

# *Exploring the Possibility of the Restoration of Human Species' Essence from the Perspective of Aesthetics*

*Lu Tingting*

*Communication University of China, Beijing City, 100000, China*

**Abstract:** Marx put forward the issue of alienated labor in 1844, which has become a relatively common and widespread phenomenon in modern society. Discussions and analyses on this issue have never ceased, indicating that it remains a pressing social problem to be solved today. Marx once stated that philosophy is not about explaining the world, but about changing it. In his own works, he also rarely delved into abstract theories and concepts; instead, he attached importance to starting from social reality and persisted in integrating theory with practice.

In this paper, the author attempts to approach from the perspective of aesthetics, and by combining Marx's theory of labor alienation, analyze how humans gradually move towards their opposite and become alienated into non-humans under the system of private ownership. Inspired by Marx's proposition that "beauty is the objectification of human essential powers", this paper also tries to analyze how to restore the species essence of humans through aesthetic activities and explore the possibility of realizing the return of human nature along this path.

**Keywords:** Alienation; Alienated Labor; The Species Essence of Humans; The Return of Human Nature

## **0. Preface**

Marx's theory of alienated labor is a core viewpoint put forward in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 (hereafter referred to as the Manuscripts). Starting from the issue of human alienation, Marx explored the path and possibility of the return of human nature. The problem of alienated labor that Marx proposed more than a hundred years ago has become a relatively common and universal phenomenon in modern society, and discussions and analyses on this issue have never ceased, which shows that it is still an urgent social problem to be solved today. Marx once said that philosophy is not to explain the world but to change it. In his own works, he also rarely discussed relatively abstract theories and concepts; instead, he attached importance to starting from social reality and persisted in combining theory with practice.

Marx believed that "beauty is the objectification of human essential powers", and a serious consequence of alienated labor is that humans exist in an inhuman form. The loss of human essential powers means the disappearance of beauty. Aesthetics, as a discipline that mainly analyzes the field of human sensibility, can also be translated as "the science of sensibility" (from the original Greek "Aesthetica"). My supervisor, Professor Zhou Yueliang, holds the view that beauty itself has no substance; instead, it takes "sensation" as its essence. It can be said that beauty arises from sensation, and "sensation" includes issues such as sense perception, sensibility, and emotion. Without sensation, there is no beauty, no essential powers, and no humanity. Therefore, alienated labor leads to human self-alienation, that is, the alienation of human sensation. The author will attempt to combine Marx's theory of alienated labor to analyze how human sensation gradually moves towards its opposite and is alienated into inhuman sensation under the private economic system, as well as how aesthetic activities restore human perception and thereby restore human essential powers.

## **1. Human Essential Power is a Form of Vitality**

Marx argued that human essential power is primarily manifested in free and conscious activity.

While Marx did not explicitly elaborate on what “human essential power” is in the Manuscripts, the author understands it as a form of “vitality”. As beings endowed with dynamic creativity, vitality serves as the source of power that drives humans to engage in free and conscious activity. “Animals produce only under the compulsion of immediate physical needs, while humans produce even beyond such physical needs—and only when they are free from these immediate physical needs do they truly produce.”<sup>[1]</sup> Marx held that human productive activity must be creative activity; only creative activity qualifies as “human activity”. What distinguishes humans from animals lies precisely in this innate, creative vital energy. It is this capacity that enables humans to reshape nature according to their needs and create a human-specific objective world. We refer to the series of creative activities embodying the characteristics of the human species as “human activity”—human life activity is the realization of the objectification of human essential power.

“Life is a force that surges forward from the past to the future”<sup>[2]</sup>, and vitality is the driving force behind life’s continuous development. Objectification is the inevitable result of the release of such human vitality. “The transformation of inorganic nature is the self-confirmation of humans as conscious species-being.”<sup>[3]</sup> All the essential attributes of the human species are manifested in the practical activities through which this vitality is objectified. Marx believed that human essence encompasses both spiritual power and physical power: spiritual power, which may also be called “power of the mind”, includes cognition, emotion, and will; physical power refers to the practical action of the human body. All human activities are conscious—humans can take their own life activities as the object of their consciousness. In practical activities, humans infuse their essential power into natural objects; by transforming individual natural things or reshaping nature as a whole, they can intuit their species-specific essential power, achieve an understanding of the attributes of the human species, and thus realize self-cognition.

