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## An Aristotelian View of Marx's method

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DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS WORKING PAPER SERIES

**An Aristotelian View of Marx's Method**

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Working Paper No: 2011-08

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## **An Aristotelian View of Marx's Method**

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### **Abstract**

A number of Marxist scholars have tied aspects of Marx's thought to certain Aristotelian categories, yet remarkably little is said of Marx's dialectical materialism in this literature. Here we attempt to lay a foundation for such an effort, paying particular attention to the way in which Aristotle's mediated starting point resonates in Marx's method. While Hegel is able to grasp man's self-creation as a process, his dialectical method proceeds from an unmediated starting point, and impresses Idealism upon the Aristotelian categories. In rejecting the Idealist dimensions of Hegel's dialectic, Marx implicitly reclaims the materialist dimensions of Aristotle's system. It will be argued here that such an interpretation sheds important light on the nature of Marx's departure from Hegel, and on his method in *Capital*.

**Keywords:** Marx, Aristotle, Hegel, Methodology

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**Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to recognize a debt to Dr. Robert Urquhart for the inspiration for this paper. Of course, the usual disclaimer applies.

# An Aristotelian View of Marx's Method

Nathaniel Cline, William McColloch, and Kirsten Ford\*

April 15, 2010

## Abstract

A number of Marxist scholars have tied aspects of Marx's thought to certain Aristotelian categories, yet remarkably little is said of Marx's dialectical materialism in this literature. Here we attempt to lay a foundation for such an effort, paying particular attention to the way in which Aristotle's mediated starting point resonates in Marx's method. While Hegel is able to grasp man's self-creation as a process, his dialectical method proceeds from an unmediated starting point, and impresses Idealism upon the Aristotelian categories. In rejecting the Idealist dimensions of Hegel's dialectic, Marx implicitly reclaims the materialist dimensions of Aristotle's system. It will be argued here that such an interpretation sheds important light on the nature of Marx's departure from Hegel, and on his method in *Capital*.

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# 1 Introduction

While a multitude of scholars have contended that certain aspects of Marx's thought appropriate Aristotelian categories or notions, the role of Aristotle's thought in Marx's development of dialectical materialism has surprisingly been downplayed. The silence of scholars on this issue may, in part, be explained by the relative dearth of overt references to Aristotle in Marx's writings.<sup>1</sup> The common interpretation is that Marx, though certainly having read Aristotle directly, received and interpreted Aristotle primarily through Hegel's *Logic*. There is no hyperbole in the assertion that Hegel considered his own system to be the rightful culmination of Aristotle's philosophy, and that Marx drew copiously from Hegel's *Logic* while composing *Capital* and (especially) the *Grundrisse*. We have reason, however, to doubt whether Marx fully accepted Hegel's own interpretation of Aristotle. That is, we may argue that Hegel projected his own Idealist predilections onto Aristotle, which Marx, in turn, rejected when he grounded dialectics materially.

Though we would contend that Aristotle's influence on Marx is pervasive, in this paper we center our discussion on Marx's chosen starting point in *Capital*: The commodity. We argue that this seemingly innocuous choice to begin with the commodity is, on the contrary, a striking abandonment of a cornerstone of Hegel's method; a turn that reveals Marx's continued direct engagement with Aristotle. For Marx, as for Aristotle, the search for an unmediated starting point free of presuppositions is deeply misguided. Instead, we ought to begin with what is most knowable and clear to us as historical subjects under the capitalism. Though this is by no means evidence that Marx broke with Hegel in *toto*, we believe that our discussion serves to clarify both the nature of Marx's split with Hegel, as well as his method in *Capital*. To this end we divide our approach as follows: The first section examines Hegel's unique interpretation of Aristotle, along with his prescriptions for the starting point of inquiry. In the second section we re-examine Marx's critique of Hegel in light in of the preceding discussion. We then turn in the third section to a review of those categories in Aristotle that we believe are of prime importance. Having laid this groundwork, the fourth section demonstrates that, in beginning with the commodity, Marx manifestly assumed an Aristotelian position. Finally, in concluding we measure the importance of this point, and suggest several directions in which this research could be extended.

