

Karl Marx's Philosophy of Nature,
Action and Society

Karl Marx's Philosophy of Nature,
Action and Society:
A New Analysis

By

Justin P. Holt

Karl Marx's Philosophy of Nature, Action and Society: A New Analysis, by Justin P. Holt

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For Alise

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ABBREVIATIONS FOR TEXTS

- C-1* = *Capital*. Volume 1. Translated by Ben Fowkes. Penguin Books. New York, 1990.
- C-2* = *Capital*. Volume 2. Translated by David Fernbach. Penguin Books. New York, 1981.
- C-3* *Capital*. Volume 3. Translated by David Fernbach. Penguin Books. New York, 1991.
- CCPE* = *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by S.W. Ryazanskaya. International Publishers. New York, 1970).
- EW* = (*Early Writings*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton. Penguin Books. New York, 1992.
- G* = *Grundrisse*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus. Penguin Books. New York, 1993.
- GI* = *The German Ideology*. Prometheus Books. Amherst, New York. 1998.
- MECW* = *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works*. International Publishers. New York.
- MESW* = *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Selected Works, in One Volume*. Progress Publishers. Moscow. 1977.
- PS* = Hegel, G.W.F. *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford University Press. Oxford, 1977.
- TSV-1* = *Theories of Surplus Value*. Part 1. Progress Publishers. Moscow, 1963.
- TSV-2* = *Theories of Surplus Value*. Part 2. Progress Publishers. Moscow, 1968.
- TSV-3* = *Theories of Surplus Value*. Part 3. Progress Publishers. Moscow, 1971.

PREFACE

The origin of this book begins with a debate I had with Jonathan Pickle. I was in graduate school at the time and we were working for the department as office assistants. As usual, discussion of philosophy had taken precedence over photocopying someone's syllabus or faxing a professor's overdue utility bill. I was deeply in agreement with Hegel at the time, and Jonathan wondered if I thought Marx's criticism of Hegel was close to the mark. Having read very little Marx I couldn't effectively answer the question so we decided to form a reading group. We eventually read many of Marx's and Engel's major works and I drifted away from Hegel and into agreement with Marx, more or less. I do think that Marx is onto some major problems with Hegel's philosophy, but this book is not about Marx's critique of Hegel alone. Marx's critique of Hegel and idealism in general does figure prominently, but this discussion is secondary to the main topic of this work: Marx's philosophy of nature as a basis for his practical philosophy.

In addition to the old debate with Jonathan, the precursors to my considerations lay with two divergent Marxist schools: Analytical Marxism and Critical Theory. The idea of considering how nature and material action structure Marx's practical philosophy arose when I read G.A. Cohen's beautifully argued book *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*. This work clearly demonstrates that a distinction between material action and social action can be found in Marx's writings. I became curious how natural phenomena differed from the material and the social. How can we distinguish between humans as natural beings, humans as material beings, and humans as social beings? I found that the traditional Critical Theory statement on the matter, developed by Alfred Schmidt in his *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, did not attend to the distinction between material action and social action found in Cohen (in defense of Schmidt, Cohen's book appeared almost a decade after the English publication of Schmidt's book). Also, Schmidt's work did not address Marx on his own terms. Hegel's understanding of nature was often used instead of Marx's own discussion of nature. Marx had many considerations of humans and nature, and his critique of Hegel was often based on these distinctions. Schmidt's analysis was intriguing, but I thought that Marx's break from Hegel, clearly demonstrated in his early

works, was lost in the interpretation. With Cohen's penetrating analysis in mind I decided to reinterpret Marx's philosophy of nature in light of his practical philosophy.

There have been some very good books and articles published recently that have demonstrated how Marx was an ecological thinker (the work by Paul Burkett and John Bellamy Foster definitely stand out). These works have bypassed the shortcomings of Schmidt's analysis and argued from Marx's comments and his influences alone. While these books are invaluable for presenting a socialist case for environmental preservation, there has not been a thorough reappraisal of how Marx's philosophy of nature structured his practical philosophy. This book is an attempt to understand Marx's practical philosophy from the perspective of Marx's natural and materialist analysis. I do draw heavily on political economy to do this, but many of Marx's philosophic insights are not fully addressed by political economy. I hope that a practical philosophic consideration can add a certain dimension to the well know Marxist political economic critique of capitalism.

This book has been a long time in coming and many people have helped me along the way. Since this book was first developed as a dissertation my committee was invaluable in assisting me in its completion. My supervisor Dmitri Nikulin was indispensable in this work's production. My other committee members, Simon Critchley, James Dodd, and Anwar Shaikh, all contributed questions that have helped me improve the manuscript. Jonathan Pickle's influence on my thinking goes back many years and my interest in Marx would have never developed if it weren't for him. I hope I have been as helpful, but I doubt it. My longtime friend Dr. Burmbaum was always available to help me work through a difficult point; I will always be grateful for his insights. My beautiful and brilliant girlfriend, Alise Wallis, has always assisted me in my work and if it weren't for her I would have never completed this book. I have benefited from her amazing analytical abilities and learned much from my discussions with her. She is a great friend and I will cherish her always.

