

What is the “Philosophy of Praxis”?

Steven Vogel

I

Andrew Feenberg is one of the most significant contemporary social philosophers. His work and its influence in the philosophy of technology are well-known; he has developed a set of ideas about technology and its relationship to society that go importantly beyond standard debates about the “neutrality” or “complicity” of modern technology with respect to its social consequences, emphasizing the social complexity of technological developments both in terms of their sources and of the surprising ways in which they themselves transform the social environment in which they operate. Nothing like a Luddite, he has provided careful analyses of contemporary technologies that are remarkably sensitive to both their liberatory and their dangerous aspects. His interest in and connections with the worlds of French and Japanese philosophy, in addition, have provided English-speaking readers access to ideas from those worlds and have enriched his work with intriguing cross-cultural investigations of various technologies.

Feenberg was a student of Herbert Marcuse and is perhaps the leading proponent of the continued importance of the latter’s work; in that sense, he is also one of the few figures in the contemporary philosophical

S. Vogel (✉)
Denison University, Granville, OH, USA

scene who can be said to continue to work in “classical” critical theory. Most work nowadays with roots in the Frankfurt School is strongly Habermasian and typically treats earlier figures such as Adorno or Marcuse with gestures of vague respect before moving off in directions with which they would likely not have had much sympathy. Feenberg, on the other hand, although acknowledging Habermas’s significance, wants very much to argue for the validity of the earlier (more radical, and more explicitly Marxist) approach of the first Frankfurt generation and has done so quite impressively.

But there is another figure, from the period just before the Frankfurt School began, who stands in the background of much of Feenberg’s work and whom he has done more than almost anyone else in contemporary philosophy to bring back into serious discussion, and that is Georg Lukács. The work of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse is unthinkable without Lukács, who recognized the deep Hegelian grounding to Marx’s thought before the publication of Marx’s early manuscripts in the 1930s made that grounding obvious. The entire tradition of Western Marxism stems from Lukács’s work, but in many ways Lukács’s brilliance and his significance for serious thought about what critical social theory ought to look like (and about how it is related to critical social *practice*) have been sadly overlooked for many decades. Part of Feenberg’s importance is as a figure repeatedly returning to Lukács’s ideas and trying to restore to them the crucial place in contemporary philosophy that they absolutely deserve.

This was the topic of his first published book, which appeared in 1981 and was entitled *Lukács, Marx, and the Sources of Critical Theory*.¹ I was writing a dissertation on Lukács at the time, and the book was enormously important to me, helping to clarify some of Lukács’s key ideas and therefore to develop my own ideas as well. I first met Andy Feenberg a few years later, when he commented (kindly and helpfully) on the first paper I ever gave at a professional conference. And we have been in touch ever since, recognizing in each other, I think, not only kindred spirits, but also clear enough the issues on which we disagree. I was excited when Andrew revised and republished that first book last year, under the new title *The Philosophy of Praxis*, and I read it with the same intellectual excitement I had felt when first reading the original.²

“Philosophy of praxis” is the name that Feenberg gives to the basic set of ideas developed by Lukács in his 1923 *History and Class Consciousness*, ideas that Marx’s 1844 manuscripts showed to have been central to the

latter's early work as well, and also that play a role in the later theorists of the Frankfurt School (especially Adorno and Marcuse). Feenberg's book is a marvelous historical study, offering subtle critical analyses of the twists and turns as the position is worked out in the thought of these four figures. It is less successful, I think, as a clear presentation of the position as a unified whole. My goal in what follows is to try to present my own view of the basic tenets of the "philosophy of praxis" as such; in doing so, it will become clear where Feenberg and I disagree and where I think the source of our disagreements lie. I consider him an intellectually and compatriot; on fundamental issues we really agree, and furthermore where we do not agree I always learn from what he has to say. This essay is dedicated to him in friendship, therefore, and in respect.

II

A curious fact about Feenberg's book is that despite its title, he does not say much about what the "philosophy of praxis" actually *is* or why it has the name it does. Gramsci was the first to use the term, but apparently simply as a euphemism for "Marxism" in an attempt to avoid prison censorship. Feenberg's use is more specific, but oddly enough does not mention praxis at all: "the defining trait of philosophy of praxis," he writes, "is the claim that the 'antinomies' of philosophy can only be resolved in history."³ This seems like a plausible definition but does raise the question of why such a view should be called a philosophy of *praxis*. Given the name, one might have expected the claim to be that the antinomies can only be resolved in praxis, but Feenberg does not say this. Is praxis the same as "history"? What, actually, *is* "praxis"? Strikingly, the term is defined nowhere in the book, nor does it appear in the index.

"Praxis," of course, is not an English word. In English-language sorts of New Left thinking, it has often been used to mean a specially significant sort of "practice," particularly self-conscious, perhaps, or revolutionary. The word is originally Greek and is an important concept in Aristotle. But it is a perfectly ordinary German word, and the thinkers Feenberg is investigating are all German, so it seems appropriate to understand it in its ordinary German meaning: practice. I shall do so in what follows. And for me, the central thesis of the philosophy of praxis, or of practice, is not the one quoted above about the historical resolution of philosophical antinomies, but rather Marx's crucial remark in the eighth *Thesis on Feuerbach* that "*All mysteries which lead theory to*

mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice."⁴ Practice, not history, is the key category for the philosophy of practice: What's striking about Feenberg's book is how small a place that category actually plays in his account.

Marx's thesis is a statement not only about philosophy itself (here called "theory") but also implicitly about human beings. Humans are physical, material beings, first of all: the philosophy of practice is an absolutely materialist theory. But their materiality has to be understood as *active*: Humans are constantly acting, constantly *doing things*, and "practice" is the name this theory gives to those doings. To be a living human being is to be active in the world, and to be active in the world means at the same time to *change the world*. All activity is *transformative* activity; the doings or practices that human beings engage in are constantly altering the world around them. To walk is to compress the pathway on which one travels, scattering or crushing items below one's feet; to breathe is to change the ratio of oxygen to carbon dioxide in the air around one; to talk is to send vibrations tumbling through the air toward the ears of one's interlocutor. The claim here is a straightforward one and applies not only to humans but also to all living organisms: *to be alive is to be active*, and activity transforms the environment in which it takes place.