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<sup>1</sup>A notable exception is Marx's comment that "I always had great interest in the latter philosopher [Heraclitus], to whom I prefer only Aristotle of the ancient philosophers." Letter to Ferdinand Lassalle. 21 December 1857. *Marx-Engels Collected Works, vol. 40*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975. p. 225. In addition, Aristotle receives some minor treatment in *Capital*, where refers to him as, "the greatest thinker of antiquity" Marx (1990, p.532)

## 2 Hegel visits the Lyceum

Hegel's explicit dialogue with Classical Greek philosophy, and with Aristotle in particular, appears in scattered fragments throughout his work. Further, insofar as Hegel believed that his own philosophical system transcended the deadlocks of all philosophy hitherto, such a dialogue can often be read as implicit. Thus a fully adequate exposition of these inter-relations would be a substantial work unto itself. A few cursory remarks may, nevertheless, prove useful.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most fundamental feature of Hegel's philosophical system is the role given to idealism. Idealism is not merely opposed to materialism as one of two possible philosophical position. Rather, Hegel insists that philosophy and idealism are identical. Hegel tells us that "[e]very philosophy is essentially an idealism or at least has idealism for its principle, and the question then is only how far this principle is actually carried out...Consequently, the opposition of idealistic and realistic philosophy has no significance."<sup>3</sup> Though we find this remark only once we are well into the Logic, it ought to be seen as Hegel's basic premise that informs all his work. Hegel does not, however, subscribe to a vulgar form of idealism in which reality is but a product of thought. Instead, Hegel's idealism lies in the assertion that the finitude of the objects we encounter in reality can only be transcended in the realm of thought. That is, it is only through thought that the particular things we encounter in reality can assume a universal character. As Lucio Colletti notes, "[i]n practical terms, the innovation means this: one no longer says that the finite does not have true reality...one adds that the finite has as 'its' essence and foundation that which is 'other' than itself, i.e. the infinite, the immaterial, thought."<sup>4</sup>

Having clarified Hegel's conception of philosophical idealism, we may turn more directly to his treatment of Aristotle. Even a casual reader could hardly fail to notice the lavish praise Hegel heaps upon Aristotle; praise made all the more notable when set against the harsh criticism Hegel leveled against his philosophical adversaries. Moreover, the connection between Hegel in Aristotle is far from a modern predilection. Hegel's favored pupil and first biographer, Johann Rosenkranz, saw such parallels drawn often enough to regard them as a 'stereotype.'<sup>5</sup> Of course, the attention Hegel pays to the history of philosophy is not, in and of itself, particularly remarkable. As Hegel remarks in the Preface to Phenomenology, "[t]he more conventional opinion gets fixated in the antithesis of truth and falsity, the more it tends to expect a given philosophical system to be either accepted or contradicted...It does not comprehend the diversity of philosophical systems as the unfolding of truth, but rather sees in it simple disagreements."<sup>6</sup> Thus Hegel makes clear that he views his own philosophical system not as a refutation of others, but rather as the culmination of this pro-

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<sup>2</sup>A recent comprehensive study along these lines is found in Ferrarin (2001)

<sup>3</sup>Hegel (1969), p.154-5.

<sup>4</sup>Colletti (1973), p.14.

<sup>5</sup>Ferrarin (2001), p.5.

<sup>6</sup>Hegel (1977), p.2.

gressive ‘unfolding of truth.’<sup>7</sup> Yet beyond the objective importance of Aristotle in the history of philosophy, Hegel appears to view the Aristotelian system as having taken a decisive step towards the truth of his own.<sup>8</sup>