Justin P. Holt
February 2009

INTRODUCTION

What is this book about? Broadly, this book is about Marx's understanding of how nature shapes standards for practical action. Humans develop abilities for the use of nature over time. These accumulated abilities enable humans to live their lives in new ways. New productive techniques bring about surplus product that in turn enables people to perform new activities or specialize in old ones. The time freed from necessary production, due to material development, opens up new ways of living. But, these new ways of living are not automatically accepted. The possibility of new ways of using free time has to be argued for and proved. Marx tries to do this by critiquing orthodox philosophy and political economy. Marx's critique is dependent on an implied standard of practical action. In this book, I show the basis upon which Marx develops his implied standard and then I will present his standard in a systemized form. Overall I will argue for this statement: *the natural and material existence of humans is the basis Marx uses to develop a standard of practical action.*

In this book, a practical standard is the determination of desirable outcomes and situations that can be chosen by people. The domain of the practical is actions performed by people that involve choice. The practical has been commonly described by philosophers as ethics, politics, and juridical judgments. In practical philosophy there have been standards that determine actions as good or beneficial. In Aristotle, the fulfillment of human function is the standard for individual actions. This is the ethical. The standard for societal action, the political, is whether a state is to the benefit of all members, or to the benefit of a few or only one. Kant determines the morality of a practical action as a good will acting in accordance with the moral law. Classical utilitarianism determines an action as good when pleasure is felt or pain reduced. All of these judgments described involve the application of standards for decision-making. Practical philosophy is concerned with what choices one should make.

Before defining some terms and moving into descriptions of the various parts of this book, I will state why I have found it important to see Marx's understanding of nature and humans' appropriation of it as a basis for a practical standard. First and foremost, Marx is a practical thinker in that he finds practical concerns to precede theoretical concerns. This is a

well-known tenet of Marx's philosophy of history, but not necessarily a well understood tenet. Nature as a category of practical philosophy has had a varied and long career in western philosophy; I would venture that nature, in its various philosophic manifestations, has been a constant component of practical argumentation as long as there have been arguments about the practical. If not always fully enunciated in the history of philosophy, usually it has played an essential bracketing function in arguments about human action. Such as, if the natural is defined as society x then society y can be determined as an unnatural societal arrangement.

The use of the concept of nature as a regulatory device in practical philosophy is to assist arguments in developing standards for evaluating actions; and simply understood practical philosophy's goal is to understand what is the best way to live. Understanding what is the best way to live means determining the best actions to achieve this. Definitions of nature are used to limit conceptions of action along broadly understood lines of rational and irrational, or agreement and disagreement. We can see that conceptions of nature are being used to argue one manner of existence over another. In short, determining what are our natural tendencies can further arguments about what society we should live in, and what societal ends we should strive for. Defining what is natural in our practical lives thus shapes our political thought. One can effectively "take off the table," so to speak, certain activities and goals if they are defined as *unnatural*, and just as effectively justify many unnecessary and irrational activities because they are seen as *natural*.¹

I. Historical Examples of Practical Standards

In the history of philosophy there have been some notable uses of nature to justify the judgment of actions. Not to dwell on too many examples, a few from ancient Greek philosophy will suffice. In Plato's *Republic*, nature as a regulating principle in constructing the just city is widespread; and it is used in sincere and insincere ways. The just city itself is a macro version of people's souls, so the nature of men is the nature of the city. Correspondingly, taming one's soul, one's bodily and psychic states and capacities, is the micro image of how a city is tamed. Plato's idea of a hierarchically ordered soul dictates how we are to control

¹ The current debate that claims it is unnatural for homosexuals to raise children, and thus argues that homosexual relationships and parenthood are not conducive to the best outcomes of society, is a contemporary example of using nature as an argument to preserve the status quo.

ourselves, and analogously, the city. Not only does the city start due to physical necessity, that is, the division of labour, but it collapses when the reproduction laws of the guardians are ignored.² The types of poetry and music we play will stimulate different emotional states. Lies about the types of men's souls, which they are born with, validate and maintain the social order of the city.³

These examples elucidate conceptions of nature being used to determine actions as rational or irrational. A city that does not divide the activities of ruling and production between different people is an irrational social arrangement according to Plato's *Republic*, because having people perform more than one task results in inferior outcomes and products. Having producers concerned with material production and rulers concerned with governance allows each person to focus on one task, which will produce the best outcome or product.⁴ Plato's argument on this point can be restated as such: the best outcome for activities is specialization and the best way to live would be a social arrangement that promotes specialization.