Humans do more than simply transform their immediate environs through walking and breathing, of course; they can also transform the things around them purposefully, in accordance with plans. They consciously build and restructure the world around them through their practices, anticipating the results of those practices and engaging in them specifically to produce those results. It would be a mistake, however, to understand these sorts of practices as involving something *beyond* practice, some "theoretical" moment that is not itself a practice. "Planning" too is itself an activity—we engage in it with pen and paper, or with spreadsheets, or by talking to one another, or sometimes just by trying things and seeing whether they work or not. Thinking, intending, hoping, believing—all of these, at least for a philosophy of practice committed to materialism, involve *action*, practice: they are all *doings* in the material world. As one thinks one continues to breathe, to gaze in some direction or other, perhaps to type on a computer or write on paper or speak to a collaborator. To intend or to believe or to hope all involve performing certain actions, or trying to perform them (which itself involves action). The idea here is not the simplistic behaviorism that

identifies various supposedly mental phenomena with "mere" physical behavior, denying such phenomena any felt first-person character at all, but rather it insists that such felt first-person experiences are never independent of real physical activity, of material doings, and could not exist—could not even be imagined to exist—in the absence of such doings. The point follows directly from the materialism: We are physical, material, living organisms, and every such organism is always (and always already) *active*, in motion, doing.

All I have done in the last few paragraphs is to define what "practice" means for the philosophy of practice; such a definition, as I've said, is unfortunately lacking from Feenberg's discussion. But there is more to the philosophy of practice than this definition, and more too than the implicit claim for the priority of practice as a category. There is also the idea, expressed in the eighth *Thesis*, that such a philosophy can help to resolve the "mysteries that lead theory to mysticism," an idea that involves a particular understanding of the history of modern philosophy and of its own place in that history. Feenberg is particularly good at talking about this element of the account; he summarizes it well by describing Lukács as showing that "Marxism [that is, the philosophy of practice] is the veritable *Aufhebung* of classical German philosophy, arising from its inner dynamic on the basis of its results."⁵ The philosophy of practice sees the revolutionary movement that Marx and Lukács both support as a key moment in the history of philosophy, and shockingly even sees the proletarian revolution itself as having philosophical significance. The overthrow of capitalism, for them, *is also the solution to a series of philosophical problems*.

The story is a familiar one. The attempt by the British empiricists to provide an epistemological foundation for the increasingly successful new sciences ends in disaster. If all our knowledge comes from sense-experience, and if that experience is understood as the mind's passive reception of information from an external world of objects—so that achieving valid knowledge requires refusing to impose "subjective" ideas upon that information and instead accepting it just as it presents itself—then knowledge of a world independent of humans turns out to be *impossible*. Instead of justifying the claims of science about the world over rationalist attempts to determine its character a priori, empiricism found itself (as in Locke) unable to explain in what sense a world of material substances could be known to exist at all, or (as in Berkeley) driven to deny that anything exists outside of experience, or finally (as in Hume) forced

into a potentially corrosive skepticism not only about the real existence of causal relations in the world but also about the existence of the knowing subject who believes in such relations itself.

This is the context in which Kant founds the tradition of “classical German philosophy,” arguing that empiricism’s error derives from its view of the subject as a *receiver* of information, and of knowledge as requiring the knower to be *passive*. The fundamental structures of the world we experience—space, time, substance, cause—are there because we put them there, because knowledge is a process in which data from outside the subject are actively formed and organized by the subject. The validity of those structures or categories, and our a priori knowledge of those structures or categories, is guaranteed by the fact that we impose them upon that data. The key insight here is really Vico’s: We can only know what we *make*. The world we perceive and experience—the world we inhabit, the world investigated by science—is a world *constituted* by the ego.

But Kant retains a theory of “things in themselves” that stand behind the things we experience, which is to say a noumenal world about which nothing can be known. Feenberg gives a particularly good account of the role the problem of the noumenal realm plays in the Kantian system and especially of the various ways Kant tries to overcome it—in the second *Critique* by the idea that the subject of moral action is the noumenal self that underlies the empirical ego, and in the third one by the appeal to aesthetics as a realm in which not only the form of experience but also its content too is “constituted” by the subject.⁶ Schiller and Fichte take these ideas further, as Feenberg shows, but it is really in Hegel that something like an adequate resolution is achieved, with the introduction of a dialectical logic according to which the “otherness” of the thing-in-itself is always only a *relative* otherness, the otherness posited by a particular and limited view of knowledge. At each stage in Spirit’s development, Hegel tries to show, it finds itself faced with something it cannot grasp, something beyond its ken—and yet then in a dialectical reversal it overcomes that “beyond” and discovers itself in the very otherness it thought it could not reach, producing yet another stage in which a new otherness will soon reveal itself and then be *aufgehoben* in turn. The goal of the process is Absolute Knowledge, the moment in which all otherness is overcome and shown merely to be stages in the development of Spirit: at that point subject and object turn out to be identical, the (relative) otherness of the object turns out always to be the

doing of the subject, and Spirit turns out itself to be nothing other than the world.

With this move, the "thing-in-itself" is rejected, assimilated into the world of Spirit as one of its moments. The Kantian dualism of phenomena and noumena is overcome, but the price seems to be a radical idealism in which the real world is revealed to be the product of Spirit, while the material world turns out to be the one whose "otherness" (that is, whose materiality) disappears in the Absolute. One speculative absurdity—a "real" world inaccessible to human knowledge—is exchanged for another one, in which thought appears as the real content of the world while matter appears merely as thought's alienated product.

Marx's role as the "culmination" of classical German philosophy, on this reading, consists in his inversion of Hegel's idealism, preserving the Kantian insight that knowledge has to be active as well as the Hegelian insight that this requires abandoning dualism and the thing-in-itself but understanding this now in a *materialist* way. The "subject" now is the physical human being, not Spirit—and the "activity" that subject engages in, through which she comes not only to know but also to structure the world around her, is now concrete physical activity, not the mysterious and obscure process whereby an ego "constitutes" a world or Spirit "recognizes itself in its other" but rather simply the practical activities through which human beings work on and transform the world. In the *Theses on Feuerbach* Marx calls those activities "practice," as I have above; elsewhere in his work, though, he refers to them as "labor."

Reinterpreted materialistically, the theses of the classical German tradition make a very different kind of sense. We make the world—and so the Vicoesque idea is relevant—not in the sense of some enigmatic constitutive act but rather by *building* it through our labor. Our every act, as I've argued above, transforms the world; the world around us consists of objects that we have built, objects that express who we are and what we find important, and that also help us to live the lives we want to live. Producing that world, engaging in those practices, laboring, is quite simply what it is to be a human being. And the world that those practices create is *our world*, a world that is *not* other than us, *not* unknowable to us, but that is at the same time perfectly real and material. It is a world in which the problem of the thing-in-itself—of something *below* or *behind* the world we experience—simply does not arise, because the world we experience turns out to be the world *we have built*.

