On the Internal Logic of Ecological Justice—Based on the Analytical Perspective of Marx’s Historical Materialism

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Ecological justice is a good state of symbiosis and sharing between man and nature on the basis of labor. Based on historical materialism, Marx’s concept of ecological justice takes labor as the intermediary of the relationship between man and nature, and explores the internal logic of the trinity of man, nature and labor from the historical generation. “Realistic man” is the subject of labor and has the nature of freedom. Nature is the object of labor of “realistic people” and has objective nature. As the premise of human history, labor is the practical basis of human and natural justice order. Construct a kind of ecological justice based on labor and promote the harmonious coexistence between man and nature in practice.

Keywords: ecological justice, labor, reality person, nature

Introduction

With the outbreak of global environmental crisis, the issue of justice between man and nature has become the focus of people’s attention. Ecological justice is the value concept that human beings hold when they get along with nature. Human beings should treat nature with a fair attitude, which is the moral responsibility that human beings should bear to nature. The academic circles have studied the theory of ecological justice from different angles, mainly forming two research directions of anthropocentrism and naturalism. Anthropocentrism discusses the intrinsic basis of human protection of nature from the perspective of human interests, and nature-centrism answers why human beings protect nature from the perspective of the overall interests of nature. The theory of ecological justice formed on the basis of these two research approaches deepens human’s ethical understanding of the possibility of ecological justice. However, only from the perspective of values, we cannot really understand the internal logic of how ecological justice can be realized, which leads to the dilemma of abstraction. Ecological justice is a good state of symbiosis and sharing between man and nature on the basis of labor. Human beings carry out ecological practices on the basis of respecting the laws of nature to realize the internal unity of the ecological rights and interests enjoyed by human beings and the ecological responsibilities undertaken by them. Based on Marx’s historical materialism, this paper tries to make a preliminary discussion on the internal structure and basic rules of ecological justice, so as to lay a foundation for realizing the harmonious coexistence between man and nature.
Subject Freedom: The Attribute of “Realistic Man”

At the philosophical level, subject freedom is the choice of action as an active individual and the
dialectical unity between active subject and passive object. From Plato to Descartes, Kant and Hegel have
carried out in-depth studies on the concept of freedom, and their theories have deepened the knowledge and
understanding of human beings to freedom. In the research field of ecological justice, the “subject” involved in
subject freedom is the active, perceptual, and self-conscious person, who realizes the essential stipulation of
“realistic man” through the conscious transformation of nature in labor.

“Realistic Man”: The Unity of Subjectivity and Object

Marx took “realistic man” as the active subject, which is not only the dialectical unity of realistic subject
and object, but also the principle of subjectivity beyond the spiritual level. In the perspective of labor, the
dynamic relationship between the subject and the whole world is regarded as the subjective expression of
realistic man. In labor, in the dynamic relationship between man and nature, man and the whole material world,
realistic man obtains creativity, freedom, and activeness, thus realizing the subject freedom of “realistic man”. In Marx’s words, realistic people are those who engage in activities, engage in material production, and therefore operate under certain material limits, preconditions, and conditions that are not subject to their arbitrary control (Marx, 2009a, p. 524). In real labor, people can confirm the free nature of the subject by realizing their own creative activities and realize the freedom of movement in real activities.

In the ontology of Marxist philosophy, the existence of the subject (realistic man) is relative, and the
realistic man highlights the free and active nature of the subject in the object activities, and realizes the unity of
subjectivity and object in the object labor. In ontology philosophy, the main body existence must be set object
(the object); there is no existing object, is not to prove the existence of, and there is, therefore, to know a certain
being which should be placed in the objects to the understanding; the two are together; this set exists because,
this “set” is “the essence of the objective forces’ subjectivity, therefore, the activities of the nature of these
‘strength must be’ objectivity activity” (Marx, 2009a, p. 209). In the objective activity, the change between
subject and object is the transformation of subject essence. While confirming the subject essence power, the
object realizes the transformation to subject essence in the passive transformation. Labor has the characteristics
of objectivity; the work is subject to the nature of the target to the object in the process of the
subject-labor-object in the existence of the philosophy which is the dialectical unification; in the process, main
body and object creation, to some extent, realize the nature of each other mutual transformation, which is the
main body in the objectification of labor and object spatial organic unification.