Why Plato's argument is about nature needs to be further elaborated. The limits of actions are shaped by natural necessity. By specializing, one can provide a better outcome, "a finer job," Plato states.⁵ The manipulation of nature is limited by two factors: our ability to appropriate natural processes, and available time. These two factors are interrelated, as for example, our ability to appropriate natural processes is dependent on our historical inheritance of production facilities, and how much of the days, weeks, months, and years of our lives we can contribute to developing our abilities. As we can see, our ability to appropriate natural processes is dependent on time, both as our inheritance of productive development and our available time for ability development (in Marxian terminology, the ratio of necessary to surplus labour). Vice versa, the time we have available for ability development is dependent on how our abilities for appropriating natural processes are already developed, that is, our production facilities we have historically inherited. My description of natural necessity is reaching beyond Plato's text, but I think it is attending to its point: an optimal social arrangement for Plato's just city, is dependent upon our ability to control natural necessity. Our control over natural necessity, or more simply, natural processes, is our material ability.

² Plato (1968), 546b.

³ Plato (1968), 415a.

⁴ Concerning superior results from the division of labour and specialization, see Plato (1968), 370a.

⁵ Plato (1968), 370a.

In Aristotle's practical works, nature shapes not only what are the best ends for our actions, but our capacity to understand what those ends are. Aristotle's discussion of the greatest good as happiness of the contemplative life is dependent upon his definition of human function as the excellent development of rational facilities: "...we posit the function of a man to be a certain kind of life, namely, activity or *actions* of the soul with reason..."⁶ Without determining a definitive function for humans, Aristotle cannot delineate between competing types of happiness, in particular the happiness derived from honors. Having the best type of happiness determined by our nature opens up the possibility for weighing types of actions and social arrangements against one another, and coextensively, enables one to more effectively plan practical arrangements than if the case was only one of individual preferences. Simply put, the best type of happiness is the type of life, or activity, that fulfills human function, which for Aristotle is the contemplative life.⁷

Function for Aristotle is thus effective for determining right action; that is, virtuous action. Without such a standard one is plunged into different types of relativism, the most probable, acknowledged by Aristotle, is the merely political; the social arrangement that is based solely upon convention with no guidance given by reason. In the book on justice, Aristotle develops the contrast between convention and reason determined action in the legal/political realm.

There are some who think that all kinds of justice are such as these [i.e., legal],⁸ in view of the fact that what exists by nature is unchangeable and has the same power everywhere, like fire, which burns here as well as in Persia, but that things which are just are observed to be subject to change. Such is not the case, however, although there is a sense in which this is true. Perhaps among the gods, at least, this is not the case at all, but among us there is something which is just by nature, even if all of what is just is subject to change. Nevertheless, some of what is just exists by nature and some not by nature. Now of things which can be otherwise, what kinds exist by nature also and what kind exist not by nature but by law or convention, if indeed they are alike in being both subject to change, is clear from the examples which follow; and the same distinction applies to the other cases. The right hand is by nature stronger, although it is possible for some men to become ambidextrous. As for the things which are just by convention or expediency, they are like standard measures; for measures of

⁶ Aristotle (1984), 1098a12-13. Italics are by the translator.

⁷ Aristotle (1984), 177a11-19. Concerning the relationship of virtuous action to the fulfillment of function, see 1106a24.

⁸ Translator's comment.

wine or of corn are not everywhere equal but larger in wholesale and smaller in retail markets. Similarly, what is just according to men and not by nature is not the same everywhere, since forms of government, too, are not all the same; nevertheless, there is only one form of government, which is by nature the best everywhere.⁹

Aristotle wants to establish the difference between the necessities of nature, the possibility of actions within the boundaries of natural necessity, and natural-practical standards. In the first distinction, Aristotle's example of fire which is the same in all places, natural forces cannot be other than what they are, and there is no possibility of choosing whether or not fire will burn in Persia. The second distinction is that natural necessity does provide a boundary to choice and action. Aristotle's example of a naturally strong right hand and ambidexterity denotes the possibility of actions within a natural boundary. Another example, which I find to be reminiscent of Aristotle's, is the impact food and exercise has on health and strength: one has a natural tendency towards health and strength that can be improved due to food and exercise. Our activities of exercise and proper eating to improve health and strength are circumscribed by our natural tendencies and limits.¹⁰

What is most important to us here is the final distinction, Aristotle's use of a natural-practical standard. This standard is based upon the definition of function, which means one should judge practical activities upon how they fulfill human function. Aristotle realizes that people live differently based upon their various conventions. But, different conventions do not mean that all social arrangements are optimal for the fulfilling of function, *because function is determined by our nature*. Humans' natural tendencies mean that one way of living and one societal arrangement is best, because it meshes with humans' natural aspects best. Human function circumscribes not only the possibilities of actions, but also their capacity to provide greater or lesser degrees of happiness. Aristotle finds that the contemplative life would provide "perfect happiness."¹¹

⁹ Aristotle (1984), 1134b25 to 1135a6.

¹⁰ The activities of training, correct exercise, and eating, are technical activities in Aristotle's system as opposed to practical activities regarding ethics and politics.

¹¹ Aristotle (1984), 1177a18.