Human essential power exists as an abstract concept—it is an invisible and intangible force. The objectified activities of humans serve to manifest this inherent life impulse. Through continuous practical activities, human self-cognition accumulates, evolves, becomes refined, and achieves independence (independent of instinct or the unconscious). It is through practice that humans gradually develop clear consciousness and proactively project their vitality onto objects during their activities.

## 2. Alienation Manifested as an Inversion of Essence

The realization of human essential power is the purpose of human life—that is, the ultimate end of human vitality. In the Manuscripts, Marx argued that “alienated labor refers to a process in which, in the course of their own development, the subject generates an opposite from their own activities; this opposite then becomes an external, alien force that turns back to oppose the subject itself. Specifically, it manifests as the alienation of the laborer from labor itself.”<sup>[4]</sup> Under such alienated labor, humans feel controlled by an alien force. As Büchner described, “We are mere puppets manipulated by unknown forces—there is not a trace of ourselves left!” This forced labor makes humans feel contradictory and divided within themselves; they negate their own existence in labor. A severe consequence of this is the contradiction between human existence and human essence. Eventually, the activities originally meant to manifest human essential power are replaced by this alienated labor: humans reduce their life activities to nothing more than a means of sustaining their own existence, and turn the means of physical survival into the purpose and essence of human life.

This contradiction and inversion are primarily manifested in the following: “The human being (the laborer) feels himself to be free only when he is engaged in his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and adornment—while in his human functions he feels himself to be nothing more than an animal. What is animal becomes human, and what is human becomes animal.”<sup>[5]</sup> Of course, activities like eating, drinking, and procreation are also

human functions; yet when they are treated as the ultimate purpose of human life, they take on an animalistic nature.

The inversion of purpose and means leads to the loss of humanity's species-essence—namely, the stagnation and degradation of vitality. Human practical activities are inherently activities that affirm one's own essence, through which humans freely exert their physical and spiritual powers. The objectification of this human essence manifests as spiritual fulfillment, and the release and manifestation of life impulse. When this need of humans is not met—when human essential power is suppressed, hindered, and left with no outlet—an alien force emerges to confront and negate humans themselves.

The contradiction between human existence and human essence, determined by the private ownership mode of production, makes humans experience their own existence as “inhuman existence.” “The more the laborer expends himself in his work, the more powerful becomes the world of objects which he creates in opposition to himself, the poorer he himself becomes in his inner world, and the less he belongs to himself.”<sup>[6]</sup> This is because humans infuse their vitality and creativity into objects and external things, yet these objects have become detached from their creators and turned into possessions that belong exclusively to others. Therefore, the more humans engage in such activities and the more labor they invest, the emptier they become spiritually. Since this kind of labor is passive, forced, and beyond one's control, the more passive human activities are, the weaker human creativity grows.

### 3. The Alienation of Human Senses into Inhuman Ones

The alienation of labor caused by private ownership refers to the commodification of labor. As the subject of labor, humans find that the commodification of labor equals the commodification of humans themselves—and commodification is in turn reification. In commodities, their own creations, humans can no longer infuse their essential power. In other words, during production activities, humans perceive this labor as something external to themselves: forced, self-tormenting, and self-sacrificing labor. In the process of their own production, humans do not belong to themselves but to others.

Practical activity is inherently an activity through which humans affirm their own existence. For humans, however, the most direct experience of alienated labor lies in the sense of oppression and unfreedom felt during labor. This immediate experience of suffering fundamentally makes humans loathe production activities. In alienated labor, humans do not affirm themselves but negate their own existence; such labor damages their physical bodies and devastates their spirits. It is even impossible for humans to proactively and freely exert their spiritual and physical powers.

Human senses are reduced to a sense of possession. Private property narrows humans down to a one-dimensional existence: “an object only becomes ours when we possess it, or directly enjoy it, eat it, drink it, wear it, dwell in it, etc.”<sup>[7]</sup> The “desire to possess” fuels the rampant spread of utilitarianism; individuals are forced to struggle alone with all their might for their own survival and pleasure, treating these as the final and sole ultimate purpose of human life. In such a situation, the necessity of human existence is unfree—and this unfreedom inverts human needs into a naked biological utility.