Hegel, in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, suggests that the first virtue of Aristotle’s philosophical system was that he “extended his attention to the whole circle of human conceptions...penetrated all regions of the actual universal [and] brought under the subjection of the Notion both their riches and their diversitude.” Hegel believed that in these lectures he was uncovering the true Aristotle that had been obscured by contemporary scholarship. In the *Lectures*, the critical extension of Aristotle’s system, relative to that of Plato, is seen to be the introduction of the “the principle of living subjectivity, as the moment of reality.” For Hegel, it is this ‘living subjectivity,’ that comes to the fore in Aristotle’s thought; a crucial determination which had played, at best, a subordinate in the thought of Aristotle’s predecessors. The means by which Aristotle comes to recognize the centrality of this ‘living subjectivity’ are examined in significant detail by Hegel. He argues that the two ‘leading forms’ of Aristotle’s system are *potentiality* (*Dunamis*) and *actuality* (*Energeia*). While these determinations are seen to enjoy an independent existence in Aristotle’s thought, it is only their active unity that gives rise to the concrete category of substance. *Potentiality*, though decidedly the determination which is prior to *actuality*, exists merely as an abstract universal; as Hegel contends, it is “the matter which can take all forms, without being itself the form giving principle.”<sup>9</sup> Put more directly, matter as a category unto itself is *pure potentiality*; a moment that exists only as an abstraction of mind. Tangible sensuous substance requires the second determination of *actuality*. It is by means of this determination that matter acquires form, and realizes an aspect of its potentiality. Hegel holds that the unifying thread between these opposed determinations is activity. This active mediation between potentiality and actuality is necessary not only to give rise to sensuous substance, but more importantly to introduce the possibility of change. As Alfredo Ferrarin has argued, however, Hegel treats the concept of *energeia* as the true cornerstone of Aristotle’s system. Hegel seizes upon this concept, giving it perhaps greater emphasis than did Aristotle himself, because

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<sup>7</sup>Here it seems far from incidental that Hegel goes on to illustrate this point with the triad of bud-blossom-fruit; an example which he draws directly from Aristotle. In this example the the flower and, subsequently, the fruit of the plant are should not be seen a refutations of the previous form, each moving closer to the ‘truth’ of the plant. Instead, Hegel’s tells us that “their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only do no conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole.” For a detailed discussion of this example’s Aristotelian Origins see Ferrarin (2001), p.133-4.

<sup>8</sup>Notably, Hegel took on an intensive study of Aristotle while in Jena, immediately prior to (or perhaps coinciding with) his work on *Phenomenology*.

<sup>9</sup>Here Hegel is careful to note that the Aristotle “has nothing to do” with the the empty category of *ding an sich*. The determination of matter in-itself has an existence only as an (empty) abstraction. Matter in its true existence is the concrete unity of potentiality and actuality mediated by the activity of form. Though one might argue that here Hegel is too eager to impose his own dialectical logic on the Aristotelian system, such a reading appears in keeping with Marx’s own appropriation of the Aristotelian method.

he sees in it the foundational principle of his own philosophical system. In Ferrarin's words, Hegel wishes to posit *energeia* as a "self relating negativity, a determination that is a self-determination, hence a universal end actualizing itself."<sup>10</sup> The importance of this category for Hegel is that the truth of *energeia* – *energeia* in its idealized form – can exist only in thought. Hegel clearly believes that Aristotle shares this conception. In the *Lectures* he states that:

“[t]he speculative philosophy of Aristotle simply means the direction of thought on all kinds of objects, thus transforming these into thoughts; hence, in being thoughts, they exist in truth. The meaning of this is not, however, that natural objects have thus themselves the power of thinking, but as they are subjectively thought by me, my thought is thus also the Notion of the thing, which therefore constitutes its absolute substance...It is only in thought that there is present a true harmony between objective and subjective; that constitutes me. Aristotle therefore finds himself at the highest standpoint; nothing deeper can we desire to know, although he has always the appearance of making ordinary conceptions his starting-point.”

The crucial point here is that Hegel gives primacy to the object *in thought*, rather than as a material reality. In so doing, Hegel reads an idealist dimension into Aristotle's system that Marx would later (implicitly) deny. While Hegel readily acknowledges that Aristotle often appears to proceed from material reality, he contends that this is but a surface appearance. Things in themselves do not exist in truth; only when they exist as objects for the mind is this truth revealed.

This vision of the Aristotelian method has further implications for the point at which Hegel begins his own system. Whereas Aristotle showed an (apparent) willingness to proceed from immediate phenomena grasped as such, Hegel feels compelled to find an *unmediated* starting point. As is well known, Hegel takes as his starting point in the *Logic* the abstract category of pure Being. The core of his justification of this choice is that pure being constitutes the only possible unmediated starting point; it is abstract precisely because it does not presuppose anything. The subsequent tri-partite division of Being into its dialectical moments should not then be understood as a mere logical device employed by Hegel to aid his exposition of Being. On the contrary, the three dialectical moments are taken by Hegel as ontological aspects of Being itself.<sup>11</sup> While seemingly a technical point, this distinction is of crucial importance if we are to understand Hegel's true method. Hegel conceives his method as that of the passive, rational scientist. We are told that his explicit aim is “[t]o show that now is the time for philosophy to be raised to the status of a Science.”<sup>12</sup> As a scientist of Being, Hegel does not assume the dialectic as a method *a priori*. Rather, it is only because the thorough-going scientist of Being finds that his object is dialectical, that scientific thought must surrender itself to the dialectics of the Real.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Ferrarin (2001), p.108.