II. Marx's Practical Philosophy

As we see, conceptions of nature can have substantial significance in the construction of a practical theory. In these brief overviews of Plato and Aristotle I hope to have set the ground for discussing the roll of nature in Marx's practical philosophy. Excluding Hegel, Aristotle is the thinker to whom I find Marx most closely related; his relationship to Hegel is based on critique, that is, Marx cites Hegel mostly to show how he is wrong and to also introduce his own ideas.¹² Interestingly, Marx quotes few thinkers approvingly. He rather cites them to critique their ideas; but this is not the case with Aristotle. When Marx quotes him it is commonly to support his own position. He breaks radically with Hegel on the role of nature in practical philosophy, which Marx discusses in his early work *Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State*. Marx embraces a materialist historical account of the genesis of the state as opposed to an idealist historical account. This places Marx in alignment with Aristotle whose typology of state forms is based on historical examples and class relations rather than permutations of thought. Marx is in many ways a historically *developmental* minded Aristotelian. Aristotle conceives of various social arrangements being possible, and so does Marx; the difference between the two thinkers is that Marx finds that some social arrangements can only occur at certain stages in the development of the productive forces.¹³ This difference radically alters how a society's purpose, living well,¹⁴ and an individual's function can be achieved, since the types of lives people may live at various levels of productive development can be very different.

The similarities between Marx's and other practical philosophies can easily be seen; they are all interested in the described domain of practical philosophy, which is what choices should one make. Should one present the limits to human development inherent within the social relations of capitalism or should one defend these limits as real ones that cannot be overcome? Should one advocate the end of the wage system or higher

¹² Allen Wood finds Marx to be similar to Aristotle on several matters but does not provide a thorough comparison of their philosophic positions, see Wood (2004). John Bellamy Foster does demonstrate that Marx's materialism was influenced by the philosophy of Epicurus, see Foster (2000), chapter 1. But, Aristotle definitely had an influence on Marx's practical considerations, especially the notion that humans are animals that occur in groups and do not enter into an original organization by choice in the style of the social contract theorists, see *G* pp. 83-85.

¹³ Aristotle considers a development of household to village to city-state, but not a fuller range of social arrangements; see Aristotle (1986), 1252a1 to 1253b1.

¹⁴ See Aristotle (1986), 1252b30 on the city-state's natural purpose.

wages? Should the hierarchies of workplace and society be accepted as necessary and beneficial or unnecessary and detrimental?

Why should one choose to condemn capitalism as Marx does? Well, Marx condemns capitalism because it separates humans from natural processes and our developed tools and devices for using nature effectively, thereby reducing our ability to satisfy needs and develop new skills and interests. Capitalism, in its best form, diminishes humans' potential to provide for themselves and to develop new capacities. Marx has a good reason for condemning capitalism. Like all practical philosophy, Marx argues for a standard that is reasonable. Capitalism fails to meet this standard; this means that capitalism is not conducive to the best outcomes and situations for people, defined as people's ability to satisfy their needs and develop new skills and interests.

Marx determines that these outcomes are best for humans by showing how humans are natural creatures who develop activities for using nature over time. Humans are natural creatures; they are part of the natural world. Marx considers all things to be part of the natural world; there is no separable reality. As natural creatures humans are corporeal, objective, and organic. A determination of the human subject mandates, if we are to consider humans as natural creatures, that we must take these three attributes into account. Humans are objects among other objects, all of which occupy and take up space. These physical objects are in relation to one another and are integrated in the processes of the natural world. It is important that our understanding of physical objects related by natural processes maintains the distinctiveness of humans as living creatures. The relationship of humans to the natural world is one of organic metabolism between objects.¹⁵ Humans could be thought of as matter alone, but thinking of humans in this way misses the distinctiveness of humans as living creatures. Humans, as living creatures, means their living form has to be maintained if they are to continue as living creatures. Humans have necessary natural-organic requirements to maintain their living form.

Humans cannot be understood in their actuality if we determine them solely as natural creatures. Humans are not only corporeal, objective, and organic; they are also historical creatures.¹⁶ They have different abilities to

¹⁵ For a full discussion of Marx's understanding of metabolism see Foster (2000), chapter 5.

¹⁶ Burkett describes human's natural-historical condition as such, "While recognizing that production is structured by historically developed relations among producers and between producers and appropriators of the surplus product, Marx also insists that production as both a social and a material process is shaped and constrained by natural conditions, including, of course, the natural condition of

manipulate the natural world to meet their necessary biological requirements. This ability to manipulate the natural world is humans' capacity for material activities. Material activity is the use of natural processes, matter, and energy, in which the appropriation of nature is qualitatively changed from the point of natural processes alone. Humans of course have always appropriated nature to meet their biological needs. The line between a natural appropriation of nature and a material appropriation of nature can be quite fine. A material activity is the use of natural processes that may accumulate over time as skills and knowledge. Material activities are qualitatively different than natural processes because of the accumulation of ways of using nature over time.

