

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Study on the Assertion of the "Laws of Beauty" in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*

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Abstract

The "laws of beauty" in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* constitutes the core principle of Marxist aesthetics. The key to understanding it lies in grasping the meanings of the two "standards". The "standard of the species" refers to the technical dimension in which humans can imitate the instincts of various organisms through cultural capabilities, while the "inherent standard" refers to the purposive aspect of human intention. Conscious, technical labour is the real process through which humans acquire the "universal" capacity transcending all other beings, enabling labourers to become a species-being and gaining the spiritual experience of "beauty" as their purposes are realized. Estranged labour stands as the antithesis of the "laws of beauty", only the realization of communism can bring the experience of beautiful labour.

Key words: The "laws of beauty"; The standard of the species; The inherent standard; Estranged labour

Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (hereinafter referred to as the *Manuscripts*) is the principal work in which Marx shifted toward economic issues during his development of historical materialism. As a work that integrates Marxist philosophy, political economy, and scientific socialism, it holds a unique and significant position among all of Marx's writings. By connecting economics and philosophy, Marx carried out a great revolution in these two fields, enabling us to view philosophy through economics and understand economics under the guidance of philosophy, while simultaneously revealing the secret of aesthetics. Since the Chinese translation by He Sijing was published in 1956, Chinese aesthetic circles have engaged in vigorous discussions on important issues on its key issues, including estranged labour, the objectification of essential powers of man, the essence of beauty, and so on. From the 1930s–40s through the 1990s, the *Manuscripts* sparked diverse debates in China's academic and aesthetic community, and many scholars have employed applying its viewpoints and methods to solve real-world aesthetic problems. Scholars' explorations of aesthetic thought have been diverse and multifaceted, with the most controversial being the famous assertion of the "laws of beauty". Today, many scholars recognize that this assertion constitutes the core of Marxist aesthetic thought. Sorting out and deeply understanding the "laws of beauty" assertion is of great significance for researching Marxist aesthetics and building modern aesthetics.

I. Academic Debates on the "Laws of Beauty": Interpretations of the "Two Standards"

Marx did not explicitly define the "laws of beauty". There has been considerable controversy in Chinese aesthetic circles over the understanding of the "laws of beauty", mainly centered on the two standards: the "standard of the species" and the "inherent standard". This section introduces two distinct understandings of these two concepts.

(I) Object-Attribute Theory: Both Standards Belong to the Object

The debates over the "two standards" mainly lies in divergent understandings of the "inherent standard". The first view, represented by Cai Yi and Lu Meilin, ascribes both standards to object itself, attributes objective nature to the "laws of beauty", and holds that the "standard of the species" is the essential characteristic of the species, while the "inherent standard" refers to the intrinsic prescriptiveness of the thing.

In his *Explorations of the Aesthetic Thought in the Paris Manuscripts*, Lu Meilin retranslated Marx's account of the "laws of beauty" based on the original text, Russian, and English versions. His translation is as follows: "Animals only build in accordance with the standard and needs of the species to which they belong, whereas man knows how to produce according to the standard of any species, and everywhere applies to the object the measure inherent in the object itself; therefore man also builds in accordance with the laws of beauty" (Lu, 1997, pp. 3–9). It can be seen that Lu Meilin supports the first view. The "inherent standard" is

the intrinsic essential prescriptiveness of the object, and humans transform the object according to its inherent essence. For example, if one were to apply the "laws of beauty" to transform a piece of wood, one could only make it into wooden products, but it is obviously impossible to turn it into a knitted sweater. This illustrates that humans can only transform objects based on their inherent attributes.

(II) Subject-Object Unity Theory: The Inherent Standard Belongs to the Subject

The second view, represented by Zhu Liyuan and Ying Bicheng, assigns the subjective standard of humans to the "laws of beauty". They argue that the "standard of the species" refers to the natural laws and survival modes of species instinct, while the "inherent standard" refers to the purposefulness that humans impose on the object. The "laws of beauty", they contend, is the unity of human subjective initiative and objective regularity.