The materialism here is an *activist* one, not a naïve naturalism that treats humans as material objects passively pushed or pulled by external (or internal) forces. Humans maintain their agency, but do so as material beings who express that agency through physical actions. This activist materialism is the translation of idealism's account of the subject into the material realm, as Marx explains in the first *Thesis on Feuerbach*, writing that "the chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing [*Gegenstand*], reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object* [*Objekts*] or of *contemplation* [*Anschauung*], but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active side was developed abstractly by idealism—which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such."⁷ The world of matter is not simply a world of objects but of subjects too—it is subjectivity *itself* that needs to be interpreted materialistically. Subjects are to be understood as *material* subjects engaging in practices that are materially transformative of the world around them.

The implications for epistemology here are particularly important. We come to know the world, this view asserts, by *acting in it*—by moving around in it, trying things out in it, discovering what works and what does not. "The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory," writes Marx in the second *Thesis*, "but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking, in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question."⁸ In fact *there is no thinking which is isolated from practice*: That's why the question is a scholastic one. Like the idealist versions of activist epistemology, this materialist one intends with the notion of practice to overcome a series of dualisms, including the dualism between subject and object itself. Practice is the intertwining of subject and object, after all: in practice a subject transforms the objective world, thereby producing an object in which the subject is expressed. Furthermore, once we drop the idealist assumption that practice occurs as the result of some prior mental act (an intention or thought) by the subject and realize that the mental act is expressed *in* the practice, we can see that practice transforms and produces the subject too—a subject whose objectivity is essential to it. I am what I do, and so my doings help to create not only the objective environment I inhabit but *me* as well. But that environment of course helps to shape

and constrain my doings too—and so, crucially, do the other humans with whom I share it. And so together we help to produce the world we inhabit, through our practices, while that world helps to shape us, and those practices, as well.

The environment we inhabit is built through our practices: this crucial idea immediately complicates standard models of the relation between knower and world that take subjectivity and objectivity to be ontologically distinct. Philosophy professors are always using things like chairs as examples when explaining various epistemological views, asking students how they come to know the chair and what that knowledge consists in, but always implicitly treating it as something purely external to the knowing subjects quizzically examining it. And yet what’s rarely mentioned is that the chair was *built* by knowing subjects whose practices in fact made the chair what it is. Its builders built its properties into it, transforming through their practices the materials needed to produce it and thereby creating something whose usability (either for sitting or for employing as an epistemological example) was so to speak guaranteed “a priori.” I will not say that noticing this resolves all the problems philosophy professors and students like to find in the “object,” but it surely complicates them, and complicates in particular the idea that in this case subject and object are separated by a potentially unbridgeable gap: whatever gap there might have been has, as it were, already been bridged.

That the chair had multiple builders, not just one, is crucial here as well. It would be the rare college classroom where a chair was constructed by a single craftsperson devoted to collegiate carpentry; and even if it were the case, still that person’s tools, not to speak of all the other objects—trucks, legal documents, etc.—required to place the chair in the classroom were surely produced by others. The philosophy of practice insists that human practices are typically *social* practices. We build things *together*—first of all in that we do so in direct collaboration with others, but second in that our practices are structured by social understandings and norms, and third because the environment we inhabit is *always already* one that humans have built, and so the very objects on which and with which we work (which is to say, the very objective world we live in) is one in which the practices of other humans have already played a role. Whatever one builds, one builds *out of* and *in the context of* and *along with* and *normatively guided by* others.⁹ And so our building activities, our practices, are always social ones. *This* is what it means to say that the environment is a “social construct”: not that we

impose social “meanings” on the world but that what surrounds us is *literally* constructed in our socially organized practices of labor.

My reconstruction of what “the philosophy of practice” might mean is intended, among other things, to suggest that Feenberg’s original definition might benefit from a reformulation: it is not in *history* that philosophical problems are solved, on this view, but rather in *practice*. History is the result of practice, that is certainly true: in a way it is simply the history of various forms of practice. But other things are the result of practice too: houses, say, and cities, and governments, and all the kinds of commodities Marx describes in *Capital*. If we are to be materialists, I might suggest, it is the *material objects* that result from practice on which we ought to focus, not an abstraction like “history.” In a sense this is my fundamental criticism of Feenberg: that he does not take sufficiently seriously the material (and also mundane) character of practice. If he did so, I think, a number of problems in his account would be resolved.

One of the problems has to do with the idea of “labor.” I have been suggesting here that Marx uses it as a name for practice. In particular for him “labor” does not simply mean the painful, dangerous, and exploitative drudgery that he spends so much energy criticizing capitalism for demanding: rather, especially in his early work, key to his critique is that under capitalism the activity through which humans transform the world and express themselves appears as merely a “means for life” that they run from as soon as they have the chance to avoid it. But Feenberg seems unsure on this point, and criticizes Marx for “hover[ing] between hyperbole and absurdity” in the claims he makes for labor.¹⁰ The translation of the mysterious world-constituting activity of the idealist subject into practical human labor, he argues, cannot be complete, because “the imaginable extension of the concept of an object of consciousness is in truth far greater than that of an object of labor.”¹¹ But this is not true, certainly not if we have given up the dualism that believes there to be a world of “consciousness” separate from the material one, and not if we understand “labor” to mean practical activity in the broad sense. Of course I can think of objects that cannot be worked upon by physical means and with physical tools (because of their size or distance from me, or perhaps their “abstract” and intangible character), but when I think of them the thoughts themselves are *acts*, having roles to play in some activity I am engaging in at the time, whether that be trying to understand some aspect of the universe, making children laugh by coming up with imaginary characters, or taking part in a philosophical argument.

Feenberg says that Marx is "not content to confine human creative powers to the narrow domain that mankind actually and potentially transforms in an imaginable labor process, but wants to extend those powers to 'objective reality everywhere,'" ¹² but it is not clear why he thinks this is either hyperbolic or absurd, or what parts of "objective reality" are *not* potentially transformable by human practice. The problem becomes clearer when Feenberg complains that Marx's view involves "the reduction of the human relation to nature to labor," noting that "in everyday coping, play, aesthetic appreciation, recognition, and contemplation humans relate to being perhaps just as fundamentally as they do in labor without attempting to remake objects in their own image."¹³ But each of these *are themselves forms of practice*, and indeed—despite the way Feenberg talks about them—are practices that transform the world.¹⁴ Even "contemplation" requires the contemplator to be present in the world, to breathe, to be moving: contemplation too is a form of practice. It is true that typically those who engage in these practices are not "attempting to remake objects in their own image," but it is a mistake to suggest that ordinary labor attempts this either. When I build a bookcase, just as when I admire a sunset or play with a basketball, it is the object itself I am concerned with, not some sort of narcissistic self-duplication. Feenberg is operating with a very limited, and negative, sense of what labor is—indicated, for instance, when he writes against what he sees as Marx's extension of labor as implicated in "reality everywhere" that "the universe is not, in principle, mere raw material: the very idea is either absurd or abhorrent."¹⁵ Once labor is understood as practice, it makes little sense to say that it treats the universe as "mere raw material": the objects upon which labor works may well be themselves filled with meaning and value. It is only *capitalist* labor that treats everything it touches—as well as those doing the touching—as "mere raw material." An enlightened and humane set of practices could well involve deep appreciation for the objects with which they deal, and could even leave certain objects relatively unchanged.

