human being takes the abstract citizen [Staatsbürger] into himself and as an individual human being has become a Gattungswesen in his empirical life, his individual work and his individual relationships, only when the human being has recognized and organized his *forces propres* as *social forces* so that social force is no longer separated from him in the form of *political force*, only then will human emancipation be accomplished.

It is crucial to Marx's point about the way in which the French revolution falls short of this that there is the *appearance* there that *l'homme* (the universal human being) is on the scene. But what are *presented as the droits de l'homme* are actually only rights of the *bourgeois* (the rights of individuals to dispose of their property as they see fit, and so on). So the French revolution conception serves to camouflage that human emancipation has not yet come on the scene. It is only when *citoyen* and *bourgeois* are unified so as to constitute the true *homme*, Marx thinks, that there can be *real* human emancipation (and not human emancipation in name only). *L'homme*, as presented in the bills of rights, despite the appearance of

universality is a mere individual bifurcated from their universality. This displaces what *l'homme* really is: the individual *in their very universality*.

Marx's insistence on the need to avert the threat of bifurcation in 'On the Jewish Question' is maintained in the 'Notes on James Mill', composed probably somewhat later than the Paris Manuscripts, in the summer–autumn of 1844.¹⁹ Here he speaks of the appropriate conception of *Gattungstätigkeit* and *Gattungsgeist* as being one on which individuals 'by activating their own essence [*Wesen*] produce' a 'human community' or 'social being' that is 'no abstractly universal power confronting the single individual' ('keine abstrakt-allgemeine Macht gegenüber dem einzelnen Individuum'). Instead this 'social being' is to be conceived as 'the essence of every individual, his own activity, his own life, his own spirit, his own wealth' ('Das Wesen eines jeden Individuums, nur eigne Thätigkeit, sein eignes Leben, sein eigener Genuß, sein eigener Reichthum'). And again: 'Men, not as abstractions, but as real, living, particular individuals *are* this community. *As* they are, so it is too.' ('Die Menschen, nicht in einer Abstraktion, sondern als wirkliche, lebendige, besondere Individuen *sind* dieß Wesen. *Wie* sie sind, so ist daher es selbst.' (MEGA² IV/2: 452; EW 265))

This is also how to understand the Sixth of the Theses on Feuerbach (which are largely to be read as a consolidation and recapitulation of points made in the Manuscripts and the Notes on Mill). Here Marx protests against Feuerbach: 'the human essence [das menschliche Wesen] is no *abstractum* dwelling in the single individual. In its actuality it is the ensemble of social relations.' Feuerbach's mistaken conception means that he is 'forced [...] to abstract from the historical process' and 'to presuppose an abstract—*isolated*—human individual.' Furthermore it means that the human essence 'can only be conceived as

¹⁹ This is the dating given in MEGA² (IV/2: 758).

“Gattung”, as an inner, dumb universality that binds the many individuals in a *natural* manner.’ (MEGA² IV/3: 20–21; cf. MECW 5: 7–8)

It is clear enough, then, that the problematic of bifurcation is to the fore in each of these texts. The shape of the solution that Marx envisages is also manifest: it must be that the universality in question reaches down (so to speak) into the character of the individual *as* individual. In this, he has now aligned himself with (a salient strand of) Max Stirner’s critique of Feuerbach. As Stirner writes, in a critique of the notion of Gattungswesen that includes as one of its targets (curiously enough) Marx in ‘On the Jewish Question’, ‘Man with a capital M is only an ideal, the Gattung only something thought of. To be a man is not to realize the ideal of *man*, but to present *oneself*, the individual.’ (Stirner 1995: 163) Stirner’s insistence on the moment of individuality is grist to Marx’s mill, and will from now on be deployed in polemics against Feuerbach that take place alongside polemics against Stirner himself (notably in *The Holy Family*).

4. Concrete universality

We have seen that Marx’s conception of Gattungswesen seems to involve (and require) the early-Feuerbachian conception of its universality. But we then also saw that this generates a bifurcation problem—one that Marx is, throughout his writings of 1843 and 1844, particularly keen to avoid.

Whatever else may be in doubt about Marx’s developing project, it is clear that something that remains vital for him is a conception of humanity according to which individuals show up as universal through and through, in their very individuality. Such a conception is one that answers to the Hegelian demand for ‘concrete universality’: a

universality that is not to be conceived in abstraction from its bearers, but *through* its bearers.²⁰

This helps to illuminate the distinctiveness of Marx's claim to equate 'naturalism' with 'humanism' and to possess the resources for the resolution of the conflict between the human and nature:

This communism, as completed naturalism = humanism, and as completed humanism = naturalism; it is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between the human and nature, and between human and human, the true resolution of the conflict between existence and essence, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and Gattung. It is the solution of the riddle of history and knows itself to be the solution. (MEGA² I/2: 263; EW 348)

Marx's endorsement of 'naturalism', such as it is, is not a turn away from a conception of the human the Gattung, as if we could now begin from individuals rather than from the universality in which they share. Precisely not: such naturalism fully carried through is *communism* (a process, not an end-result, as Marx repeatedly insists), or the restoration of human beings to universality, through the individuality that figures, in each bearer, as articulation of that universality.

Neither does Marx's newfound insistence on 'naturalism' signal an abandonment of the Feuerbachian conception of Gattungswesen we have examined here, in favour of something that does, after all, answer to the biologicistic conception of Gattung-membership we saw explicitly articulated in Schaff, and implicitly in play in other interpreters in section 1. For Marx there was never any *opposition* between nature and spirit. Spirit is for him the

²⁰ See Chitty 2009 for the suggestion that what Marx is after is concrete universality.

apex of nature, as it is for Hegel. Hegel announces the ‘transition’ from nature to spirit as follows at *Encyclopaedia II*, §376:

With this, nature has passed over into its truth, into the subjectivity of the concept whose objectivity is itself the sublated immediacy of singularity, is *concrete universality*; so that the concept is posited that has for its *determinate being* [Dasein] the reality which corresponds to it, namely, the concept – [i.e.] *spirit*. (TWA 9: 537; Enc2: 443)

For Marx, to insist on ‘naturalism’ is to insist that we human beings, qua *the Gattung*, are concretely universal. As such, we are limited, suffering, natural beings—but no less *Geist* for that.

Marx’s intention, as he himself clearly states, is not, we must remember, to embrace ‘materialism’ in opposition to ‘idealism’, but to transcend this very opposition:

Here we see how naturalism or humanism, fully carried through, differ both from idealism and materialism and is at the same time their unifying truth. (MEGA² I/2: 295; EW 389)

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