<sup>11</sup>Put differently, the object of the science of Logic is dialectical ontologically

<sup>12</sup>Hegel (1977), p.5-6.



Moreover, this is precisely the sense in which Hegel's dialectics appear distinct from the dialectic *method* of Antiquity (e.g. Socratic dialogues). Whereas in Antiquity dialectics served as a method of argumentation that produced, in its synthetic moments, a clearer picture of non-dialectical reality, Hegel rejects the Dialectic as simply a mode of thought. Hegel instead conceives himself as the mere observer of the dialectic of Being.

What should again be emphasized is that Hegel gives ultimate primacy to the object *in thought*, and assumes that any materialist turn would signal a rejection of the inherent method of philosophy as such. Though philosophy should not deny reality an objective existence, the truth of the object is contained only in thought. While we should rightly shy away from the conclusion that Hegel's own method was Aristotelian, he certainly appears to have believed that resolution of his own system did not contradict the essence of Aristotelian method (as he had construed it). Hegel thus saw his philosophy as the necessary resolution and systematization of many Aristotelian categories into a logically consistent whole. As we shall see, in rejecting the many of the idealist dimensions of Hegel's system, Marx (gradually) came to confront these same categories, albeit with a decisively different approach.

### 3 Marx's active materialism

Consistent with Hegel, Marx denies the subject-object split with his dialectic, but rejects the primacy Hegel's dialectic assigns to the object *in thought*. Accordingly, Marx critiques Hegel for painting history as the history of the "production" of abstract, or speculative thought.<sup>13</sup> Marx considers this thinking the inevitable result of Hegel's failure to grasp the nature of his own alienation, the product of the alienation of modernity in general. As he says of Hegel's *Logic*, "*Logic* is the *money* of the mind, the speculative *thought-value* of man and of nature, their essence indifferent to any real determinate character and thus unreal."<sup>14</sup> While he considers Hegel to have gone much further than previous philosophy in comprehending man's self-creation as a process and arriving at a notion of alienation, he maintains that the ideal basis of his dialectic prevents him from understanding the essential reality of either. As he famously says in the *Afterword to the Second German Edition of Volume I of Das Capital*, "The mystification which the dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell."<sup>15</sup> The way in which Marx resolves the "mystical shell" into its rational core is in returning to the materialist dimensions of the Aristotelian

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<sup>13</sup>Marx (2003), p.175.

<sup>14</sup>*ibid.*, p.174.

<sup>15</sup>Marx (1990), p.103.

system. In order to arrive at this conclusion, however, a more explicit (however compendious) look at Marx's critique of Hegel will prove useful.

In the third manuscript of *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx encapsulates his critique of Hegel through his valuation of the *Phenomenology*, which, as he notes, is the birthplace of Hegel's philosophy that also contains its "secret."<sup>16</sup> For Marx, "[t]he main point [of the *Phenomenology*] is that the *object of consciousness* is nothing else but *self-consciousness*, that the object is only objectified self-consciousness, self-consciousness as an object."<sup>17</sup> In this view – which takes *self-consciousness* to be *man* – the alienation of self-consciousness constitutes a (seemingly) independent substance, or "thinghood." Accordingly, objectivity is intrinsically alienation from human essence, which in order to be overcome, requires the supersession of the object *in thought*. Given that man's essence is objectified, re-appropriation of his *objective being* surmounts both alienation and objectivity.<sup>18</sup> As Marx explains, "[t]he person who takes possession of his being is only the self-consciousness which takes possession of objective being; the return of the object into the Self is therefore the re-appropriation of the object."<sup>19</sup> Hence, alienation is no more than *alienation of self-consciousness*.

