**Marx, Naturalism, Anachronism, and the Disenchantment of Nature**

0.0 Introduction

A key debate that is occurring in analytic philosophy at the moment is whether to accept the popularly-accepted conception of naturalism. Naturalism, in its orthodox and popular version, forces us to accept an austere and disenchanted picture of the universe and the place of humans in it. Normativity, on this conception, is not a part of the part of the universe at all. There are versions of austere naturalism (‘bald’ naturalism, as John McDowell puts it)[[1]](#footnote-0) that admit of *epistemic* normativity—the position that if some epistemic fact is true, then we ought to believe it—but these are really no different in kind.

The real sufficient property of what distinguishes bald naturalism from other kinds is that bald naturalism doesn’t admit of *moral* entities in nature. There is an ongoing movement in analytic philosophy called Liberal Naturalism which seeks to exorcise some form of discourse about moral entities as real objects in nature. The way liberal naturalists see it, there is something fundamentally wrong about picturing the universe as devoid of moral meaning. Orthodox, bald naturalism pictures nature as fully and exclusively explained by the hard sciences—physics, chemistry, and a reductive conception of biology—and supposedly this picture of the universe does not admit of moral entities.

I want to argue in this paper that this bald naturalist picture of the universe has entered political philosophy. This conception of nature creates terrible problems for political philosophy. It threatens to distort the meaning of historical texts through anachronistic interpretation. What I want to do in this paper is show that the contemporary orthodox position of bald naturalism is leading to a terrible distortion of Marxist political philosophy. In the first part of this paper I want to step through the first three chapters of a current book by Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*,[[2]](#footnote-1) and show how Feenberg’s contemporary understanding of naturalism has caused him to pass over a proper analysis of Marx’s early philosophy.

I deem Marx’s dialectics of nature to be an interesting and exciting form of normativistic naturalism, which stands in juxtaposition to the orthodox bald naturalism in today’s analytic philosophy. Marx’s theory of revolution depends on unifying human forms of intelligibility with nature in order to bring about the end of what Marx calls ‘estrangement’--or ‘alienation’.

The second part of this paper I will show how Feenberg’s criticism of Marx’s naturalism depends upon a false premise—that nature *must* be devoid of meaning. In order to do this I will perform a brief comparison of Marx with a modern form of liberal naturalism. This naturalism is John McDowell’s Aristotelian brand of ‘relaxed’ naturalism, which can be found in his major works *Mind and World* and *Two Sorts of Naturalism*. I will show that McDowell’s anticipation at the end of *Mind and World* of a connection between his philosophy and Marx’s is absolutely correct. Marx’s concept of alienation, formulated in the *1844 Manuscripts*, and carried through all of his work through to *Capital*, maps beautifully onto McDowell’s concept of first and second nature. Further, we can go deeper, and show that McDowell’s epistemological philosophical formulations in the beginning of *Mind and World* very closely resemble those of Marx’s in the *1844 Manuscripts*.

Through establishing a connection between McDowell and Marx I will be able to show how we don’t have to accept Feenberg’s bifurcated and antinomial position on the relation of human meaning and the natural world. I argue that McDowell’s philosophy shows that Marx is entitled to unite human meaning and nature in the way he does.

1.0 Andrew Feenberg’s *The Philosophy of Praxis*

Feenberg’s 2014 book *The Philosophy of Praxis* is an analysis and an interpretation of Marx’s concept of naturalism. The book has three different parts. The first part performs an examination of the concept of naturalism in Marx. The second part performs an examination of the same concept as it appears in the work of Gyorgy Lukacs, one of the founders of Western Marxism. The first two parts of the book are fundamentally critical in nature, whereas the third is mostly constructive. Feenberg draws on Herbert Marcuse’s formulation of naturalism in Marxism, and concludes that this attempt at interpreting Marx’s understanding of the concept of naturalism is the most correct.