Reducing the inner and outer worlds created by humans to a “sense of possession” is the alienation of humans' holistic senses. Humans' complex, rich, and sensitive senses are reduced to a simple sense of possession; the simplification of senses leads to the one-dimensionalization of humans. Humans feel excluded by an alien force, and develop a sense of self-negation and disorientation.

### 4. Beauty as the Objectification of Human Essential Power

Marx argues that beauty is the “objectification of human essential power”; to explore human

essential power is to explore the question of beauty. Human essential power manifests itself in humans' free and conscious activities—thus, beauty is also a symbol of freedom, and creation is the primary form of human freedom. Gao Ertai writes in *On Beauty*: “Man is a dynamic being in a constant process of creating and self-creating; this is the fundamental characteristic that distinguishes humans from all other beings.”<sup>[8]</sup> Human creative activities are conscious and intentional; in the world they create, humans can intuit their inherent life essence. In other words, only when humans engage in free creation and perceive themselves as acting freely can they comprehend beauty and confirm their human essence. Conversely, when humans cannot confirm their essence or intuit their spiritual power in the objective world they have created—when they feel reduced to a mere naked existence, and their perceptual, free, abundant, and vibrant life spirit is stripped away by an alien force—they sink into spiritual emptiness.

The realization or objectification of human essence can be experienced as a sense of freedom, while alienation leads to the loss of this sense. Humans can only gain such freedom through the continuous process of self-creation and self-realization; in these free and conscious activities, they intuit the possibilities of their life, the infinity of their existence, and the diversity of life itself. “Creation is the transcendence of the real world, the transcendence of the known and accepted world; it is the vitality to break free from all that is familiar and move forward in exploration toward an unprecedented, rejected, and unknown world.”<sup>[9]</sup> These spiritual qualities are the weapons by which humanity achieves progress. True “human needs” are primarily reflected in humans' exploration of their internal creative power—the objectification of their own essential power—whereas alienated labor suppresses the creative impulse within human life.

Beauty is a form of creation; through aesthetic activities, humans can intuit themselves. My mentor, Professor Zhou Yueliang, argues that “beauty has no entity in itself, but takes ‘sensation’ as its essence.” We can say that beauty arises from sensation, where “sensation” encompasses perception, sensibility, emotion, and related concepts. Without sensation, there is no beauty, no expression of essential power, and no manifestation of humanity. When humans engage in creative or aesthetic activities, they spiritually overcome the sense of unfreedom brought about by alienated labor. “To grasp the unity of human individual and wholeness, existence and essence through sensation—this is the essence of aesthetic activity.”<sup>[10]</sup> Unlike the simple sense of possession, aesthetic feeling does not involve the actual possession or consumption of an object, but its symbolic possession. Aesthetic activity is humans' symbolic possession of their own essence; “through the prism of aesthetics, human essence manifests itself in various forms of symbolic signs.”<sup>[11]</sup> Aesthetic creation eliminates the opposition between the self and the external world; humans' natural existence is no longer pitted against external things. Aesthetics builds a bridge between existence and essence, enabling the possibility of moving from “things” to “humans” and from “humans” to “things.” It also allows humans to move from finiteness to infinity: through their own creativity, they enrich their life and existence, and ultimately achieve the unity of human existence (natural existence) and human essence (social existence).

### **Conclusion: Aesthetic activity is an activity of experiencing freedom.**

Marx argues that beauty is the “objectification of human essential power”; to explore human essential power is to explore the question of beauty. Human essential power manifests itself in humans' free and conscious activities—thus, beauty is also a symbol of freedom, and creation is the primary form of human freedom. Gao Ertai writes in *On Beauty*: “Man is a dynamic being in a constant process of creating and self-creating; this is the fundamental characteristic that distinguishes humans from all other beings.”<sup>[12]</sup> Human creative activities are conscious and intentional; in the world they create, humans can intuit their inherent life essence. In other words, only when humans engage in free creation and perceive themselves as acting freely can they comprehend beauty and confirm their human essence. Conversely, when humans cannot confirm their essence or intuit their spiritual power in the objective world they have created—when they

feel reduced to a mere naked existence, and their perceptual, free, abundant, and vibrant life spirit is stripped away by an alien force—they sink into spiritual emptiness.