In the Introduction to the *Grundrisse* Marx explains the "illusion" that so confounded Hegel, leading him to embrace this mystified view:

"[In] conceiving the real as the product of thought concentrating itself, probing its own depths, and unfolding itself out of itself, by itself, whereas the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind. *But this is by no means the process by which the concrete itself comes into being.*"<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, in Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* he sees Hegel's conception of the state – a manifestation of alienation in real human life, as is religion – the result of his transformation of predicate into subject. Akin to Hegel's own notion of ideology as an abstraction that remains lodged in the predicate, Marx critiques Hegel for giving predicates an autonomous existence, and then turning them into their subjects. As a consequence the genuine subject emerges as the result. "Precisely because Hegel starts from the predicates of the general description instead of from the [actual subject], and since, nevertheless, there has to be a bearer of these qualities, the mystical idea becomes this bearer."<sup>21</sup> Once again, Marx points to Hegel's error

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<sup>16</sup>Marx (2003)

<sup>17</sup>*ibid.*, p.178.

<sup>18</sup>The latter because it is the objective nature of the object (as opposed to its determinant nature) "which is the scandal of alienation for self-consciousness." In this way the object is "self-annulling." *ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>19</sup>*ibid.*, p.179.

<sup>20</sup>Marx (1973), p. 101. Emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup>Marx (1978a), p.18.

in mistaking the way in which nature presents itself to man as identical to the way in which the concrete actually comes into being.<sup>22</sup> In this way, Hegel's philosophy bears mystification problems, wherein the finite is not real, and renders him unable to see that the infinite's *true subject* is the real finite. Thus, Hegel's philosophy is itself a manifestation of an inverted reality, is itself an expression of alienation in real, sensuous human life. Marx makes plain that the way in which to avoid falling into this deception is to proceed from the subject and then perceive its objectification.

It can now be made clear that the core of Marx's critique of the Hegelian method lies in his chosen starting point. As has been seen, Hegel proceeds from pure Being in order to avoid being deceived by presupposition. In beginning with the actual subject, rather than predicates divorced from their subject, Marx explicitly wishes to obviate such a pretext. For Marx, deception occurs when proceeding without presupposition, and can only be circumvented by beginning with immediate phenomena grasped as such. In the *German Ideology* he makes this plain in his own method. "The method of approach is not devoid of premises. It starts out from the real premises and does not abandon them for a moment. Its premises are men, not in any fantastic isolation and rigidity, but in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions."<sup>23</sup> Hence, as historical objective beings, we should begin inquiry with that which is most knowable and apparent to *us*. Then we must make an effort to work through these initial appearances, without ever fully dispensing of them.

In contrast to the Hegelian world, in which the object has no objective existence outside of *knowing*<sup>24</sup> itself, for Marx, objects really exist, are external to man *and are a basic precondition for the use of his human faculties*. In this way, objects are both the prerequisite *and* the occasion for historical human subjects to realize their basic nature. He takes as an example the hunger drive, which requires a nature outside of itself in order that it be satiated. From this viewpoint, if an *objective being* is to create an object, it need not "descend" from its "pure activity" à la Hegel, given that the object authenticates its activity as an *objective being*. The activity of such a being is objective, precisely because objectivity is constituent of its essential being. We can establish Marx's position by way of comparison: whereas Hegel would comprehend the architect's product as the *object of consciousness* generating an apparent "thingness," which is to say, as an alienation, Marx recognizes the object of the architect's labor as

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<sup>22</sup>Lucio Colletti is emphasizing this same point when he says, "Existence is not a predicate, it is not a concept. The conditions as a result of which something is given us to be known are not to be confused with the conditions as a result of which this something is taken up into thought." Colletti (1973), p.92.

<sup>23</sup>Marx (1978b), p.155.