III

The most famous of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, of course, is the final one: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it." Rather than simply an inspiring (if vaguely anti-intellectual) slogan calling readers to move beyond armchair

philosophizing toward real revolutionary activism, in the context of the philosophy of practice this remark turns out to have a different and striking meaning, according to which revolutionary political activism appears not as an alternative to philosophy but rather as the latter's *telos*. For if the philosophy of practice involves inverting the idealist picture of *Geist* constituting the world into an activist materialist picture of human beings transforming the world through their practices, and thus asserts the thesis of the fundamental priority of practice over theory, then *that thesis itself cannot simply be a matter of theory*—cannot, that is, be yet another theoretical assertion by a thinker *about* the world of practice, but must rather *itself be practical*, and therefore world-transformative. The rejection of idealism's emphasis on theory cannot itself be (merely) a theory, but must rather be something like an Aristotelian practical syllogism, whose consequence is not a theoretical statement but an *act*—a practice. The move to practice (to “changing the world”), is thus *required by the theory*, or rather is its final result. Theory (or “interpretation” of the world), taken to its logical conclusion, has to transcend theory and become practice.

But what sort of practice? Here the question becomes complicated, not least because the philosophy of practice seems also to assert that all theory is actually a form of (or grounded in) practice, an assertion that renders the distinction between interpreting the world and changing it a bit fuzzy. If all interpretations of the world are based in practice, then they all change the world; what does Marx mean by calling for a new kind of practice that goes beyond mere interpretation? And what happened to the *critical* element of Marx's theory, which after all is the most important part of it—the idea that certain practices, like the ones characteristic of capitalism and commodity production, are unjust and exploitative, and for that matter also the idea that certain interpretations of the world, like the ones that are used to justify that unjust and exploitative social order, are simply *wrong*?

The Hegelian story of the relation of Spirit to “objectivity” involves the repeated discovery by the subject that that which it took to be other than it turns out not to be other at all: in recognizing itself in its other, it moves to a new dialectical stage. In the materialist translation of this story, accordingly, world-transformative practices that know themselves as such, practices in which the subject recognizes and takes responsibility for the changes that are produced, represent higher or better forms of practice than those that are ignorant of what they are and what they

do. The normative assumption here dates back to the Delphic oracle: self-knowledge and self-understanding are to be preferred over ignorance and self-deception. This suggests an answer from within the philosophy of practice to the familiar question of what the normative basis is for the Marxist critique of capitalism.

The claim of the philosophy of practice is that humans are fundamentally practical (social) actors in the world and the world is the product of our (socially organized) doings. But there are some doings, it turns out, that do not seem like doings at all, and appear instead in the form of Things, separate from us and independent of our doings. Lukács gives such doings a wonderful name: reification, *Verdinglichung*, "thingification." Marx uses a different name, alienation—but the phenomenon he is describing is the same. The central characteristic of capitalism, according to the Marx of the early manuscripts, is that the objects that humans build through their labor appear to them as external and independent powers—that the more workers transform the world around them the more that world seems like something separate from them and out of their control, indeed as the source of their misery. Their product is not recognizable as such, instead appearing as the wealth of the capitalist that keeps them in submission. This idea is developed further in the mature economic theory of *Capital*, where it is called the fetishism of commodities: the exchange value of a commodity appears as a quasi-natural property of it, instead of an indication of the human labor that produced it. Thus as Marx famously says, a "definite social relation between men ... assumes ... the fantastic form of a relation between things."¹⁶ The labor by which various human beings collaborated to produce an object that is useful to other human beings appears in the form of a Thing and so is "thingified." And the point of *Capital* is to show that the entire system of market exchange and wage-labor, and with it the oppression and immiseration of the proletariat, follows from this process. It appears as the "natural" form of social organization (subject, for example, to the "Iron Law of Wages"), but in fact is the product of the ways in which human practices are engaged in capitalist society.

Lukács extends Marx's idea, showing how reification characterizes capitalist society at all levels. To be a member of a capitalist society is to confront a series of institutions each of which appears as something like a "fact of nature"—something that is simply given, to whose rules of operation one must adjust oneself, and the question of whose potential mutability or justifiability never arises—despite the fact that

those institutions are in fact simply the product of a myriad of social interactions among community members. This is true of that crucial institution called the “market” above all: think of the way we experience “facts” like the rate of growth of GDP, or the inflation or unemployment rate, or for that matter the Dow Jones Industrial Average. These appear as Things that determine our own behavior, that we have no way as individuals to affect but must simply observe and react to, but that in fact of course are themselves simply the aggregated *result* of all of us as individuals observing and reacting in this way, without recognizing that *we ourselves are the authors* of the “alien” phenomenon we face. The individual subject’s attitude to the objective world she inhabits—a world she helps to produce but that seems alien, like a piece of nature—is what Lukács calls a “contemplative” one: it involves treating objectivity as something one can only passively respond to but can never actively transform. This is precisely the epistemological position of empiricism, it is worth noticing—the one that was overcome (but only in theory) by the Kantian view of knowledge as active. In the material world it characterizes a set of practices that treat objectivity as something independent of the subject, failing to notice that the world of objects is one that is *socially constructed* in the sense described above.

I have argued elsewhere that environmental problems have their origin in this sort of phenomenon.¹⁷ The basic structure of all these cases is the one that Garrett Hardin named the “tragedy of the commons,” where in the absence of a procedure for communal decision-making individuals are faced with a situation in which the act that it is rational for each to perform when aggregated results in an outcome harmful and undesirable to all. I cannot affect global warming by privately deciding not to burn fossil fuels; all that decision does is to worsen my situation significantly while decreasing carbon emissions by an infinitesimal and imperceptible amount. If we agreed to do this together global warming would be decreased, but since there is no way for us to make that communal decision, it is irrational for me to cease burning them—although the consequence of everyone reasoning this way is precisely what produces global warming. The same is true for the factory owner concerned about pollution or the fisherman desiring to preserve fish stocks: Private individuals are faced by a totality that makes it impossible for their private acts to make a difference. The aggregated act of multiple individuals harms everyone, but to each individual that aggregated act appears as a Thing to which she can only respond, and her response (multiplied

across all individuals) produces exactly the harmful aggregate itself. The only solution would be for the individuals to decide *as a community* what they wished to do.