The realization or objectification of human essence can be experienced as a sense of freedom, while alienation leads to the loss of this sense. Humans can only gain such freedom through the continuous process of self-creation and self-realization; in these free and conscious activities, they intuit the possibilities of their life, the infinity of their existence, and the diversity of life itself. “Creation is the transcendence of the real world, the transcendence of the known and accepted world; it is the vitality to break free from all that is familiar and move forward in exploration toward an unprecedented, rejected, and unknown world.”<sup>[13]</sup> These spiritual qualities are the weapons by which humanity achieves progress. True “human needs” are primarily reflected in humans’ exploration of their internal creative power—the objectification of their own essential power—whereas alienated labor suppresses the creative impulse within human life.

Beauty is a form of creation; through aesthetic activities, humans can intuit themselves. My mentor, Professor Zhou Yueliang, argues that “beauty has no entity in itself, but takes ‘sensation’ as its essence.” We can say that beauty arises from sensation, where “sensation” encompasses perception, sensibility, emotion, and related concepts. Without sensation, there is no beauty, no expression of essential power, and no manifestation of humanity. When humans engage in creative or aesthetic activities, they spiritually overcome the sense of unfreedom brought about by alienated labor. “To grasp the unity of human individual and wholeness, existence and essence through sensation—this is the essence of aesthetic activity.”<sup>[14]</sup> Unlike the simple sense of possession, aesthetic feeling does not involve the actual possession or consumption of an object, but its symbolic possession. Aesthetic activity is humans’ symbolic possession of their own essence; “through the prism of aesthetics, human essence manifests itself in various forms of symbolic signs.”<sup>[15]</sup> Aesthetic creation eliminates the opposition between the self and the external world; humans’ natural existence is no longer pitted against external things. Aesthetics builds a bridge between existence and essence, enabling the possibility of moving from “things” to “humans” and from “humans” to “things.” It also allows humans to move from finiteness to infinity: through their own creativity, they enrich their life and existence, and ultimately achieve the unity of human existence (natural existence) and human essence (social existence).

## References

- [1] Marx, K. (2021). *\*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844\** (Liu Pikun, Trans.). Beijing: Research Press, p. 38.
- [2] Gao Ertai. (1982). *\*On Beauty\**. Gansu People’s Publishing House, p. 38.
- [3] Marx, K. (2021). *\*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844\** (Liu Pikun, Trans.). Beijing: Research Press, p. 74.
- [4] Marx, K., & Engels, F. (n.d.). *\*Collected Works of Marx and Engels\**, Vol. 1, pp. 156 – 157.
- [5] Marx, K. (2021). *\*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844\** (Liu Pikun, Trans.). Beijing: Research Press, p. 70.
- [6] Marx, K. (2021). *\*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844\** (Liu Pikun, Trans.). Beijing: Research Press, p. 66.
- [7] Marx, K. (2021). *\*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844\** (Liu Pikun, Trans.). Beijing: Research Press, p. 77.
- [8] Gao, E. T. (1982). *\*On Beauty\**. Gansu People’s Publishing House, p. 29.
- [9] Gao, E. T. (1982). *\*On Beauty\**. Gansu People’s Publishing House, p. 38.



- [10]Gao, E. T. (1982). \*On Beauty\*. Gansu People's Publishing House, p. 202.
- [11] Gao, E. T. (1982). \*On Beauty\*. Gansu People's Publishing House, p. 48.
- [12]Gao, E. T. (1982). \*On Beauty\*. Gansu People's Publishing House, p. 29.
- [13] Gao, E. T. (1982). \*On Beauty\*. Gansu People's Publishing House, p. 38.
- [14]Gao, E. T. (1982). \*On Beauty\*. Gansu People's Publishing House, p. 202.
- [15]Gao, E. T. (1982). \*On Beauty\*. Gansu People's Publishing House, p. 48.