Therefore, subject freedom is embodied in the realization of the unity of subjectivity and object in object
labor. In labor, the subject of labor interacts with the object of labor, “objectification of subject (objectification
of man’s essential power)” (Shigeru, 1997, p. 107). It is to make the object complete transformation through
labor to carry the essence of the subject, make the subject to the object transformation in labor and complete the
objectification of the subject. Marx pointed out, “In production, man is objectified; in consumption, things are
subject” (Marx, 1979, p. 26). In the process of human labor, human beings consciously transform nature to
obtain material, information and energy needed by human beings, so that the essence of human beings is
objectified into things and the subject is objectified. Labor is the basis for the confirmation of human
subjectivity, with people with initiative as the subject of labor, and nature as the object of labor. The primary
premise of human labor is to obtain resources from nature to satisfy human’s own survival and development. At the same time, it realizes the change of itself and nature in human labor activities. “Production is not only the subject of production, but also the subject of production” (Marx, 2009b, p. 16). In the material production practice, the subject through labor to the object of transformation, promote the subject and object of subjectivity, to achieve the unity of subjectivity and object.

The Provisions of Ecological Justice on “Realistic People”

Marx’s previous philosophers defined the subject (realistic person) as “abstract spiritual subject” or “abstract natural person”. Marx criticized it with historical materialism as a weapon and defined realistic person as a material entity with consciousness and labor ability. Marx’s concept of ecological justice takes labor as the starting point and obeys the norms of justice in the active transformation of human beings to nature, so as to realize the harmonious coexistence between human beings and nature. In the materialistic historical perspective, as the subject of labor, realistic people have natural attributes, social attributes, and spiritual attributes.

First of all, in Marx’s concept of ecological justice, realistic people evolve from nature, are part of nature, and have natural attributes. The existence of nature is a prerequisite for human existence. Human’s free and conscious labor is carried out within the scope permitted by nature. Human’s natural attribute determines that human has dependence on nature. Therefore, for the survival and reproduction of human beings, human beings are endowed with the ecological responsibility of protecting nature. Only by taking nature as the basis of human existence and following the laws of nature as the basis of human labor can the material transformation between human and nature be better promoted and the harmonious coexistence between human and nature be realized. Therefore, in the perspective of Marx’s concept of ecological justice, human beings bear the overall responsibility of protecting human existence conditions (nature).

Secondly, in Marx’s concept of ecological justice, the labor of “realistic man” is the basis of the generation of social relations and has social attributes. For Marx, man is “the sum total of all social relations” (Marx, 2012, p. 139). Man’s material practice is the premise of the existence of all social relations. Man forms the relationship between man and nature and man and man in labor. The emergence of human society is the process of gradual formation of people in labor. People are separated from nature and form interpersonal relations on the basis of labor, which is the most basic social relationship. The social attribute of man is produced in labor and gradually perfected in the communication between man and nature. Nature is the basis for the generation of human social attributes. Without the existence of nature, human beings themselves cannot exist, let alone the existence of society. Nature not only meets the needs of human existence, but also is the condition of social existence. Ecological justice and social justice influence each other, because ecological justice is not only the justice relationship between man and nature, but also closely related to the social justice between man and man. Fundamentally speaking, although social justice plays a decisive role in ecological justice, ecological justice is the foundation of social justice and cannot be shaken.

Finally, Marx’s concept of ecological justice highlights people’s self-consciousness and thinks that people are “realistic people” with spiritual attributes, which highlight people’s spiritual attributes in their objective activities. While criticizing Hegel’s consciousness of “abstract subject of spirit”, Marx placed the essence of human beings in realistic labor practice and developed human spirit in labor. “Consciousness can only be
realized at any time, and people’s existence is their real life process” (Marx, 2012, p. 152). In the conscious labor of nature, human spiritual consciousness develops, human spirit is produced in the labor, human spiritual realm is also gradually enhanced in the change of objective environment, and the sublimation of human spiritual realm will deepen people’s understanding of the value of nature. Spiritual attribute will give people to understand the environmental value, aesthetic value, and life value of nature, and treat nature with empathy, so as to bear the responsibility of protecting nature.