In his paper *The Paris Manuscripts and Aesthetic Issues*, Ying Bicheng also analyzed the text from the German and Russian versions, arguing that the two standards mentioned by Marx each have their own distinct meanings. He contends that the first "standard of the species" refers to the standard of animals, the standard of animals as "subjects". The second "standard of the species" is introduced to compare humans with animals, so both should belong to the same meanings. Only in this way can the difference in productive capacity between humans and animals be reflected. Through German grammatical analysis, Ying Bicheng concludes that the sentence containing the "inherent standard" should mean: humans apply their own inherent standard to objects, that is, transform the objective world according to the human standard (Ying, 1998, pp. 157–170). That is to say, humans actively transform the objective world based on their own subjective purposes and values, enabling the object to meet human needs.

As discussions on the two standards deepen, some scholars argue that we should not simply stay at the level of this passage on the "laws of beauty" to understand the logic of beauty but should delve further. Others contend that Marx's formulation of the "laws of beauty" deepens existing definitions of the essence of beauty in the history of aesthetics. In short, scholars from different perspectives have affirmed the significance of the "laws of beauty" assertion from various perspectives, establishing its important status within the principles of Marxist aesthetics.

II. An Analysis of the "Two Standards"

To help readers better understand the analysis of the "two standards", the original text is quoted below:

"In creating a world of objects by his personal activity, in his work upon inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species-being, i.e., as a being that treats the species as his own essential being, or that treats itself as a species-being. Admittedly animals also produce. They build themselves nests, dwellings, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc. But an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, whilst man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom. An animal produces only itself, whilst man reproduces the whole of nature. An animal's product belongs immediately to its physical body, whilst man freely confronts his product. An animal forms only in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object. Man therefore also forms objects in accordance with the laws of beauty" (Marx, 1974, pp. 68-69).

Through a comparison of animals and humans, Marx points out that animal production is instinctive, whereas human production not only produces what is necessary for their own instinctive needs but also produces what is not currently needed or does not belong to the human "standard of the species". In other words, human production is not limited to their instincts. It is in this context that Marx puts forward the assertion of the "laws of beauty". Based on the above semantics, it can be inferred that the main intent of this passage is to express the human superiority over animals in productive skills. Animals cannot be aware that they are a certain kind of animal, nor can they be aware of the "species" to which they belong, but humans can—this demonstrates human technical superiority over animals. Only by grasping the central idea of this passage can we analyze the "standard of the species" and the "inherent standard" according to semantic logic.

(I) The "Standard of The Species" Is the Technical Prescriptiveness of Species Instinct

The "standard of the species" is the activity criterion externalized from species instinct, reflecting the natural technical determinacy of vital activity. For example, the spider produces by weaving webs, an

instinctual activity; it can only weave webs in accordance with the standards and needs of its own species. Similarly, the bee can only produce—building honeycombs—according to the standard of its species. Yet both can only engage in production within their own natural limits: a bee cannot spin webs like a spider, and vice versa. Thus, the "standard of the species" here is the "subjective standard" relative to animals, referring to the technical dimension of animal instinct. The second sentence states, "whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species" (Marx, 1974, pp. 68-69), should be understood holistically: it refers to humans' ability, through culture ability, to imitate the technical instincts of all organisms, expressing human technical superiority over animals. Humans can imitate the standard of any species to produce, so this still refers to the animal's "subject standard". Each animal possesses its own instinctive "technique." For example, the swallow is an outstanding "architect" — it can build its nest airtight. It builds from the bottom up, crisscrossing twigs to expand space, uses fallen feathers and soft grass bound with saliva to fill gaps, and even collects wet mud from the riverbank and rolls it into pellets. Animal production is confined to the natural instincts of the species. It is the determination and constraint formed during the long-term evolution of organisms and governed by their natural nature. Thus, the natural instincts of the species shape the "standard of the species". Humans are different. Their superiority lies in their ability to combine and draw on the survival techniques of all species, produce across species boundaries, create things not limited by their own standards, and possess a "universal" ability that surpasses all beings. As Marx said: "Bees produce honeycombs that would put some human builders to shame. What separates the worst builder from the best bee is that before the builder creates a structure in wax, he creates it in his head" (2024, p. 154). It is precisely because of the advanced nature of humans that humans have become the only beings in nature producing the entire objective world without being restricted by species.