<sup>24</sup>It is perhaps worth reiterating that this is due to the fact that for Hegel "the object is only the semblance of an object, a deception, which is intrinsically nothing but knowing itself which has confronted itself with itself, has established in face of itself a nullity, a 'something' which has no objective existence outside the knowing itself" Marx (2003), p.184. Hence, an object arrives at existence for consciousness inasmuch as it knows it to be *something*.

the substantiation of his activity as an *objective being*. Hence it is his potential, objectified by his own deliberation and realized in the process of building. At the same time, the essence of the house is brought into unity with its existence. In perfect lucidity he explains, “The fact that man is an *embodied*, living, real, sentient, objective being with natural powers, means that he has *real, sensuous objects* as the objects of his being, or that he can only express his being in real, sensuous objects.”<sup>25</sup> The primary premise of human history is production for the means of life, and therefore the production of material life itself.<sup>26</sup>

Just as caution must be made in interpreting Hegel’s idealism as the vulgar idealism of the philosophers he wished to critique, Marx’s materialism must not be mistaken for those mechanistic forms of materialism that both preceded and followed Marx.<sup>27</sup> Although Marx pronounced Feuerbach to be “the only person who has a serious and critical relation to Hegel’s dialectic, who has made real discoveries in this field, and above all, who has vanquished the old philosophy”<sup>28</sup> he was nonetheless careful to distinguish himself from his static materialism. Marx explains that Feuerbach’s insistence to grasp the existence of an object as independent from contemplation of it, he is left only able to grasp the sensuous world through a philosopher’s “spectacles”<sup>29</sup> and is therefore forever blocked from moving beyond that which is most clear and knowable to us.

Feuerbach saw his own approach as the negation of philosophy, the “incarnate result” of speculative philosophy which “puts an end to it by explaining it.”<sup>30</sup> As he says, “I differ *toto coleo* from those philosophers who pluck out their eyes that they may see better; for my thoughts I require the senses, especially sight.”<sup>31</sup> In Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* he says of his method, “The object, reality, sensuousness is conceived only in the form of the *object* or of *contemplation* but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively.”<sup>32</sup> Consequently, the fundamental shortcoming of Feuerbach for Marx is his belief that existence is one and the same with essence, and consequently leaves his disciples with a static materialism.<sup>33</sup>

Before reviewing the Aristotelian categories we believe to be principal in understanding Marx’s own method, it is perhaps worthwhile to briefly note what has surfaced in this re-examination of his critique of Hegel. Marx’s system owes its

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<sup>25</sup>Marx (2003), p.171.

<sup>26</sup>Marx (1978b), p.157.

<sup>27</sup>Marx demarcates his “naturalism or humanism” from both the methods of idealism and materialism, which he argued also “constitutes their unifying truth” Marx (2003), p.181.

<sup>28</sup>Marx (2003), p.171.

<sup>29</sup>Marx (2003), p.170.

<sup>30</sup>Feuerbach (1989), p.xv.

<sup>31</sup>*ibid.*, p.xiv.

<sup>32</sup>Marx (1941), p.82.

<sup>33</sup>Marx says that for Feuerbach “every exception is expressly conceived as an unhappy chance, as an abnormality. . . Thus if millions of proletarians feel by no means contented with their living conditions, if their ‘existence’ does not in the least correspond to the ‘essence’ . . . this is an unavoidable misfortune. . . The millions of proletarians and communists, however, think differently and will prove this in time, when they bring their ‘existence’ into harmony with their ‘essence’ in a practical way, by means of a revolution” (*ibid.*), p. 168.

motion to the human activity of self-creation, a potential achievable through a nature that is outside of us. Marx's rejection of the Idealist basis of Hegel's dialectic freed him to reclaim the materialist basis of Aristotle's method, wherein the fundamental nature of the world is sensuous movement of matter. Therefore, for Marx inquiry should not attempt to begin devoid of premises, as this would be a deception. As historical subjects, whose activity is constitutive to our essential being, we should instead begin with such objects that are most clear and knowable to us.

## 4 Placing Aristotle's *podia* on the ground

By no means a summary of Aristotle's philosophy, here we will simply present a short discussion of five principle terms that seem particularly relevant. These terms are *phusis*, *logos*, *eidos*, *dunamis*, and *energeia*. We have already seen the appearance of the last two terms;. As noted earlier, Hegel identified *dunamis* and *energeia* as crucially important to the Aristotelian system. Here however, we will place them in the context what we view as the unique materialism of Aristotle. Thus we believe that the starting point of "ordinary conceptions" is for Aristotle, mediated and therefore more than an appearance. We must accept the world as it is clear to us, and not shy away from presupposition.