I will not be dealing with the second and third part of Feenberg’s book in this paper, because much of the discussion Feenberg undertakes in *The Philosophy of Praxis* is determined by his analysis of the classic texts of Marx. If we look carefully at the way Feenberg has discussed Marx and Engels’s early texts of the *1844 Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*, then the rest of the argument of Feenberg’s book can be understood. It is my position that Feenberg has *not* given Marx and Engels a proper treatment in the first part of his book, and because of this the conclusion of his book has missed the mark. This is not to say that Feenberg’s inspiration from Marcuse in the last part of *The Philosophy of Praxis* means *Marcuse* is wrong about Marx’s understanding of naturalism—it is that Feenberg even misinterprets Marcuse in the light of what Feenberg makes about Marx in the first part.

1.1 Naturalised Normativism

The conclusion of *The Philosophy of Praxis* is that human society and nature are ontologically separate, and that the meaning of Marx’s political philosophy is that social revolution that succeeds in establishing communism will not affect the natural universe, it will merely transform the way humans perceive and interact with nature. Communist revolution, properly understood, will be a cultural and social process, Feenberg says, and has no significance for the natural world.

The first three chapters of *The Philosophy of Praxis* establish the groundwork for reaching this conclusion. In the first part of Feenberg’s book, Feenberg discusses how Marx critiques Hegelianism and constructs his own system of Marxism. The discussion takes the reader right through Marx’s earliest engagements with philosophy in his doctoral thesis about Democritean and Epicurean materialism, right to the founding of historical materialism in *The German Ideology.*

Feenberg correctly explains that Marx’s chief manoeuver in escaping Hegelianism was by adopting the position that

philosophical categories are displacements of social ones. For example, Marx is convinced that the problem of alienated labour is the real foundation of Hegel’s philosophy, but that Hegel does not pose it correctly.[[3]](#footnote-2)

This step in moving beyond Hegel is foundational for what Feenberg calls Marx’s ‘meta-critique’ of Hegel. Feenberg identifies three different phases in Marx’s early philosophy which take his ‘meta-critique’ of Hegel from start to finish. The first step Marx performs in constructing his new philosophy of Marxism is that he ‘redefines the *terms* of Hegel’s philosophy, while retaining in part the *relations* Hegel establishes between these terms’.[[4]](#footnote-3) The transformation Marx effects in the first part of his development beyond Hegel is that he argues that

Hegel’s standpoint is that of modern political economy. He conceived labour as the essence, the self-confirming esence of [humanity] … [But] labour as Hegel understands and recognises it is abstract and mental labour. Thus, that which above all constitutes the essence of philosophy, the alienation of [humans] knowing [themselves], or alienated science *thinking* itself, Hegel grasps as its essence.[[5]](#footnote-4)

So Marx does not disagree with Hegel that the essence, the meaning and foundation of human civilisation is labouring, working, *producing* objects. Marx just revises Hegelianism by pointing out that Hegel only considered human labouring to be *mental* labouring, and that the objects that human labour produced were *abstract*, *theoretical* objects. Marx’s position is that it is *concrete*, physical and *empirical* labouring that is the kind of labouring which is the essence of humanity. The labouring that share-croppers, factory workers, truck drivers etc., all perform is the real basis of the meaning of life for humanity.

The second phase of Marx establishing his system by transforming Hegelianism is to take the new *content* Marx has derived for his system and ‘reconstitute the formal structure of [Hegel’s philosophy]’ with the help of this redefined content.[[6]](#footnote-5) In the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, and *On The Jewish Question*, Marx agrees with Hegel that political life, and therefore political philosophy, as up until now been riddled with antinomies. Therefore, the social life of human beings has been alienated, and has been damaging the flourishing and development of human beings.

Marx agrees with Hegel that the reason for the alienation of human civilisation is due to the bifurcation of human society into abstract state citizenship and civil society. Marx more or less follows Hegel’s constitution of the problem of alienation in *The Philosophy of Right* in his *Critique* and *On The Jewish Question*. In their relationship to the modern Westphalian nation-state, humans are pure, moral agents. Humans have clear boundaries for their relationships with others, and there is more or less perfect procedural justice for every person with respect to the formal law of the state. Humans know exactly where they stand as citizens, and they have rights and duties with respect to one-another that are explicit and logical. Citizens can appeal to the state to have their rights enforced. They can use the state to explicitly effect recognition between humans as they exist as perfect moral agents.