We can determine a natural appropriation of nature negatively as an appropriation that requires no accumulation of skills and knowledge over time. This may be a chimera, since hominids that existed before *Homo sapiens sapiens* used tools, so humans were always tool users. This also means that biologically current humans always materially appropriated nature. Humans have always had a historical dimension to their existence. One cannot abstract the accumulation of skills and knowledge away from human experience and say this is what humans really are. A determination of human existence has to take the material appropriation of nature into account to determine a practical standard.

III. Marx's Materialist Standard of Practical Action

In determining a practical standard for people Marx is interested in using the reality of human existence as the basis for a standard. Since humans are natural and material, Marx seeks a materialist standard. A materialist standard of practical action is grounded on the natural and material existence of humans, as opposed to a social or idealist account. A social account would take the mores of a current social form as the standard; the basis for a social standard would be the demands for reproduction of the social form. An idealist account would take the structure of thought as the basis and the agreement of thought and action as the standard.

Marx takes the demands of humans as natural/historical beings as the basis for developing a practical standard. The materialist basis for Marx's

human bodily existence." Burkett (1999), p. 1. I would stress that Marx also wants to emphasize the historical level of productive forces development as an analytically distinct factor that shapes relations between people, socially and materially.

practical standard is humans' necessary access to the natural world. As physical and organic beings, humans need to have access to natural processes if they are to perform any material activity. To provide for their biological needs, and to engage in the cultural life of their communities, humans need to have access to natural processes in their historically contemporary form of the means of production. The means of production are typically understood as the tools, machines, spaces, money, and materials of production; to this list I would add the knowledge and skills needed to use these devices to conduct and understand the processes of production. Access to natural processes/means of production is required for humans to maintain their living form and to develop additional abilities. We can see that this access is needed as a precondition to perform any activity, material or otherwise. To enjoy leisure time, one needs of course to have enough food, water, shelter, and security to be able to enjoy it, and really, just to have, leisure time. Studying also requires these biological preconditions and also access to time free from producing one's subsistence. But, to study, one also needs access to materials and people. One can't study unless one has books and equipment and people to learn from. All of these preconditions, biological or material, are natural processes that have been made, shaped, and altered by productive technique. Being able to take advantage of these productions is to have access to the means of production. One's life would be impossible to live without access to the means of production. We fabricate our lives by using nature.

Access to the means of production is the effective control over the means of production, including investment and output. Sufficient access includes being able to make decisions not only over the direct labour process, but also over questions regarding total product produced by society and the repercussions that follow from production. All of these matters affect how the lives of people in a society actually are: What activities are available to what people? Who knows what in this society? Who controls which devices? Who controls which form of labour and capital? What uses of free time are available to which people? Understanding who controls the means of production in its totality can answer these questions. How one can live one's life - unemployed, trapped in low-wage employment, overworked, not having to work, learning science or not, enjoying economic and physical security - depends on access to the means of production.

Within capitalism, access to the means of production is not universal, which means that all people in society do not have equal access to the means of production. Some people have control over small amounts of the

means of production. Some people have control over large amounts of the means of production. And most people have control over no amount of the means of production. An example of this lopsided control can be demonstrated by looking at the distribution of income and wealth in the United States. In 2001, the top 1% of the population held 39.7% of net financial assets, the next 9% of the population held 40.1%, and the remaining 90% of the population held 20.2%. In contrast, household income distributed to this 90% of the population was 54.8%, the next 9% of the population was 25.2%, and the top 1% of the population had 20% of total income.¹⁷

This maldistribution of access to the means of production, in tangible and less tangible forms, means that how people live their lives can differ greatly. People's ability to use natural processes and the means of production directly affects people's life prospects. If people do not have access to the means of production they cannot live their lives to the fullest potential available to them in their time. Marx finds the unequal distribution of access to the means of production to be the major barrier for people being able to live secure and fulfilling lives, or at least the chance to attempt to live a fulfilling life.

The basis of the materialist standard of practical action is that for humans to be biologically and historically active they need access to the means of production. This brings us to stating what is the materialist practical standard: reasonable universal self-actualization of one's projects. Actualization of one's projects is the satisfaction of biological and historical needs. The term project is used to convey an understanding of need satisfaction that is not immediate. Some needs, like becoming educated, raising a family, developing a skill, studying a natural phenomena, living a secure life, or committing oneself to a life's work, are not satisfied in the same time frame as the need to eat immediately. But security of nutrition also does not occur in the same time frame as securing one meal.

Self-actualization is the satisfaction of one's project by oneself. This implies that one has direct control over the means of production. This provision is to preserve Marx's idea of the associated producers and to avoid the problem of a benevolent tyrant.

Universal self-actualization is control over the means of production collectively by society. This is to prevent ownership of the means of production from sliding into the hands of individual producers, which

¹⁷ Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto (2005), Table 4.1, p. 279. Also of note, in 2001 the top 0.5% held 25.6% of all common stock, table 4.7 p. 287.

implies that one's property could be alienated. Collective ownership of property cannot be alienated by a society unless that society's ownership pattern is de-legitimized.