**Objectivity of Object: Transcendence of “Two Narrow Axiologies”**

The existence of subject and object has always been discussed in philosophy, and the objectivity is the essence of how subject understands the existence of object. In Marx’s labor as the starting point of ecological justice, as the main body of labor, nature as the object of labor, labor relations in the whole, the object objectivity problem is the labor of people of the scale of the natural transformation of labor object; the object of studying the objectivity problem is understanding the intrinsic relationship between human and nature, which is the theoretical basis for the realization of the ecological justice.

**Sublation of “Intrinsic Value Theory” and “Mechanical Value Theory”**

Marx’s historical materialism stands on the basis of human labor and recognizes the relationship between human and nature from labor. Human as the subject produces to nature through labor, and this production process is the process of material transformation between human and nature. In this process, human exists as the subject of labor and nature exists as the object of labor. Based on Marx’s concept of ecological justice, this paper analyzes the value of nature, which is an objective existence object, and criticizes the “intrinsic value theory” and “mechanical value theory” of nature.

**Critique and sublation of “intrinsic axiology” of natural abstraction.** For activists in the center of the natural view, natural existence is a kind not to man’s existence and the existence of objective existence and has its existence value of systemic and spontaneity, people just an individual exists in natural ecosystems, natural existence is the precondition of individual existence, and nature is not to other beings to make reference to the intrinsic value of life. Therefore, value is a unique characteristic of nature, and the way to reflect value is not to judge the value of the subject, but to measure the value of promoting the integrity of the whole natural ecosystem. In the systematic existence of nature, man is a member of the natural wilderness, and his initiative is realized under the permission of natural rules. In Rolston’s opinion, nature came into being before human beings, and the wilderness value of nature as a whole is irreplaceable. In the natural biosphere, human beings are like all other creatures, and they are all members of the natural ecosystem. Nature existed before man, and man is a species produced in the long evolution of nature. Therefore, the intrinsic value of nature itself does not exist with man’s existence. Intrinsic value is the inherent nature, and as the main value to judge the value of man is only given by nature, which emphasizes the natural status prior to the value of a man, to the initiative of the people under natural, equating consciously, who have labor ability of the person to exist in the instinct of life existence, excessive emphasis on natural centered theory of value, which will be the subject status in the lost of people, in the abstract value horizon.

Naturalism advocates that the intrinsic value of nature falls into an abstract value horizon. First of all, to break away from the human level and overemphasize the intrinsic value of nature will eliminate the role of
labor in historical development and deny that the material transformation between human and nature through human labor is the premise and foundation of social development. Cut off the overall connection between human history and natural history, reduce human and human history to a kind of contingency, and deny the key role of human labor to it, so that people’s thinking re-establishes the value of idealism philosophy, and returns to Hegel’s “absolute spirit”. Second, it blindly emphasizes the intrinsic value of nature, the initiative of weakening the reality person; people lost the subject of a value judgment function, digestion of “class”, considered and objective to create labor and animal instinct activities (only) in order to survive, and affect a person’s own creativity and the development of society.

Criticism and sublation of “mechanical axiology” of nature. Anthropocentrism is deeply influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution. It believes that humans, like natural beings, can adapt quickly to harsh environmental changes to survive, and that species that do not adapt will be eliminated. Human beings are the most intelligent species in evolution. Through further understanding of nature, people find that each part of the natural existence has its own function and can meet the requirements of human survival and development. There are even those who believe that the knowledge of nature as a whole adds up to the knowledge of nature as a whole, which leads people to fall into mechanistic values. Anthropocentrism, influenced by the philosophical value of “subject and object dichotomy”, regards nature as the object existence conquered and controlled by human beings, and holds that nature has instrumental value only. “The existence outside human beings, no matter whether they have life or not, have instrumental value only, such as animals, plants and wilderness” (Lei, 2000, p. 64). People only see the instrumental value of nature to human existence and ignore the integrity of natural existence. Under the influence of this kind of thinking, human labor will produce alienation, which will lead to the rupture of organic circulation between the whole and part of nature.

Anthropocentrism insists on “mechanical axiology”, which makes people fall into an absolute rational subjectivism. First of all, it affirms the subjective status of rational man, exaggerates human reason, measures the value of natural existence by human reason, defines the value of natural existence by human need, and “unhesitatingly pursues a value scale opposite to the relationship between man and nature, a kind of present, one-way and linear teleology” (Cai & Tang, 2018, p. 20). Regard human survival as the highest value criterion, ignore the integral value of natural existence, and fall into extreme subjectivism. Second, improve people’s subjective status, evaluation of the value of nature as measured by a mechanical, instrumental, natural value of the overall loss of sexual function, nature as a whole which will also be accompanied by the destruction of people and lead to system function degradation, denial of the existence of natural ecological integrity of value, which is no organic life relationship between nature and people, so that the existence of main body of the people lost foundation (natural).