But humans live a split-life as social beings. Humans also inhabit the social space of civil society. This is a second ontological realm that overlaps over the ordinary everyday life of human beings. Civil society is the realm of pure economic relations and affective human behaviour. Humans are driven by their desires—base or intellectual—in civil society. Here, humans do not cooperate and respectfully recognise each other, as they do as citizens. Here humans compete for economic resources and attempt to cheat each other out of their lot. Civil society is the life Hobbes imagines all humans to be undertaking before they make a social contract in order to establish the Sovereign State—without the state, human life would be ‘nasty, brutish, and short’. Humans are selfish and mutually hostile to one another in this ontological space.

Hegel and Marx go *beyond* liberalism when discussing this dichotomous human life by arguing that the *antinomy* of social and political society can be transcended—it can be ‘sublated’--*aufgehoben*. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues that the antinomy of citizenship and civil society can be transcended through the *power of reason*, by constructing a special kind of state. The state Hegel envisions will embody the special logical structure of the Absolute Idea, and will therefore transpose the unity inside metaphysical thinking down into *political and social behaviour*. Hegel imagine that the perfect state will bring about the existence of the most perfect development of *Spirit* on earth. The cultural and social connection humans have with respect to one another—*Sittlichkeit—*will reach its furthest stage of maturation.

But Marx points out that the *content* of *sittlichkeit* and spirit on earth for Hegel is purely mental. Insofar as Hegel deems labour to be purely intellectual, then Marx denounces Hegelianism for being abstract. So Marx *reconstitutes* the formal structure of Hegel’s political and social philosophy by changing the term for mental labour with *concrete*, *physical* labour. As Feenberg says, the revision of the formal structure of Hegelianism

consists in transferring the formal attributes of reason to need. In Hegel, reason is self-reflective, it mediates itself in the course of its own self-development in history; again, for Hegel reason is also universal, both in the narrow sense that its ethical postulates apply equally to all, but also in the broader sense that its unconditioned categories apply o the whole of reality. The unity of subject and object is the foundation of this concept of rationality, the essential demand of reason that establishes reason’s *imperium*. Marx transfers these determinations of rationality wholesale onto “man”. And since “man” in Marx’s sense is a being of need, need no longer appears as the irrational content of a formalistic rationality, but is itself chargd with the functions of rationality.

For Marx, the philosophical subject is now a natural being, man. As such, this subject encounters its object, nature, in a natural way, through need. The ontologically primordial sphere is not that of natural science, in which external relations prevail, but the sphere of need in which subject and object are essentially related.[[7]](#footnote-6)

So instead of finding the unity of citizenship and civil society in the power of a mystical reason, Marx locates the beginning of the dissolution of human alienation in humanity *conceived* *naturalistically*. For Marx this is an *ontological* proposition, not a mere physiological one. Hegel would be able to affirm that humans *physiologically* exist in a relation of need—indeed any political philosophy could affirm this. But Marx is saying this need humans have towards nature is a special *metaphysical* relation. He explicitly affirms that ‘need’

is an ontological relation, and not merely a fact of physiology. He writes “Man’s feelings, passions, etc., are not merely anthropological characteristics in the narrower sense, but are true *ontological* affirmations of being (nature)”.[[8]](#footnote-7) What is more, he proposes a theory of the historical evolution of human need that indicates that it is not only hunger that is objectified in food, but the higher needs ot the social human being that find their essential object in the natural world. In this sense the interdependence of man and nature takes on a larger metaphysical significance … . Hence Marx says that “Nature is the inorganic body of man”,[[9]](#footnote-8) to express the idea that man and nature, subject and object, are indissolubly joined.[[10]](#footnote-9)

The consequences of Marx’s revision of the formal structure of Hegelianism is that nature becomes *intelligible* to humans. It is pervaded with normative content with which humans can connect. Feenberg calls this ‘humanised nature’. Marx fully affirms a naturalised normativism in his system here. Humans are a part of a normativistic nature, and they are supposed to unfold their potentialities *within it* as they fight for communism, and perhaps progress into it. Marx says,