This is, in a way, the fundamental argument for socialism: Reification can only be overcome by a communal decision, in which the community as a whole chooses to act self-consciously *as* a community. In the terms of the philosophy of practice this point can be put as follows: The world we inhabit is the product of our socially organized practices. But when we engage in those practices without recognizing this fact, when we fail to acknowledge that the phenomena that surround us (commodities, economic structures, social institutions, changes to the climate) are the products of our own practices, then those phenomena come to look like independent Things with power over and against us that we have no power to question or to change. In accordance with the basic insight of the philosophy of practice, however, this “failure to acknowledge” the world as the product of our practices is *itself a kind of practice*—the kind associated with capitalist free markets, in which private individuals engage in private transactions with each other oriented toward private gain, and no significant space for communal decision-making is to be found. To engage in world-transforming practices self-consciously, on the other hand, would be to engage in them *as a community*, recognizing that *we* (not I) are responsible for the world we inhabit, and to make decisions about those practices democratically and to see them as *our* (not my) practices. No longer appearing as an alien Thing, the practices would appear instead as our own self-expression—as practices that knew themselves to be world-transforming and therefore knew the world we inhabit to be *our* world and not something alien to and beyond us.

When Marx distinguishes between interpreting the world and changing it, we can now see, he is distinguishing not so much between theory and practice as between *two kinds of practice*—the contemplative kind that views the world as independent of our activity and the self-conscious kind that recognizes the product of its activity as its own, and in this sense overcomes reification. I began this section by asking what the practice that Marx is calling for might consist in, and now we have an answer: A set of communal practices that *know themselves to be world-constructing* and that are thus chosen self-consciously by the community through a democratic process of communal decision-making. To say this of course is still to provide no detail about what specific set of practices these might be—but that is not a weakness so much as precisely what the

philosophy of practice would lead one to expect. No theoretical analysis prior to the actual communal decision-making itself could provide the answer, because if it could that theoretical answer would have priority over the practical process of deciding, and furthermore would appear to that process as an independent Thing to which the process's relation could only be a contemplative one. Only the community itself can decide what its own practices should be—that decision is a matter of practical democratic choice, not of philosophical argumentation.

The communally self-conscious decision I've been discussing is identified by Lukács with the proletarian revolution itself, and Feenberg does an excellent job of explaining what this means.¹⁸ Among other things as we saw earlier, it ascribes to the revolution a distinctive epistemological and even metaphysical significance, since it would now not merely transform the structure of society or the economy, but is itself also the *solution* to a series of philosophical problems (about form versus content, is versus ought, the relation of subject and object, the nature of the thing-in-itself, etc.). Such a claim about the proletarian revolution, Feenberg recognizes, is terribly hard to believe today, not least because it is no longer clear that the concept "proletarian revolution" has much meaning nowadays at all. He offers an interesting argument to the effect that for Marcuse the formation and growth of the counterculture of the 1960s offered a possible substitute for what Lukács was imagining—but of course this too appears nowadays as at best another failed opportunity.¹⁹ The ultimate paradox of the philosophy of practice is that unless and until the self-conscious communal practices it calls for actually take place all it has to offer is yet another interpretation of the world, and hence by its own standards until that time it remains unjustified and even in a quite serious sense untrue. I have no solution to offer to this paradox, which might indeed be an ultimately tragic one, but will simply leave it stated in this form here.

IV

The key issue on which Feenberg and I disagree has to do with the status of "nature" in the philosophy of practice. To emphasize the idea that human beings *construct the world* raises the question of how literally this is to be understood: Could *nature* be a human construction? Feenberg understandably finds this implausible. Chairs are no doubt built by humans, but they are built *out of* wood and similar materials that are

not themselves built; more generally *all* our building practices take place within a surrounding natural context—a context that makes building possible but is not itself built. Reification occurs when entities that are in fact socially constructed appear as independent and even “natural” Things; but some objects *are* independent and natural, and (one might be inclined to argue) it makes no sense to suggest that *those* entities too are our products.

Yet to say this seems to require distinguishing between “nature” and the human world in a way that significantly limits the range of applicability of the philosophy of practice, for the dualism it introduces looks suspiciously like the old one between subject and object that it was supposed to overcome. The claim that the mysteries that mislead theories to mysticism can only be resolved by appeal to human practice turns out to apply only to those mysteries having to do with the human world, and not to “nature.” But the antinomies that the philosophy of practice was supposed to resolve had to do with the possibility of knowledge of the objective world itself, not simply some part of it. The empiricist views whose difficulties led to Kant’s insight that knowledge must be active, then to Hegel’s radicalization of that insight, and finally to Marx’s materialist reformulation of it as a philosophy of practice began, after all, as an attempt to understand and explain the possibility of natural science; but if the philosophy of practice is explicitly denied applicability to nature then in fact those difficulties would seem still to remain. Theory and practice, interpretation and change, objective world and subjective/human one, mind and body, is and ought—all the dualisms that the philosophy of practice was supposed to dissolve—now come rushing back. And materialism itself is put at risk: the idea of grafting a strong distinction between nature and the human onto the monistic metaphysics that materialism asserts seems awkward at best: Aren’t humans part of nature?

Feenberg is deeply aware of and concerned about this problem (which has important implications for any discussion of the social character and meaning of contemporary science and technology) and comes back to it repeatedly throughout his book. He examines both Marx’s and Lukács’s views about it in some detail and offers sophisticated and helpful readings of their discussions. Although sympathetic to the more radical version of the philosophy of practice from which “nature” is not excluded, ultimately he pulls back from this conclusion, which (in both the original book and the new version) he calls “rigorously consistent and obviously absurd.”²⁰ The key tenets of the philosophy of practice, he repeatedly

suggests, do not apply to nature. As opposed to systems such as the economy, technology, and bureaucratic administration, he writes in his discussion of Lukács's view of reification—systems whose reification can in principle be overcome by self-conscious practice—the realm of nature “is *essentially* reified and knowledge of it is destined to remain permanently ‘contemplative.’”²¹