Reasonable universal self-actualization means that actualization has to be to the benefit of the actualizers. This prohibits actions that harm the actualizers. Harm can be a tricky notion, but we can have a deflationary account that considers harm to be any action that inhibits actualization in the short or long term. This would include assault, unnecessary imprisonment, alienation of collective property or personal property, overwork, limits to access to the productive forces due to social hierarchies (class, bureaucratic elitism, sexism, or racism), destructive overuse of the means of production, underinvestment in the means of production, irrational development of the means of production, and environmental destruction.

Overall, we can understand Marx's materialist practical standard as a philosophic prescription for action. Marx defines what is beneficial for people as the materialist basis. The separation of people from the means of production is alienation in Marxian terminology. It is beneficial for humans to have access to the means of production. It is detrimental for this access to be inhibited, i.e. when their access is alienated from them. Access to the means of production is necessary for humans as natural/historical creatures. For human subjects to act, they have to manipulate nature. They have to appropriate natural processes to meaningfully perform any action. A person could be considered without their use of natural processes, without considering the material industrial history their society has inherited, regardless of their physical and organic connection to the natural world. But, this is to envision people in a way that may be abstractly true but does not demonstrate their actuality. To understand what is beneficial for people we need to understand them as what they are. Marx understands people as objectively physical beings that are part of the natural world, which they have progressively learned to use over time through material activities.

IV. Social Activities and Illusion

Now that we have discussed what is real for Marx in regard to humans and what are desirable outcomes prescribed by a materialist practical standard, next we need to address what is false and illusory for Marx. Marx spends most of his writing career showing why capitalism is undesirable according to what is beneficial to humans. But he also uses

much of his ink explaining how orthodox political economic understandings of capitalism and human action are flawed.

In this work, what Marx critiques as the illusory elements of human society is called the social. The social, broadly considered, includes: classes, class interests, activities of promotion, and ideology. Definitively, the social and social activities are the relationships that occur between people and things that do not have any real physical connection to the material activities' use of natural processes. Social activities promote ends that serve class interests directly or indirectly, and meet the demands for reproduction of the social form in which these activities of promotion are generated. The logic of capital accumulation is a social end. Social activities ride upon material activities but do not affect the physical outcome of material activities. Social activities may affect the pace of material activities, the distribution of product from material activities, or the type of material accumulation that serves the demands of capitalist accumulation. Analytically, social activities can be separated from material activities without affecting their physical outcome as noted above.

An example of the difference between material activities and social activities can be demonstrated with an example of garbage removal. In this example let us have a garbage truck and three people who work on the truck. One of these people drives the truck and the other two throw cans, whether they change roles while they pick up garbage is beside the point. Now the material activity of garbage collection is for the truck to be driven on a certain route where garbage is located, the garbage to be picked-up, and then the garbage brought to the dump. As I said before, as long as one person drives and two people put the garbage in the truck, the crew follows the routes, and the garbage is brought to the dump, the material activity of garbage collection has been performed. The social relations and social activities affecting the material activity of garbage collection would be class relationships and activities of promotion that shape but do not alter the material activity of garbage collection. The class relationships of the three-person crew could be: they all own the truck together, one or two of them own the truck and the other one(s) work for them, or they all work for another person(s). The social activities of promotion would be: acts that encourage the speed of garbage removal and distribution of the total value accrued to garbage collection (who gets paid how much). These social relationships and social activities of promotion do not affect the physical outcome of the material activity of garbage collection.

One can effectively perform the desired material activity without the social. The social is objectively not necessary for the material performance of the activity. But the social is necessary for the recognition of the

material activity within a specific social form. People can grow food, synthesize chemicals, and control an atomic reactor without owning the land, seed, chemicals, or machinery. People do not have to be proletarians or serfs to farm or make clothes. A person can be taught Boethius without paying for the instruction. Class designations are objectively meaningless in respect to the physical attributes of material activities. Do the vibrations of air change when engineering principles are uttered by the owner of a firm rather than when uttered by an employee? Do the principles change? Of course they don't.

Class relationships and activities that promote social ends can be a barrier to the self-actualization of one's projects. This is because the meeting of class interests and social ends are not isomorphic with the actualization of one's projects. The development of the productive forces, when promoted by the social demands of capital accumulation, are developed according to what best suits accumulation according to the controlling class interests. The productive forces can be organized to meet the needs of humans as natural and historical creatures. But when they are developed according to the demands of capital accumulation they may be developed in a manner that entails: unemployment, destruction of productive capacity, ceasing production regardless of need satisfaction, environmental destruction,¹⁸ dangerously low wages, overwork, poverty, curtailing of the social wage, and maldistribution of productive advances such as health care, education, and housing.

The social may be a barrier to the actualization of one's projects. It is definitely a barrier for self-actualization due to the limits of redistribution within capitalism. Marx wants to stress that if the social is not necessary for the objective performance of a material activity then there is no reason for us to maintain social activities and social relations. This can particularly be seen as the case since the social has ends that are not only different from need satisfaction but can also be hostile to need satisfaction. When distribution of medicines are withheld due to the logic of capital accumulation, then social relationships are hostile to need satisfaction.