It is only when objective reality everywhere for [people] in society the reality of human faculties, human reality, and the reality of his own faculties, that all objects for [them] become the objectification of [themselves]. The objects then confirm and realise [their] individuality. They are [their] own objects, which is to say that [people themselves] become the object.[[11]](#footnote-10)

[People] are not merely a natural being; [they] are a *human* natural being … Consequently, *human* objects are not natural objects as they present themselves directly.[[12]](#footnote-11)

As Feenberg explains, it is the revealing of *meaning* in nature that Marx deems as the essence of humanity—what we could say is the essence of the essence of human civilisation. The essence of human civilisation for Marx is of course concrete labour, but the essence of labouring for both Marx as it is Hegel is the *revealing of meaning*. The fundamental starting point of materialism for Marx then is that nature is permeated with meaning. As a result of this, the “objectification” and alienation that humans experience is not a non-metaphysical, cultural, social relation that sequesters itself within the sphere of human sayings and doings, but is something that affects the *natural* world too. Feenberg writes,

It is in the recognition of meaning that subject and object are united. “Thus *society* is the accomplished union of [humans] with nature, the veritable resurrection of nature, the realised naturalism of [humans] and the realised humanism of nature”.[[13]](#footnote-12)

The third step of Marx’s critique of Hegel is drawing out the social and political and political consequences of his reconstruction of Hegelianism. Marx asks the question, “What is to be done to cause humans to stop being alienated?” The answer is that humans require economic democracy on top of political democracy. Only when workers can again possess and control the means of production can humans, and as a result nature, no longer undergo the process of alienation. This conclusion is fundamentally a practical one—it is not merely intellectual, as in Hegel. Real humans in the real, physical world must really and physically take back control of the means of production from the tiny minority of people who currently control them.

So alienation is not simply just a social category—a ‘construction’—it is a sickness in the fundamental structure of reality, of which both nature and humanity are a part. It is a distortion of the *being* of nature and humanity.

1.2 Feenberg Balks

Feenberg is right when he says that

Marx’s materialism is thus quite different from all previous materialisms since he believes that human consciousness is a moment in nature’s self-development and not an external spectator on the latter.[[14]](#footnote-13)

And he seems to accept the interpretation he has given of the early Marx as the correct one when he quotes Alfred Schmidt in support in support of this thesis:

The hidden nature speculation in Marx [holds that] the different economic foundations of society which have succeeded each other have historically been so many modes of nature’s self-mediation. Sundered into two parts, [humans] and material to be worked on, nature is always present to itself in this division. Nature attains self-consciousness in [humans], and amalgamtes with itself by virtue of their theoretical-practical activity. Human participation in something alien and external to them appears at first to be something equally alien and external to nature; but in fact it proves to be a “natural condition of human existence”, which is itself a part of nature, and it therefore constitutes nature’s self-movement. Only in this way can we speak meaningfully of a “dialectic of nature”.[[15]](#footnote-14)

But despite the careful work Feenberg performs in the first two chapters of the first part of *The Philosophy of Praxis*, be denies the correctness of the system Marx constructed in his early years. He balks at the possibility of this philosophy being correct:

Throughout the *Manuscripts* one senses that there is something wrong with his [system]. In claiming that “[humans] themselves become the object”, to cite but one example among many, he seems to hover between hyperbole and absurdity. Reading such passages, one wonders if [Marx] really means it.[[16]](#footnote-15)

1.2.1 “Labour is just work”

Marx really means to identify the full development of humans into their most perfect form as affecting and also completing “objective reality everywhere”, but Feenberg dismisses this claim as impossible without much argumentation. The first criticism that Feenberg levels against Marx’s naturalised normativism is an old cliché that has been made against Marxism for centuries: ‘not all human activity is reducible to labour’:

… equally questionable is the reduction of the fundamental human relation to nature to be labour. It is by no means self-evident that the transformative impulse is the pirmary one through which being is disclosed. In everyday coping, play, aesthetic appreciation, recognition, and contemplation humans relate to being perhaps just as fundamentally as they do in labour … .[[17]](#footnote-16)