I don't agree with Feenberg, and want briefly to explain why. I don't want to claim that nature is a social product, which surely sounds odd, nor (as the philosophy of practice would seem to require) that self-conscious practices regarding nature would lead to nature itself changing, which seems odder: instead I want to question the significance and validity of the concept of “nature” itself.²² To talk of nature is to talk of a world independent of human beings, an objective world separate from them that confronts them as alien, a world in which they act and whose laws they must obey and which they surely cannot change. Such a world is *of course* “essentially reified,” by definition. The question is whether “nature” so defined correctly names the world we actually inhabit, or whether instead that name is being misapplied to the very world that the philosophy of practice wants to unmask as the reified product of practice. The real question is: How many “worlds” are there? Despite various attempts to deny it, Feenberg's view ultimately depends on a dualism that sees reality as divided into “spheres” or “realms” or “domains,” with history or the social or the human being on one side and nature on the other. “There is a realm in which consciousness is practice,” he writes, “in which we can transform our objects by becoming socially self-conscious,” but alongside it “there is another realm in which our action will always be contemplative, that is, technical. The first realm is society, the second is nature.”²³ Elsewhere he talks of history as a “special sphere” in which humans “are actually able to transform the objects on which [they] act,” and describes Marx as intending to “subordinate” the “apparently humanly indifferent sphere” of nature to that special one.²⁴ “Unlike nature,” he writes at another point, “history is the product of human action,” and describes history as “the only domain in which to find a practice that can affect... the very essence of the phenomena.”²⁵ But here his failure to understand practice specifically as *labor*, which is to say as *a process in which the human and the non-human are intertwined*, comes home to roost. For the notion of labor cuts across all these dualisms: Labor produces a world of *objective things* that are *fundamentally*

human, while also producing a *social order* that is *entirely objective and material*.

There is only one world, not two. The passive materialism that Marx criticizes in the *Theses on Feuerbach* understands this one world as simply "nature," while the classical German idealists identify it with subjectivity. But the activist materialism of the philosophy of practice insists that labor produces a world that is *both "natural" and human*—a world that is fully material but is produced ("constituted") by human action, by labor. This means that everything Feenberg sees as "social"—history, culture, the economy, etc.—is *completely material*, and that it is a mistake to understand it as a human element somehow *added on* to a natural one. The economy, for instance, is not an abstraction from the various concrete makings and exchangings that take place in the marketplace: It simply *is* those makings and exchangings. Nor is the political system anything beyond the actual practices of voting, meeting, deciding, etc., of the people taking part in it. But by the same token "nature" is not something that exists *before* or *beneath* the practices humans engage in, but rather is simply *the world we inhabit*, the world in which those practices take place and which consists of things that those practices have helped to build.²⁶ But then (as I've argued elsewhere) rather than calling it "nature," a word infamous anyway for its complexity and ambiguity and especially for the antinomies it so easily engenders, we might be better off dropping that word and speaking of the "environment"—meaning the world that actually environs us, the one we actually inhabit, which nowadays anyway is a *built* world, the product of our labor.²⁷

The "environment" consists of *all* the things that our labor has built: the artifacts and buildings that surround us, the social and economic structures and ideals that organize our lives, the technology we employ and its effects on us, our gender and class relations, our educational processes and medical procedures, our political institutions and our artistic movements, our history and our geology, our biology and our physics. *It's all one world*, and it is the product of our practices. Once this is recognized, the idea that there are different "realms" or "spheres" that differ either ontologically or even in terms of how we come to know them becomes untenable. All of reality is generated through practice, which means that practice comes *before* any distinction between human and natural, between subject and object, between idea and matter. In fact—and this is crucial—these distinctions are themselves *symptoms* of reification, deriving from a set of practices that do not know themselves

as such and therefore fail to see the human character of the world those practices produce.

Feenberg goes part way toward acknowledging the point I'm making, coming close to admitting that our relationship to "nature" is always mediated through our practices, and that even the "contemplative" approach characteristic of the natural sciences depends upon a set of practices as well.²⁸ (These would include, for instance, practices of experimentation, of measuring and calculating, of instrument-building and so forth.) But he does not fully accept the consequence that seems to me to follow from this concession, which is that if the word "nature" *means* a world independent of and prior to our practices, *we have no access to it*, even scientifically, and so it is no longer clear in what sense we can call nature a "realm" of the world we actually inhabit. Once the practical character even of natural scientific knowledge is recognized, what that knowledge calls "nature" seems to turn out to be as much part of the "built" world we inhabit as are any of the other products of human labor—not *essentially* reified, but rather reified in the same sense as all those other products, which is to say open to an unmasking that reveals the human role in their construction.

Feenberg insists instead that it is on this last point that "nature" differs from the social. Recognition of the constructed character of social phenomena leads directly toward a *change* in the phenomena, he argues, while noticing the practical processes that underlie our understanding of nature has no such result: "dereifying consciousness of the scientific construction of nature does not necessarily alter the 'facts' of nature itself."²⁹ Elsewhere he writes that "knowledge of nature simply does not respond to self-consciousness."³⁰ The idea here seems to be that the discovery of the social practices underlying our grasp of certain elements of the world (the "natural" ones) need not automatically lead to a change in those practices and therefore might leave our understanding of those elements unaltered as well. Now if this were true, one might indeed want to define "nature" as that part of the world possessing this property; but Feenberg offers no argument whatsoever to show it to be coextensive with the nature investigated by the natural sciences, or more generally with what we usually think of when we talk of nature. (Nor, for that matter, does he show that there might not be aspects of the social that possess this property as well.) Instead he seems simply to assert that nature (as ordinarily understood) does possess this property (and that history does not), without explaining how that assertion could be justified.

But second, the very idea that we could recognize that something we thought was independent is actually produced through our practices without that producing a change in those practices reproduces the very dualism between thought and world (theory and practice) that the philosophy of practice puts into question. To "know" or "recognize" something that was previously hidden is itself a practice, not merely an event inside one's head; to realize that what once seemed to be an independent Thing is in fact the product of one's own practices *is* to engage in different practices, and so will produce a different object as well. This is not so difficult to believe if we think of the material world around us not as "nature" but rather as built. To recognize that we are communally responsible for the world that surrounds us, that we have built it, would almost certainly lead to the building of different objects: it is hard to imagine any self-conscious community choosing the environment of ugliness, dehumanization, and impending climate change that surrounds us today. But by "nature" Feenberg has something else in mind, although he never makes it clear exactly what. He seems to mean something like the object of inquiry of the natural sciences; and what he finds implausible is the idea that recognizing the practical character of scientific investigation could possibly lead to a change in the scientific "facts." Yet again he gives no evidence for this claim. And a geology that has to consider and investigate the Anthropocene, a psychology that has to face its own gender biases, a biology that works by way of genetic engineering and that increasingly produces chimeras as objects of study, and for that matter a physics among whose tenets is the notion that the character of basic elements of the world changes depending on whether they are being observed—all of these seem to suggest that recognizing the constructed character of the objects of natural scientific inquiry might indeed play a role in reconceptualizing those objects and interacting with them in different ways.