Objective Definition of the Object of Ecological Justice

In the ecological justice view of Marxist materialism, man and nature are an interdependent whole of life, and nature is the foundation of man’s existence. In the category of labor from the philosophical perspective, nature, as the object of labor, is an objective existence. The objective definition of Marx’s ecological justice is neither anthropocentrism nor nature-centrism, but a kind of respecting the existence of nature as a whole, highlighting the ecology of nature, and taking nature’s own ecological law as the value scale of human to measure the objectivity of natural objects.
First of all, the object objectivity of Marx’s ecological justice concept is to respect the integrity of nature, which is the sureness of anthropocentrism’s “mechanical axiology” and the rejection of the research method of dividing nature into isolated individuals. Respecting the integrity of nature is to follow the dialectical values of the whole and part. “The individual and the whole are always interacting, the whole shapes the individual, and the individual also acts on the whole” (Lu, 2012, p. 51). Nature cannot be simplified into a simple sum of isolated individuals. In the development and utilization of nature, we should attach importance to the function of natural system, understand the organic connection between natural objects, and realize the overall protection of nature.

Secondly, the objective regulation of the object of Marx’s ecological justice concept is to follow the objective law of natural existence, which is dialectical law, rather than the intuitive law of mechanical view of nature, which is simply based on perceptual understanding of nature. All living things in the world are material, dynamic, and objective. Nature itself has objective laws that are independent of human will. Therefore, human labor to nature is restricted by the objective laws of nature, which is manifested in the fact that human beings must act within the range of natural bearing. As a whole, nature has its own self-organization, which is manifested in the movement and change of nature itself. Engels wrote, “Nature does not exist, but produces and vanishes” (Marx, 2009c, p. 415). Nature and its existence are in change, cycle, from individual existence to decomposed non-existence, and are the objective laws of nature. Under the influence of the objective rules of nature, nature as a whole of life, human beings and natural beings are the individual existence of their life links. Therefore, only by following the objective laws of nature, human labor can maintain the integrity of the natural ecosystem and realize the harmonious coexistence between human and nature.

Social Practicality: The Rejection of Abstract Ethical Conventions

Labor is the foundation of the generation of all social relations. Through the essence of social practice, the law of the generation of history is explored, and the unification of dynamic human history and natural history is adopted to realize the sublation and discarding of subjective idealism by ecological ethics, to move toward Marx’s ecological justice based on labor, and to lay a realistic foundation for the harmonious coexistence between human and nature.

Labor Practice: The Realistic Basis of Ecological Justice

Society is not a concrete material entity, but a productive relationship existing between people. Marx pointed out, “What is society, whatever its form? Is the product of human interaction” (Marx, 2009d, p. 42). Society exists neither as a conceptual form nor as a specific material entity but as a relation of production formed in human labor. “Society is not a substantial independent existence, but a kind of human existence, human relational existence, its core is built on the basis of material production labor social relations, namely production relations” (Mao, 2020, p. 38). Human labor is the basis for the formation of society and the maintenance of social relations. Human history is the history of human labor changing the material world.

In reality, human labor is the basis of social generation, which lies in the fact that society connects human production and consumption as a relation of production, and the relation of production is generated on the basis of human labor. Life is the first need of human labor, because “the first starting point of all human existence, which is also the first premise of all history... is that people must be able to live in order to ‘create history’”
(Marx, 2012, p. 139). The premise of human labor is to obtain the means of production needed to maintain life. As the starting point of human survival, labor proves that the actual human labor is causally related to the generation of social history. Human beings satisfy their own needs through natural labor. Labor is just the starting point, while nature, as the inorganic body of human beings, is the object of labor. Only by combining human labor with nature can human beings’ survival needs be realized and the process of natural material transformation be satisfied. People labor form of human society and human history, but the law of the people’s labor and social history is not just define human labor is the only source of social history; people’s labor and social laws exist mutual restriction relation at the same time; the social relationship is formed in the people’s labor, but also to the person’s labor played a role. From the perspective of the generation of social history, the transformation of nature and the world by realistic human labor is the objective basis and power of the formation of history. At the same time, the formation of social relations of production is accompanied by the existence of social laws, which have a certain restriction effect on human labor. This is because the rise of social relations to the height of law and the standardization of human behavior is caused by the inevitability of historical development. From the point of view of the specific stage of the society, both individual people and the organizational relations existing in groups are part of the existence of the society, and human labor is the premise of the existence of all social relations.