Feenberg takes the Marxian concept of “labour” to mean “work” or “pure economic activity”, and rightly deems this ‘reduction’ of the human essence to be a false idea.[[18]](#footnote-17) But Feenberg has constructed a straw man out of what Marx takes ‘human labour’ to be. For Marx. The category is an incredibly broad one. It unites all the faculties of human behaviour that Feenberg outlines in the above quotation into one category. The materialism of Marxism really meant to express that the essence of humanity, and therefore nature and reality, is how humans produce, reproduce, maintain, and care for themselves and others. Feenberg seems to understand that this kind of philosophy is supposed to help us escape the idealism of Schelling, Hegel, and Fichte, but Feenberg says that the

extension of the concept of an object of consciousness is in truth far greater than that of an object of labour. Thus if a Fichte or a Berkeley were to declare that the “consciousness itself becomes an object”, we might disagree with the philosophical premises that lead to such a conclusion, but at least the notion of consciousness refers potentially to every possible object. The idealistic conclusion need not be rejected out of hand because consciousness self-evidently *requires* an object to be reducible to it.[[19]](#footnote-18)

But this argument relies on the false premise that “labour” is just “work”. Marx never asserted “labour” to mean just work. Marx takes “labour” to also include “play”, “aesthetic experience” and other ‘spiritual’ activities. Labour is the *entire* spectrum of metabolic exchange that humans make between nature and other humans—it is not just ‘work’, and Feenberg seems to imply.

1.2.2 “Nature is by definition devoid of meaning”

The second argument that Feenberg makes against Marx’s normativistic naturalism is a much deeper and pernicious criticism. Feenberg correctly understands the position that Marx is advocating:

For the early Marx, the senses are alienated in the alienation of labour. Only under communism can the senses achieve their highest pitch of perfection. When the revolution transforms the senses by abolishing alienation it attains the core of being itself, as required by the philosophy of praxis. “The suppression of private property is, therefore, the complete emancipation of all the human qualities and senses … The eye has become a human eye when its object has become a human, social object, created by man and destined for him”.[[20]](#footnote-19) Revolution unites subject and object in liberated sensation and thereby reveals the truth of nature.[[21]](#footnote-20)

But Feenberg rejects that nature can possess meaning. Feenberg argues that human sense-perception, with its value-ladenness cannot detect meaning in nature. The immediate paragraph after the above reads:

But can one really speak of “truth” in this context? Conceivably, the historically evolved sense of communist man are different from those of man in class society, but are the sense in any case straightforwardly related to the truth about nature? Is not natural science that discovers this truth, often by the most arduous effort to transcend the given social-sensory horizon toward deeper representations? In the *Manuscripts*, Marx explicitly rejects the epistemology implied by these questions, and with it, the existing natural sciences as well.[[22]](#footnote-21)

Feenberg claims Marx’s position is contradictory, because it supposedly *denies* the reality of nature while simultaneously *affirming* the natural. Marx is supposedly saying nature is something humans *create* when they labour, but at the same time nature is a *precondition* for this labour. It seems Feenberg denies that humans can be *actively* engaged in going through metabolic exchange with nature. Apparently nature is something which cannot be changed by human activity, and will always transcend human understanding.

For Feenberg, it seems the natural world is the same as the bald naturalists. Nature, it seems here, is the realm of efficient causation, and not final-formal causation. Nature is value-free and alien to human ways of knowing and doing. At the same time, Feenberg holds that human social behaviour *is* permeated by meaning. Human cultural objects *are* produced by humans and *are* meaningful.

But this means Feenberg himself is actually holding to a contradictory position—if Feenberg maintains that nature is devoid of value, devoid of meaning, how is it possible for humans to escape alienation? If Marx is wrong about nature being normative, doesn’t that mean that human experience with respect to the natural world with *always be reified, alienated*? Further, how is human society related to nature? Feenberg rejects the Kantian theoretical construct of the ‘thing-in-itself’, and so rejects that human experience must necessarily be bifurcated, and that nature is an ‘ineffable lump’.