In his work, Marx explains how humans are objectively natural and materially-historical creatures and then implicitly develops a materialist practical standard based on the objective reality of the human experience. This implied standard is used by Marx to criticize orthodox political economy and to develop general considerations of socialism.

¹⁸ See *C-I* p. 638 on capital accumulation causing destruction of the soil.

V. Overview of the Parts and the Topics of this Book

To show how the material existence of humans is the basis for a standard of practical action, I will need to first show why the natural and the material are the actual for Marx, and second I need to show why the social, as defined by Marx's work, is spurious; with this done I can then go on to present Marx's standard of practical action. Chapter 1 of this book is a consideration of Marx's understanding of the natural and its difference from the material. Chapter 2 is a consideration of Marx's understanding of the social and his critique of social relations through the use of material determinations. Chapter 3 is a systemized version of Marx's materialist standard of practical action.

For the sake of exhibition we could phrase Marx's standard in regard to Aristotle's conception of function: if human function is actualization of one's projects, then human function is fulfilled when one's projects are actualized. This standard can also consider degree; some states of existence can be more or less conducive to self-actualization. Marx's standard for practical judgment can be used to compare different social arrangements and can be used as a basis for critiquing a social arrangement for not optimizing the capacity for self-actualization. In comparing this phrasing with Marxian terminology, one is alienated when the current social arrangement is not an optimal use of the means of production for self-actualization. The use of the means of production in a fashion that is not optimal for self-actualization is thus an impairment to self-actualization.

In review, Marx's understanding of practical standards and nature can be stated as:

- (1) Nature is objectively real for Marx and the regularities of its natural processes can be discovered via material activity.
- (2) Material activities are the use of natural properties to appropriate other natural properties. Material activities can be accumulated over time and change humans' relation to nature and other humans.
- (3) Social activities are actions performed to promote the class interests of a specific social form.
- (4) Material activities can satisfy direct and indirect needs of people whether physical or otherwise. For example, this is the satisfaction of the need for caloric intake or a life's work.
- (5) Social activities are used to satisfy class interests.
- (6) Marx finds that material activities that appropriate nature are real, but social activities obscure this reality, thus a means of determination is

needed to critique social forms and discern reality as the material and the natural.

(7) Marx implicitly develops a standard of practical action that can be used to determine the reality of the material and the natural and to critique social forms.

VI. Does Nature Have Value?

This question is not about whether or not nature has exchange value or use value, but whether nature is intrinsically valuable, as in a deontological sense. In this brief section I will discuss whether or not nature has any dignity; that is intrinsic value. Marx finds that nature is useful to us: "A thing can be a use-value without being a value [an exchangeable value – JPH]. This is the case whenever its utility to man is not mediated through labour. Air, virgin soil, natural meadows, unplanted forests, etc. fall in this category. A thing can be useful, and a product of human labour, without being a commodity. He who satisfies his own need with the product of his own labour admittedly creates use-values, but not commodities."¹⁹ Also, Marx finds that it is prudent to preserve nature for the use of future generations.²⁰ Nature is necessary for human existence and the development of abilities, but this does not mean that nature has dignity. Marx finds that the degradation of natural processes when human existence is threatened, or possible action diminished, can be considered harmful to humans.²¹

But, he does not seem to find that the degradation of natural processes is a violation of the dignity of nature. But, as we see, Marx does have practical standards for humans and their use of nature. His practical theory, at least as regards nature, is just not deontological. But, the use of nature for enjoyment is not excluded in this conception. Nature can be a use-value that satisfies the need of enjoyment, whether in hiking, rowing, or gazing at it. The quality of our lives would be immensely lessened if we lost such need satisfactions. But, this still only means that nature is useful and not that it has dignity.²²

¹⁹ *C-1* p.131.

²⁰ *C-3* p. 949.

²¹ *C-1* p. 638.

²² Burkett has a similar appraisal of Marx's understanding of the deontological value of nature, "...all ecological values are human and social values, and avoid ascribing a quasi-human subjectivity of purposefulness to nature that it simply does not possess." Burkett (2000), p. 17.

VII. Discussion and Definition of Terms

Nature and Natural Processes: For our practical philosophical purposes, nature is composed of matter, energy, and the processes that occur through matter and energy. The natural is the processes of nature. These processes are the regularities of matter and energy that can be discovered and used through human material activity. In this work, natural processes and the processes of nature will be use interchangeably. As we will see below, natural processes are not the same as the activities of humans, even if human activity is composed of natural processes.