Harmony Between Man and Nature: The Unity of History and Nature

Marx’s concept of ecological justice is essentially different from the abstract ethical concept centered on “man” and “nature”, and the dialectical relationship between man and nature in the perspective of Marx’s historical materialism is analyzed based on realistic labor. In Marx’s view of history, “realistic individuals conduct activities and create history under the premise of nature, and the purpose of historical subjects is organically combined with the laws of nature” (Xie, 2008, p. 29). Natural history and human history are formed in the dialectical interweaving, “natural history is the generation process of nature to man, historical nature is the creation process of humanized nature, and the two are unified in the history of human development” (Zhang, 2014, p. 85). Explore the material production practice of real people from the historical generation, so as to trace the essence of man through historical phenomena, and realize the unity of nature and history from the interaction between the essence of man and nature.

Marxism’s criticism of “man” and “nature” as the center is a criticism of abstract values and a reconfirmation of the world outlook. It understands the laws of world generation from a dialectical perspective and guides human beings to create history in the objective world. In human labor, history and nature exist in dialectical unity. The separation of history and nature by Hegel’s objective idealism or Feuerbach’s old materialism is a distortion of the relationship between man and nature.

Through his criticism of Hegel, Marx emphasized that the premise of history is the labor practice between man and nature, and realistic man and nature are the foundation of Marx’s view of history. Hegel believed that the existence of human beings and the generation of human history were all attributed to spirit, while nature was just the existence state of ideas. Nature itself was defective, because human beings had the ability to think, so human beings were the subjects carrying absolute spirit. Marx criticizes Hegel’s idealist philosophy of “spirit creates the world” and criticizes Hegel’s concept with Feuerbach’s intuitive materialism, emphasizing the objectivity of material existence, realistic man and the existence of real nature. Marx said, “Man is a
physical, natural, living, realistic, sensuous, objective being, which is to say that man has realistic, sensuous objects as the objects of his own essence, that is, the expression of his life” (Marx, 2012a, p. 210). And Hegel thinks that people and nature are objective existence; Marx thinks nature is not only an objective existence, and it is a premise condition for the existence of the reality person; the first premise of history is that people are able to survive, and is the required material obtained from the natural means of production; the premise of making history must be able to life and meet the demand of its own food and drink, and so on. Marx criticizes Hegel’s absolute spirit with Feuerbach’s materialist view of nature and lays a historical foundation for the realistic existence of human beings and nature in Marx’s materialist view of history. However, Feuerbach’s materialism understands nature in an intuitive and absolute way, without dialectically uniting the “realistic man”, object labor and nature. Marx believed that only by placing nature in the vision of history and re-understanding nature in historical work can the internal logic of dialectical unity between nature and history be clarified. Nature is not eternal nature, but constantly created, generated, and changed in history. Only by understanding the relationship between man and nature from the history of labor can we lay a foundation for the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, prove the mutual generation of man and nature in labor, and realize the justice of man to nature.

Ecological justice is to realize the harmonious coexistence between man and nature through the transformation of natural initiative on the basis of labor. Based on the perspective of labor of historical materialism, Marx’s concept of ecological justice explores the dialectical unity of the relationship between human beings and nature in the process of historical generation. Taking “realistic man” as the subject of historical generation, the author emphasizes that the freedom of “realistic man” is the unity of subjectivity and object, and realizes the responsibility of man to care for nature in this unity. As the object of labor of “realistic man”, nature emphasizes the objective nature of its existence, and frees nature from the cognition of “instrumental” and “mechanical” by the objective definition of natural existence. Analyze the internal logic of ecological justice from the perspective of Marx’s labor, return the relationship between man and nature to the real labor practice from the perspective of ethics, and achieve the abandonment of abstract ethical regulations. It holds that man is a “realistic man” with natural, social, and spiritual attributes. Only by following the objective laws of nature and realizing the ecological transformation of labor can it lay a realistic foundation for the realization of ecological justice.

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