I find it genuinely difficult to understand exactly what Feenberg thinks about the ontological status of "nature" and its relation to practice, or what it means to call it "essentially reified." He argues at one point that "since nature as a system or totality does not depend on the unconsciousness of the practices in which it is understood, self-consciousness does not overthrow its reified form of objectivity although some results of scientific research may indeed be overthrown."³¹ I'm not sure what nature's "reified form of objectivity" means here. A "form of objectivity" (Feenberg's translation of Lukács's *Gegenstandlichkeitsform*)

seems to be the form in which objectivity appears in a given social order, which is to say given the practices that social order engages in.³² To say that it is a *reified* such form would then seem to mean that those practices are not recognized as such. But then once those practices become self-conscious it is hard to see how the form would remain reified, even under Feenberg's questionable assumption that the practices themselves would remain unchanged. How could a self-conscious set of practices *still* confront a reified (*essentially* reified?) form of objectivity?

Similarly, in a later section responding to objections, Feenberg gives a confusing account of reification according to which "a reified object is one that has the *form* of an *independent fact governed by laws*," and glosses "independent" as meaning that "whatever social processes involved in its institution are occluded."³³ But then he explains that "to argue that certain types of objects are 'really' or 'essentially' reified does not mean that no such processes underlie their existence, but that their reified form is unalterable in practice."³⁴ If the social processes are self-conscious, however, and know themselves as "instituting" the object, then won't the "occlusion," and with it the reification, disappear? Or is Feenberg now making the stronger claim that the social processes involved in the institution of nature cannot become known (and so the processes cannot become self-conscious) even though they exist? (And even though apparently theoreticians of reification such as himself somehow do know them?)

One gets the impression that Feenberg at bottom is committed to the view that nature *really is* a realm independent of practice and that this is what he means when he calls it "essentially" reified. When challenged he acknowledges that our only access to that realm is a practical one, but still he wants to insist that there is a hardness and reality to that realm that is "prior" to practice, and that to deny this is to come too close to an idealism whereby humans somehow produce the world *ex nihilo*. But again it is the failure to grasp practice as real material labor that causes the problem, it seems to me. There is no question that in our practices we experience a resistance and hardness to the world that is not itself produced *by* practice. But it is a mistake to hypostasize—or to be more blunt, to *reify*—that hardness into something called "nature" that *causes* or *evinces* it. Doing so reinstates a dualism where humans are "outside" of nature and then attempt to achieve their goals by engaging in practices "upon" it. *Practices are material*: They take place in the (one) real world. And so *of course* they involve the experience of resistance and

hardness. *That's what it means to be a practice*—to involve effort, to face resistance, to require the expenditure of energy, and indeed sometimes to fail. It is not that once a practice gets into the real world of "nature" it finds itself thwarted by the latter's reality: instead the point is that to be a practice is *already to be real* and so to involve difficulty and effort *by definition*. The difference, one might say, between practice and "theory" is exactly that the latter does not involve such difficulty. If we think of practice as the "application of theory to the world," then the moment of resistance will seem to be a characteristic of the world, and so will seem to be something independent of and prior to practice. But if we understand practice as material activity in which both the ideal world of theory and the real world surrounding us come to be what they are, then the idea that either one is independent of practice no longer makes any sense—not because practice somehow magically constitutes reality *ex nihilo*, but because practice is itself real.

An important point Feenberg repeatedly emphasizes is that the overcoming of reification should not be understood as a single transformative moment after which everything will be different and reification will disappear.³⁵ Instead he emphasizes that it has to be seen as a *continuing process of mediation* and indeed a potentially unending one. "Reification is ... not the 'opposite' of dialectics," he writes, "but a moment in it."³⁶ Dereifying practices always occur within an objective context and under objective constraints, and in that context such constraints necessarily appear as Things independent of practice, which is to say they are reified. In this sense total dereification is impossible, except as a regulative ideal.³⁷ And as Feenberg points out, this means too that dereifying practices never create a world *ex nihilo*, but rather always on the ground of previous reifications. "Socialism is a reorganization of the society around a dialectical mediation of the reified capitalist inheritance," he writes; "reification is never completely eliminated but [rather] is repeatedly overcome in an 'unbroken alternation of ossification, contradiction and movement.'"³⁸

The key idea here is that "proletarian practice does not create social reality, but rather mediates it."³⁹ But the dialectical point that all practices are mediations of a previous reality which, *relative to the practice*, serves as a Thing "prior" to practice is not the same as the claim that there is some Thing or realm called "nature" prior to *all* practices. The point that Feenberg is making here is in a way more obvious than he recognizes, once practice is understood as labor (as material) and not in

terms of the obscure notion of historical practices that produce “social reality.” Laboring practices always take place in material contexts and are subject to material constraints. The idea of labor producing something *ex nihilo* is ridiculous: labor always has a matter on which it labors. But that matter may have been, and almost always is, the product of *previous* labor. No notion of a “nature” that necessarily underlies all practice is required here. The constraints under which “social reality” is changed are of the same order as those under which all labor operates: they are simply the constraints of *reality*.

V

The question about the status of nature in the philosophy of practice is particularly significant in the contemporary context, where environmental problems from pollution to climate change to the protection of wilderness are very much on the agenda in a way that they were not for Marx and Lukács. In the latter chapters of his book, Feenberg provides an insightful discussion of the Frankfurt School, focusing on Adorno and especially on Feenberg’s mentor Marcuse, and emphasizing how those thinkers reformulated the question of nature (and of science) in ways more relevant to environmental issues. Still there too, I would argue, his mistaken views about nature lead to problematic conclusions, including too quick of an appropriation of certain characteristic Frankfurt School approaches.

The key idea introduced by first-generation Frankfurt thinkers, as Feenberg notes, is the “domination of nature,” which he says they see as “the central issue of the twentieth century.”⁴⁰ Whereas earlier Marxism focused only on the domination of human beings by other human beings under capitalism, he asserts neither Marx nor Lukács “realized that insofar as the dominated human being is reduced to a natural object, all of nature is implicated in the social critique.”⁴¹ Capitalism treats humans and nature alike as objects to be manipulated, organized as it is by a principle of rationalization operative both in the economic sphere and in that of natural science. “Disenchanted” in the Weberian sense, nature appears under capitalism as mere matter available for human control, empty of meaning or ethical significance. This is supposed to take place in the name of human progress, but in fact—since human beings themselves are natural—ends up turning humans too into raw material for capitalist rationalization. Such is the “dialectic of enlightenment”

Adorno and Horkheimer trace in their book by the same name. The progress of science and rationality leads to a "fully enlightened earth [that] radiates disaster triumphant," a disaster that they identified with the political catastrophes of the mid-twentieth century but that surely could be seen to include the ecological ones later decades would come to know as well.⁴²