So if human society *is* meaningful, and nature is devoid of meaning, how are human society and nature related, and how can humans escape alienation? This is the way Feenberg poses the problem—that one sphere has to have *priority* over the other:

At issue in the ontological question of whether “external” nature has priority over social reality or vice versa is the methodological question of whether theory or practice has epistemological priority. In turn, on this depends whether or not subject and object can be united. In the customary representation of theory, subject and object are not identical, but distinctly separate. The ideal of truth as correspondence of thing and intellect presupposes the separation of the terms it brings into relation. The subject of theory occupies a position beyond all but cognitive connection with its objects, and unites with them not in reality but in knowledge, in a specular relation,i.e., speculatively.

This tenuous subject-object relation of theory is utterly unlike the practical relation the early Marx requires. He insists that subject-object identity be demonstrated by explaining the real process of production of the thought-objects of theory. This involves no merely reflective correspondence of thought and things, but an active creating. But can practice serve this ambitious philosophical purpose?[[23]](#footnote-22)

So for Feenberg the problem of Marxism, communism, the philosophy of praxis—whatever you want to call it—is not about whether or not theory and practice *can be united*, it is *what kinds of theory and practice are required in a bifurcated conception of reality*.

2.0 The McDowell’s *Relaxed Naturalism* and Marx’s *Humanised Naturalism*: A Connection

Feenberg opts to consider nature as essentially reified—that is, it is devoid of meaning. This is the same conception of nature that bald naturalism adopts in analytic philosophy. In this part of the paper I will show why this position is a false one, and why Marx is entitled to adopt the position of of a naturalised normativism—the position that nature permeated with meaning.

I will do this by adopting the arguments John McDowell makes against bald naturalism in his book *Mind and World[[24]](#footnote-23)* and his article *Two Sorts of Naturalism*.[[25]](#footnote-24) McDowell shows that any conception of human behaviour or philosophy of mind that pictures the natural world as devoid of meaning runs into vicious antinomies. McDowell shows how picturing the natural world as devoid of meaning makes it impossible to show how humans are able to be in contact with the world *at all*. It also makes it very difficult to show how humans can communicate with and recognise each other.

Conceiving of the natural world as essentially devoid of meaning creates an *antinomy* between human activity and the world—in other words, human behaviour cannot be full explained. The concept of intentionality is imporant in this connection. Intentionality is the concept for describing how an entity can be *about* something. Humans *have* intentionality, and the kinds of intentionality Feenberg and the bald naturalists consider humans to have is a very thin kind, and is insufficient for explaining the full richness of human activity.

In this part of the paper, we will first look at McDowell’s argument for a naturalised normativism from the perspective of the philosophy of mind. It will show why Feenberg is wrong about his interpretation of the early Marx, and why Marx is entitled to constructing the naturalism he does.

2.1 *Mind and World*: The Epistemological Argument

McDowell explains in the first part of *Mind and World* that conceiving of the natural world as devoid of meaning leads to an antinomy in the philosophy of mind. The antinomy that McDowell identifies in this first part of the book—his ‘epistemological argument’—is that between the Myth of the Given, and the myth of coherentism.

McDowell constructs his argument by taking some concepts from Kant’s philosophy of mind in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. McDowell pictures the human mind to be divided into two faculties—the faculty of receptivity, and the faculty of spontaneity. These faculties are roughly reminiscent of Kant’s own faculties of ‘receptivity’ and the ‘understanding’.

The function of these two faculties of the human mind in McDowell is roughly the same as in Kant: the faculty of receptivity is the faculty of sense perception, and the faculty of spontaneity is the faculty of concepts and reasoning. The faculty of spontaneity takes the information humans perceive about the world, and delivers it up to the faculty of spontaneity in order to process the information and turn the sense data into knowledge. The faculty of spontaneity connects the sense data content from the world together with concepts, and forms propositions and claims with it.

Now bald naturalists take the information that the faculty of receptivity collects from the outside world to be *non-conceptual*, and *devoid of rational meaning*. This conception of how the human mind relates itself to the world produces an oscillation between two sides of an antinomy—the Myth of the Given, and the myth of coherentism.