(II) The "Inherent Standard" Is the Conscious Purposiveness of the Human Subject

The "inherent standard" is the most controversial concept: some take it as the intrinsic standard of the object, others as the subjective standard. This paper argues that it refers to the latter. The original phrase is: "und überall das inhärente Maß dem Gegenstand anzulegen weiß". "Anzulegen" means "to place" or "to apply", referring to placing the "inhärente Maß (inherent standard) on the "Gegenstand (object)". The full sentence means: and knows how to apply the immanent measure to the object everywhere. It is logically incoherent to speak of applying the object's inherent standard on the object itself; It can only mean that the humans' inherent standard can be placed to the object. Marx states that Man's species-being is free, conscious activity. Human practice is precisely the transformation of the external world according to human needs and purposes, the imposition of human essential powers to objects, making the object a humanized nature, while at the same time objectifying human essential powers—a process of the subjectification of the object and the objectification of the subject. Marx put forward the objectification and estranged labour, thereby moving closer historical materialism. In the subsequent text of the "laws of beauty" assertion, Marx argued: "This production is his active species-life. Through this production, nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of labor is, therefore, the objectification of man's species-life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he sees himself in a world that he has created" (1974, p. 69). Therefore, if humans did not apply their own inherent standard to objects, how could the objective world become what Marx calls "his work" as? How could humans "see himself in a world that he has created"?

III. Estranged Labour as the Fundamental Negation of The "Laws of Beauty"

The question running through the *Manuscripts* is always the question of humans: the question of what humans ought to be and what they actually are, how humans become inhuman, and how they can return to being human. Thus, studying the aesthetic thought in the *Manuscripts* is essentially to reflect the humanistic values behind it. Marx's aesthetic thought is grounded in labour, yet labour in capitalist society has both creative and dehumanizing dimensions. Although it generates "beauty", it also negates it. Estranged Labour means that the subject's labour and its products do not belong to the labourer but stand opposed to him. Marx defines estranged labor in four aspects:

1. The estrangement of the product of labour from the worker. Marx writes: "it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself – his inner world – becomes, the less belongs to him as his own" (1974, p. 64).

2. The estrangement of labour from the worker. Under capitalist private ownership, the worker's labour is involuntary and uncontrolled, becoming a coerced activity.

3. The estrangement of humans from their species-essence. Human species-life is human labour; Estranged labour reduces labour to a mere means of survival, opposing the worker to his own essence.

4. The estrangement of humans from one another. Under capitalist private ownership, human relations are alienated into those of exploitation and being exploited.

Marx holds: "Communism as the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man...This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism" (1974, p. 90). Only in communist society can the individual's essence and creativity be liberated. In a capital-centered society, Man's species-being and sensuous powers are alienated by capital, and workers' labor is no longer free and conscious activity. Only through the transcendence of private property can human essence be returned and humans become whole beings. "beautiful" activity is the result of the objectification of human essential powers, and the advancement of human society toward greater beauty also necessarily relies on full expression of individual subjectivity (Qiu, 1987, pp. 25–26). Since the emergence of the capitalist mode of production, human sensibility and activity have lost their human nature and become thing-oriented instead. This is a necessary outcome of the limitations of bourgeois economics and the bourgeois class. As Lukács said: "the constant expansion and intention of the division of labor, which subjects the process of production to an abstract rational analysis without regard to the human potentialities and abilities of the immediate producer" (1971, p. 6), the rapid development of science and technology has led to finer divisions of labour, confining humans to prescribed roles. The standardized society produces individuals who have lost their individuality, which is detrimental to the all-round development of the individual. Thus, the "one-dimensional man" described by Marcuse has emerged (Ye, 1988, p. 336). Marx notes: "In a communist society there are no painters but only people who engage in painting among other activities" (1998, p. 418). Only the realization of communism can eliminate such defects. Furthermore, the aesthetic value of the object for the laborer becomes the labourer's pursuit. Humans gain aesthetic experience in productive practice and objectify their sensuous understanding of beauty into the object, achieving the unity of subject and object. Their labor is no longer merely for subsistence, nor is it coercive or utilitarian. All human activity belongs to free individuals, and in the liberation of creative capacity for labor beauty, the labor process becomes a process of aesthetic experience and creation.