Material: The material is the components of nature, matter and energy, and natural processes that have been subject to the activities of humans. An example of this can be brought out by a distinction: we could have a waterfall that develops due to the natural process of erosion, or a waterfall can be built through the activities of humans manipulating the process of nature, water flow, gravity, the impermeability of stone, etc. Following Cohen, I find that the productive forces are material.²³

Activity: An activity is something done by a human. Examples of activities are humans digging for tubers, humans calculating the trajectory of planets, humans teaching other humans Kant, humans engineering a bridge, humans building a bridge, humans testing theories, humans killing other humans, humans treating other humans' wounds, and humans telling fantastical tales, to name a few. I have defined activities as exclusive to humans to preserve the distinction between the natural and the material. This is done in order to maintain two important conceptions: the independent reality of nature, and the activity of discovery. One could discover the independent processes of nature via material activities, in this case experiments. By separating natural process and material activity, we can maintain an epistemic theory that allows us to have an accumulated conception of knowledge and not a formal one. Some examples of the accumulation of knowledge that preserves the distinction between natural processes and explanations of experiments are: the explanation of a pendulum is no longer explained as restricted sub-lunar motion but as the effect of gravity upon a moving body; the motion of a thrown object is no longer explained due to impetus but is understood as energy transferred to the object.

I have excluded other organisms as performers of activities mostly because Marx does so. Marx seems to find there is a difference between humans and animals in regard to our different abilities to plan. The famous

²³ Cohen (2000).

example in Marx's writings is of the spider and the architect, where the architect plans his construction ahead of time as a mental picture whereas the spider does not. I myself find the distinction to be of little importance other than to maintain the difference between activities and processes. We construct experiments and develop explanations in order to understand our own behaviors and our own physical processes. The line between the processes of our body and the activities that explain them is a fine line since we use our own natural processes to perform activities.

The distinction between natural process and activity is a reasonable distinction based on humans *actively* causing the occurrence. I actively eat food and I passively digest food; so eating food is an activity and digesting food is a process. This distinction becomes blurred with something like sleep, since I may actively not go to sleep but I will eventually lose consciousness due to the process of rest. We have learned how to manipulate our natural processes with chemicals that can prevent the process of rest, at least for a time. This sleep example muddies the distinction between process and activity to a negligible degree. Thus, an activity is humans damming a river by filling it with fallen wood, as opposed to the natural processes of beavers filling the river with wood, or the natural processes of wood being washed down stream to a point where it could bottleneck and dam the river.

Also, Marx's consideration that humans produce their world first by conceiving it where the spider does not, establishes a line between human activity and animal activity. Since humans can harness animal activity (a sheep's wool, a cow's milk, a silkworm's silk, a chicken's egg, mold cultures for cheese and yogurt, let alone raising animals themselves for food) it appears that humans use life in ways that other animals do not. But, what of the fish or the bird that cleans a shark's or hippopotamus' teeth? I think the distinction between activities and natural processes is quite slippery, and why we think it is not slippery or think that there must be a hard and fast rule is an inherited philosophic bias towards humans as different than other animals. For the purposes of this book we will consider activity as something actively done by a human being.

Material Activity: A material activity is an activity performed by a human that uses natural processes. As I stated above, material activity is the use of natural processes, matter and energy, in which the appropriation of nature is qualitatively changed from the point of natural processes alone. When I speak of practices, this can be considered as a term that is isomorphic with the phrase human material activity. Material activities are not value free. Material activities can be perverted from their material end by types of social promotion.

Social: The social is ideas, distinctions, or conceptions *associated* with the material and/or material activities but that are unnecessary for explaining material activities or performing material activities. Although the social may endorse or promote a material activity, it is not a material activity. Following Cohen I find that production relations are social.²⁴ Class distinctions are social distinctions. My use of social and social activity in this book is restricted to this definition. Broader definitions of the social are not used. To stress the use of the term social in this book, I am only using the term social to designate the phenomena that are related to the promotion of material activities. The social, in this book does not include, communication, knowledge, or inter-personal activities. In my use, the social does not include friendships, acquaintanceships, or some group relationships (see *Groups* below). But the social does include class relationships.

Social Activity: Social activities are activities that can promote material activities but are not necessary for the performance of material activities. An example Cohen uses to distinguish the two types of activities is the difference between organizing production and policing workers.²⁵ Organizing production is a material activity, since it involves humans using or altering nature and/or natural processes; whereas, policing workers is a promotion of certain ends of a production process other than the furnishing of a product, such as patterns of distribution, remuneration for labor performed, and the speed of production (to name a few).²⁶

Material Relations: Material relations are between humans and material activities and/or the material. An example of this is the relationship between humans and the activity of damming the river, or the relationship between humans and the river dammed by humans. Following Cohen, work relations are material relations, since they are between humans and matter regarding material manipulation.²⁷

Social Relations: Social relations are between humans and social activities. An example of this is the relationship between humans and the activity of policing. The activity of policing involves the acknowledgment of some people as the police and some that are policed, receptive or not to the police's position of social authority. But, it is important to note, the activity of policing can occur regardless of all members of a society acknowledging the dominant social positions. Thus, there can be a social

²⁴ Cohen (2000), p. 98.

²⁵ Cohen (2000), p. 107.

²⁶ Concerning promotion or motivation as a social activity in Cohen (2000), pp. 32-33.

²⁷ Cohen (2000), pp. 111-114.