Advocates of the Myth of the Given hold that the content of the world received by the mind must be non-conceptual, but delivered in such a way to the faculty of spontaneity so as to *constrain* it, and *determine* its ability to form rational propositions about the world. This is because they hold that only the faculty of spontaneity can be the relation between mind and world that deals in the sphere of human meaning. If receptivity also handled information about the world that possessed meaning, that would prevent the faculty from being passive:

What generates the temptation to appeal to the Given is the thought that spontaneity characterises exercises of conceptual understanding in general, so that spontaneity extends all the way out to the conceptual contents that sit closest to the impacts of the world on our sensibility. [Defenders of the Myth argue that we] need to conceive this expansive spontaneity as subject to control from outside our thinking, on pain of representing the operations of spontaneity as a frictionless spinning in a void.[[26]](#footnote-25)

The above passage says defenders of the Myth of the Given pole of the antinomy of bald naturalism argue that human cognition must be *constrained* by something, and if the data the mind received about the world contained meaning, then the faculty of spontaneity would be able to reach out and *change* the content of the world—it would be able to imprint itself on objective reality. The consequence of this is that defenders of the Myth of the Given say we would never be able to collect impartial sense data about the world, because it would always be value-laden.

However the Myth of the Given fails as a positive an account of the relation between mind and world because that would mean that receptivity delivers up excuses, exculpations, when delivering content about the world to the mind. Receptivity would be passive, yes, but there would be no warrants, justifications or reasons attendant with the worldly content that receptivity would allow the mind to receive. The content about the world the mind receives would be fundamentally non-normative. Receptivity could not be used to show *why* the world is the way it is, it would only be able to deliver up *fait accomplis*:

What happens there [at the outer boundary of the space of reasons] is the result of an alien force, the causal impact of the world, operating outside the control of our spontaneity. But it is one thing to be exempt from blame, on the ground that the position we find ourselves in can be traced ultimately to brute force; it is quite another thing to have a justification. In effect, the idea of the Given offers exculpations where we wanted justifications.[[27]](#footnote-26)

The other pole of the antinomy is the myth of coherentism. It too adheres to bald naturalism by agreeing with the Myth of the Given that the sense data that humans collect about the world through the faculty of receptivity is devoid of meaning. But it is in an important way the obverse of the Myth of the Given. It holds that the faculty of spontaneity—what Kant called the Understanding, *Verstand—*does not need to be contrained by the sense data that human sense organs receive about the world.

The myth of coherentism holds that the faculty of spontaneity—what it also agrees is the only part of human cognition that deals with anything meaningful—is perfectly free to assign any rational meaning to any component of sense data that is delivered up to it. Human cognition, or what Feeneberg would deem human cultural entities, are in no way constrained by any of the empirical data humans have to deal with.

When Feenberg wrote in the quotation we provided above that “conceivably, the historically evolved sense of communist man are different from those of man in class society, but are the sense in any case straightforwardly related to the truth about nature?” We can anticipate that he means to hold onto the coherentist pole of the antinomy of bald naturalism of the mind. He means to say that human meanings float free of any connection humans have with the natural world, and in a very strong sense human knowledge is not *about* the natural world at all.

Coherentism too fails as an account about how human activity can be about the world. Human meaning is sequestered away from the world's content, nothing constrains the operations of the faculty of spontaneity. The operations of spontaneity are free to impute any kind of meaning or justification to the purely causal worldly content that the mind receives. McDowell deems this “frictionless spinning in a void”. The world can't constrain judgement, so ultimately the world has no significance for the accountability that an agent has for the judgements it makes about the world.

McDowell shows that Feenberg’s bifurcated conception of the Marxian concepts of theory and practice are untenable as an interpretation of the Marxist ‘philosophy of praxis’. Feenberg sets up the antinomy between the Myth of the Given and the myth of coherentism by casting the problem of Marxist revolution as about the *priority* of types of theory and practice over each other. This is in effect saying, we have to choose between a theory of the Myth of the Given or the myth of coherentism about Marxism.