The term *phusis* can be translated in a number of ways, though it is most often translated as "nature."<sup>34</sup> Of course, the term plays a crucial role in Aristotle's *Physics* though the definition, "nature" does not do it full justice. As Aristotle makes clear in the second book of physics, *Phusis* implies an inner principle of change. He divides those things that exist by *phusis* and those that exist "from other causes."<sup>35</sup> But *phusis* does not mean cause in the modern sense. Thus for Aristotle, "men do not think they know a thing till they have grasped the 'why' of it (which is to grasp its primary cause)." The fact that things that exist by *phusis* are in motion is evident from "an immediate 'leading toward.'"<sup>36</sup> Those things that exist by *phusis* exhibit a bringing forth. That is, they are impelled toward the realization of their *eidos* (form). This *eidos* can then exist at varying levels of *dunamis* (potentiality or power) and *energeia* (actuality). *Eidos* provides the both the propulsion of the developmental process as well as its end. The form (or essence) provides the active link between what is potential and actual. Thus, *Eidos* makes clear the distinction between the materialism of

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<sup>34</sup>Except where noted, all references to Aristotle's works are from Aristotle (1984). In this text *phusis* is again translated as "nature." As Heidegger (1998, p.183) notes, the Romans translated *phusis* as "natura" which means, "that which lets something originate from itself." Heidegger however finds this definition to be inadequate.

<sup>35</sup>*Physics* II.1 192b38

<sup>36</sup>*Physics* I.2 185a12. This is Heidegger's (1998) translation. The Revised Oxford Translation prefers, "induction." Heidegger instead views the term as a "'constituting' in the double sense of, first, bringing something up into view and then likewise establishing what has been seen" (Heidegger, 1998, p.187).

Aristotle and the materialism of the static materialists like Feuerbach, who do not conceive of a difference between essence and existence.

Things then come into being as a result of form. Thus Aristotle's famous description of the transition from seed to tree is governed by *eidōs*. Things that exist by *phusis* have this process internalized. This internal process is parallel to the external process by which a craftsman produces (though Aristotle specifically rejects the notion of a divine craftsman). For the craftsman, form exists first in the soul (his *technē* resides in his soul) and is then imposed on matter. The form of the house to be built by an architect exists potentially in the architect himself. It is then realized in the process of building. That is, the form that exists only potentially in the builder and actually in the house are one in the same. They are simply at different degrees of actuality.<sup>37</sup>

In addition, Aristotle characterizes *eidōs* as the “*logos* of the essence.”<sup>38</sup> As Jonathan Lear notes however, the Oxford translation of *logos* as definition is misleading in this context.<sup>39</sup> While there is some appeal to language in the notion of *logos*, there is a sense in which *logos* refers to the ordering of the world itself, prior to language. *Logos* of the essence is the “order, arrangement, proportion instantiated by the essence itself.”<sup>40</sup>

As noted earlier, Aristotle believes that we cannot know a thing until we understand “the ‘why’ of it.” This suggests a particular relation between man and world. The ‘why’ is both an objective property of the world and what drives man to question the world. For Aristotle, the drive to question the ‘why’ is the nature of human beings.<sup>41</sup> The world however cooperates, and for Aristotle is meant to be known. It has an ordering that can be impressed upon man’s soul (“man’s nature is such that the world is able to impress its image on him”<sup>42</sup>). As for Marx the objective world is both the precondition for man to make use of his human faculties and the occasion for it, so too for Aristotle does the world provide the precondition and occasion for man to fulfill his nature and drive to know. Thus Aristotle remarks:

“So from perception there comes memory, as we call it, and from memory (when it occurs often in connection with the same thing), experience; for memories that are many in number from a single experience. And from experience, or from the whole universal that has come to rest in the soul (the one apart from the many, whatever is one and the same in all those things), there comes a principle of

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<sup>37</sup>We will have more to say about the labor process in the conclusion, but it is useful to note here the parallel between Aristotle’s architect and Marx’s rejection of Hegel’s notion of alienation. Marx, like Aristotle, argues the house embodies the objectified potential of the architect, realized in the active process of building.

<sup>38</sup>*Physics* II.7, 194b27.

<sup>39</sup>Lear (1997), p.28.