IV. Practical Implications of the Assertion of the "Laws of Beauty"

The assertion of the "laws of beauty" is not only a classic aesthetic proposition revealing the essence of beauty and the relation between labour and humans but also a practical guideline for solving real-world problems. Against the background of deepening the construction of the human-nature relationship and the development of aesthetic education in contemporary times, it is of great value to expand the theoretical vitality of this thesis and transform it from classical textual interpretation into a guide for action. Based on the core logic of the unity of the "standard of the species" and the "inherent standard" and the objectification of man's essential powers, the "laws of beauty" can provide a profound philosophical foundation and practical direction for promoting the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature and achieving high-quality development of aesthetic education.

(I) Guiding Ecological Practice for the Harmonious Coexistence of Humans and Nature

Marx's assertion of the "laws of beauty" confirms that labour is human essence, emancipating humans from instinctual existence identical to animals and becoming the only way to eliminate antagonisms between humans and nature and between humans themselves. Meanwhile, human production does not merely follow the external forms of things grasped through sensuous activity as animals do; it can also proceed according to the measure of every species and embody subjective, immanent essential powers in the object through labor to satisfy certain material and spiritual needs. Animals are merely objects in nature, whereas humans can actively intervene in nature and adapt to its changes. Human free, conscious activity accords with the "laws of beauty" and forms the basis for the co-evolution of humans and nature. When humans are unfree and unconscious, they can only imitate nature simply and mechanically, unable to engage in active, complex creation—let alone possess aesthetic consciousness or conduct aesthetic activity. Marx holds that humans as social subjects are a

unity of social and natural attributes. In contrast to capitalism's ruthless plunder of nature, humanized production aims to preserve the vitality and aesthetic character of nature, and humanized nature in turn promotes the fulfillment of contemporary society. Human perception of the objective world emerges and develops only in the "humanization of nature". Likewise, objects valuable to human society can only arise in humanized nature. The ecological and natural aesthetics in Marx's law of beauty enable us to re-understand the human-nature relationship in the new era of ecological civilization construction, build an ecological outlook coordinating humans and nature, continuously enrich the value connotation of contemporary laws of human-nature harmony, and thus provide a new theoretical basis for building a socialist ecological power.

(II) Leading the Positive Development of Contemporary Aesthetic Education

Aesthetic education refers to the cultivation of human abilities to recognize, experience, sense, appreciate, and create beauty through education. The "laws of beauty" provides theoretical resources for the positive development of aesthetic education.

Uphold the subjectivity of aesthetic education. The creation of beauty is the process of objectifying human essential powers, which requires free, conscious subjective activity. Aesthetic education must therefore first stimulate students' subjectivity and cultivate them as conscious beings with clear life purposes.

Cultivate students' correct value needs. Aesthetic education must guide students with positive values, directing their purposes in transforming objects when creating beauty.

Foster students' awareness and capacity for free creation. Aesthetic experience has no standard answers. Practice in aesthetic education is free, and expressive forms vary from person to person. Marx states: "all objects become for him the objectification of himself, become objects which confirm and realise his individuality" (1974, p. 95). Different essential powers imposed on the same object yield different final forms. Schools should therefore not restrict students' imagination and creativity or deprive them of opportunities to express their individuality.

Develop students' practical ability. The key to "forming in accordance with the law of beauty" lies in "forming". Objectification means the realization of labour, which must be embodied in the objective thing. Without practice, there is no objectified object and thus no aesthetic education. More importantly, students' practical activities must not violate their autonomy; otherwise, they contradict human essence and deviate from the value goals of aesthetic education.

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