A Myth of the Given type of Marxism would be a kind of historical determinist theory of revolution. It would be strictly economistic, and would not assign any conceptual importance to questions of agency of the revolutionary proletariat. History would be like a kind of clockwork at either proceeds forwards or is rewound in periods of reaction.

A coherentist Marxism would be like the uncharitable interpretations of the early philosophy of Gyorgy Lukacs that Althusserians like the early Poulantzas make—a Marxist form of Fichteanism. According to this theory, everything about reaching communism is about the forms of consciousness that the proletariat assumes through revolutionary struggle. This is a thoroughly anti-naturalist philosophy—it argues that nature is devoid of any significance for the struggle for communism, and that when humans interface with nature, there is a one-way, non-normative, efficient causal metabolic exchange. Communism will liberate *society alone*, not nature, and nature has, and always will exist as a kind of ineffable lump for communism.

2.2 Why Marx is Entitled to His Humanised Naturalism

Neither of these poles of the antinomy of bald naturalism about human cognition are acceptable. The whole of Feenberg’s book is determined by his acceptance of bald naturalism. The argument of his book oscillates from one side of the antinomy to the other, and eventually comes to rest in the myth of coherentism with his interpretation of Marcuse.

But McDowell shows us how to escape from the antinomy of the myth of coherentism and the Myth of the Given. McDowell's move in all of this is to preserve the best parts of both sides of the antinomy, while transcending the consequences of both. This is in fact the same thing that Marx does in the *1844 Manuscripts*. McDowell's position is that we should:

First, accept part of the story that coherentism tells. We should hold that the faculty of spontaneity is involved in actively producing meaning, and assigning that meaning to the sense data human cognition receives about the world. This allows us to escape the Myth of the Given. Now no part of experience is a *fait accompli* with respect to rational evaluation*.* No part of experience is now immune from evaluation and critical reflection. It is now considered fully normative, and we can subject it to reasoned assessment.

Second, identify both the mind and the world as fully permeated by meaning.Meaning and values fully extend down to receptivity, which means that the content of the world that the mind passively receives is normative. This second element of McDowell's epistemological argument argues that we should accept part of the story of the Myth of the Given. This is that human cognition can be *constrained* by the world, and that the content of the world delivers up some sense data which the faculy of spontaneity cannot actively change. This allows us to escape the undesirable consequences of coherentism. There is a passive component to perceptual experience. In receptivity, we can't help but have content about the world impressed upon our sensory equipment. We are constrained by the world with respect to its content.

This is exactly the same philosophy that Marx formulates in the *1844 Manuscripts*, only he stipulates that it is the act of human labouring that forges the connection between the human mind and the world. Human labour takes up the content of the natural world through human sense organs, and connects with its conceptual content, and sometimes passively interprets it, and sometimes actively changes it. If humans were reified and alienated, so too would be their understanding of nature. If nature was changed to become alienated, so too would be its normative significance for human activity.

This is what Marx means when he writes:

It is in the recognition of meaning that subject and object are united. “Thus *society* is the accomplished union of [humans] with nature, the veritable resurrection of nature, the realised naturalism of [humans] and the realised humanism of nature”.[[28]](#footnote-27)

Marx agrees with McDowell when McDowell says that the same kind of normativity and meaningfulness of the faculty of spontaneity must extend down into the faculty of receptivity, and therefore the natural world. Marx’s materialism is therefore unlike what we know materialism to be today. It is a normativistic materialism—it deems the matter of the natural world to be permeated with meaning.

1. I will adopt John McDowell’s terminology in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukacs, and the Frankfurt School* (Verso, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Feenberg, above n 2, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Ibid 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Marx, above n 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Feenberg, above n 2, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Marx, above n 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Feenberg, above n 2, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Marx, above n 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Ibid; Feenberg, above n 2, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Feenberg, above n 2, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (New Left Books, 1971) 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Feenberg, above n 2, 53–54. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Ibid 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. Marx, above n 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. Feenberg, above n 2, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. Ibid 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
24. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. John McDowell, ‘Two Sorts of Naturalism’ in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Harvard University Press, 1998) 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
26. Ibid 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
27. Ibid 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
28. Ibid; Feenberg, above n 2, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)