The Frankfurt School view involves a critique of natural science that goes far beyond the one implicit in Lukács and the early Marx, Feenberg shows. He interestingly interprets the "critical method of science" and its universality not merely in terms of its commitment to empirical evidence and fallibilism but also in terms of the fact that it "systematically negates lived experience," removing the humanly meaningful elements of the natural world and thereby "authoriz[ing] the exploitation of nature as raw material."⁴³ Adorno and Horkheimer are famously pessimistic about the possibility of avoiding the fatal dialectic they trace; faced with a choice among fascism, Stalinism, and the culture industry of the West, they see no serious non-dominative alternative in the offing, no way to imagine a "liberation of nature." But Marcuse, Feenberg suggests, writing somewhat later, finds in the "new sensibility" of the counterculture and the New Left hints of a different approach involving what he calls "the recovery of the life-enhancing forces in nature." For nature, Marcuse writes, "has a dimension *beyond* labor, a symbol of beauty, of tranquility, of a non-repressive order."⁴⁴ The idea would be of an approach to nature that treats it not as "raw material" but as itself in need of liberation—that treats it, in a word, as another subject.

The line of argument here is familiar, yet from the point of view of the philosophy of practice it faces real difficulties, beginning with its unexamined use of the concept of "nature." The idea that in certain sorts of scientifically directed practices humans "dominate" nature while other "non-repressive" practices allow the "recovery" of its "life-enhancing forces" and hence make possible its "liberation" again implicitly appeals to the kind of dualism that the philosophy of practice wants to overcome. It divides the world in two, with humans on the one side and nature, described as implicitly another subject, on the other. When humans violate the boundary by attempting to manipulate and control nature, they fail to show it the proper respect and instead treat it as "mere matter" for their use. The transformation of nature looks like an illegitimate assault by one subject on the body of another.

But if we recognize that there is only one world, not two, and that it is neither a human world of limitless will to power nor a world of “nature” from which the human being is excluded, then we see that human practice is not, and never could be, the imposition of the human onto the natural, but rather that engaging in practice is simply *what it is to be a human being*. And to see the world as something we transform is not to see us as “dominating” it but rather recognizing ourselves as living active creatures in an environment that shapes us as we shape it. “Nature” does not appear as “mere matter” here—in fact, of course, “nature” doesn’t appear at all. To understand the environment we inhabit as one we have helped to produce is not to fail to respect it but rather simply to understand that our entanglement in it is complete. To see the world as the product of our doings is to recognize our *responsibility* for it—both in the sense that it would not be what it is without us and also in the sense that we are *normatively responsible* for what it is, in the sense that if we find ourselves living (as we do, sadly) in a bad and ugly and dangerous world *this is our fault*, and that we are under a moral obligation to make the world a better one—which means to make our practices better ones, making better choices (and more communally self-conscious choices) about what practices we want to engage in based on our best expectations about what those practices are likely to bring about.

There is no “dimension” of nature “beyond labor,” first because *there is no nature* if “nature” means a world that we have not already changed, and second because to talk this way is to treat labor the way capitalism does, as a kind of painful toil imposed upon us by an external force that produces an ugly and harmful world in which we cannot recognize ourselves. But labor just means practice, and so it includes all the practices Marcuse and Feenberg want to support: creative ones, playful ones, practices oriented toward beauty, toward the ornamentation of life and the flourishing of humans and other living organisms. An environmentalism that thinks its goal is to avoid dominating nature is one that sees human activity in the world as intrinsically repressive and harmful, and thus is one that requires us to be passive, to view the world as something independent of us whose structure we must acknowledge and whose requirements and laws we must obey; it is marked by a kind of fear that if we fail to obey them—if we try to “force” nature to do what we want instead of allowing it its own autonomy—it will take its revenge on us, via global warming or other mass catastrophes. But in the context of the philosophy of practice the call for such a passivity (which is in any

case impossible) sounds like nothing other than what Lukács called the “contemplative attitude” that views a reified reality as something outside of human control—like the commodities that seem to have all the power in Marx’s account of capitalism, despite being themselves the product of human labor. To recognize that the world that surrounds us is *not* something other than us—neither the world of nature nor the world of history—and to see our role in it as an *active* one, makes possible an environmentalism whose goal is a human community that acknowledges its responsibility for the world and takes that responsibility seriously: one whose citizens decide together what practices they will engage in, and what environment they want to inhabit, and who do not allow those decisions to be made for them by putatively external processes, whether those be the processes of “nature” or of the market.

NOTES

1. Andrew Feenberg, *Lukács, Marx, and the Sources of Critical Theory* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981).
2. Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács, and the Frankfurt School* (London: Verso, 2014).
3. *Ibid.*, 3.
4. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 4.
5. Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*, 100.
6. *Ibid.*, 102–105.
7. Marx/Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 3. Emphasis in original. See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Ausgewählte Werke* (Moscow, Verlag Progress, 1972), 26.
8. Marx/Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 3. Emphasis in original.
9. “You didn’t build that,” Barack Obama once said (and was castigated for saying).
10. Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*, 44.
11. *Ibid.*, 45.
12. *Ibid.*, 44.
13. *Ibid.*
14. I’ll argue below, though, that they are not examples of human relations to “nature.” I’d rather say they are relations to the world.
15. Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*, 45.
16. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, Ben Fowkes, transl. (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 165.

17. See Steven Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), Chap. 7.
18. See, e.g., Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*, 110–117.
19. *Ibid.*, 155, 170–174.
20. *Ibid.*, 129.
21. *Ibid.*, 136–137.
22. See Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall*, Chap. 1.
23. Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*, 135.
24. *Ibid.*, 4.
25. *Ibid.*, 111.
26. *Helped* to build: of course other organisms, and other things, played important roles as well. But this fact does not turn the environment into anything “natural” in the sense of somehow being separate from humans.
27. See Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall*, 42–43.
28. See, e.g., Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*, 135–136.
29. *Ibid.*, 136.
30. *Ibid.*, 147.
31. *Ibid.*, 141.
32. *Ibid.*, 73–77.
33. *Ibid.*, 147. Emphasis in original.
34. *Ibid.*
35. See *Ibid.*, 112–119.
36. *Ibid.*, 114. (The remark is repeated for some reason on p. 143.)
37. See *Ibid.*, 117–119; 133–134.
38. *Ibid.*, 134. (The quoted phrase is from *History and Class Consciousness*.)
39. *Ibid.*, 133. See also *Ibid.*, 123.
40. *Ibid.*, 152.
41. *Ibid.*, 156.
42. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, John Cumming, transl. (New York, Seabury Press, 1972), 3.
43. Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*, 144–145.
44. See *Ibid.*, 183. The quotations are from Marcuse’s essays “Ecology and Revolution” and “Nature and Revolution.”

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