<sup>40</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>41</sup>“All men by nature desire to know.” *Metaphysics* I.1, 980a21

<sup>42</sup>(Lear, 1997), p.8.

skill and of understanding – of skill if it deal with how things come about, or understanding if it deals with what is the case. Thus the states neither belong in us in a determinate form, nor come about from other states that are more cognitive; but they come about from perception...And the soul is such as to be capable of undergoing this...when one of the undifferentiated things makes a stand, there is a primitive universal in the mind (for though one perceives the particular, perception is of the universal.”<sup>43</sup>

This passage highlights a number of important themes. Not only do we have the capacity to have the world impressed upon us, the world itself has an ordering. The universal is embedded in the particular (essence is embedded in existence), and this is *prior* to our attempts to understand the world. The world thus, “provides a path along which man’s curiosity can run.”<sup>44</sup> This is particularly important, because it is not that the world, for Aristotle, presents itself as immediately knowable. Instead it presents itself as puzzling (“confused masses”<sup>45</sup>), but draws us into it. In *Physics*, Aristotle argues that:

“The natural way of doing this [investigating primary causes] is to start from the things which are more knowable and clear to us and proceed towards those which are clearer and more knowable by nature [*phusis*]; for the same things are not knowable relatively to us and knowable without qualification. So we must follow this method and advance from what is more obscure by nature, but clearer to us, towards what is more clear and more knowable by nature.”

What is most understandable to us, and what is most understandable without qualification are distinct but related. That is what is most understandable to us sets us on a path toward what is understandable by nature. All of which suggests deep relation between man and the world. As we noted earlier, *eidōs* can be thought of as the *logos* of the essence. That is, the ordering that is instantiated by the essence is precisely what makes the world intelligible. All of this is to say that our intimate relation with the world is one in which the impression of the ordering of the world on the soul is of the same “stuff” as the ordering of the world itself. As we shall see, this implies that the movement of thought itself is important. It is not simply instrumental, the movement of thought will be part of the final content itself.

In addition, the passage cited above suggests that appearances (*eidōs*) are important for inquiry. Thus in Aristotle’s response to Parmenides notion that change is impossible, he gives great weight to the “self-evident.”<sup>46</sup> That is, “Our ordinary beliefs about the world thus become a starting point of philosophical activity which may be modified but which can never be completely abandoned.”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Posterior Analytics* II.19 100a3-b1

<sup>44</sup> (Lear, 1997), p.2-3.

<sup>45</sup> *Physics* I.1 184a22.

<sup>46</sup> *Physics* II.1, 193a3-6.

<sup>47</sup> Lear (1997), p.56.

It is not insignificant that Aristotle uses the first person plural. Inquiry begins with what is most knowable and clear to *us* (*our* ordinary beliefs). For Aristotle, this is unproblematic. Ordinary beliefs always should be taken seriously and contain some truth. They must however be worked through as noted in Aristotle's description of his method. We do not however lose first appearances, we work through them, but they remain with us throughout our investigation. Aristotle (and Marx) is essentially uninterested in philosophy that seeks to undermine pre-theoretical beliefs. Philosophy for Aristotle is a common undertaking, and as we exist in the world, it is appropriate to begin with how it appears to *us*.

## 5 Capitalism as it appears

Though there several themes in Marx begging for an Aristotelian interpretation, we focus here on the starting point of *Capital*. The familiar opening line of the first chapter of *Capital* can then be seen through the Aristotelian lens described above. The chapter opens:

“The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as ‘an immense accumulation of commodities,’ its unit being a single commodity. Our investigation must therefore begin with the analysis of a commodity.”<sup>48</sup>

As we saw earlier, Marx's move away from Hegel can be clearly seen in the starting point of inquiry. Here we see that Marx has a clearly Aristotelian formation. As we saw, Marx argues that inquiry is “not devoid of premises. It starts out with real premises and does not abandon them for a moment.” This approach is clearly applied in *Capital*. The existence of the capitalist mode of production is not questioned, it is taken as given. In addition, we begin with the capitalist mode of production as it *appears*. Clearly, this is a superficial view, as the rest of the book attests. Still, its appearance should be taken seriously, and is indeed never fully abandoned, but it is worked through.<sup>49</sup> Aristotle takes a similar position when he argues, “we should be grateful...to...more superficial views; for these also contributed something, by developing before us the powers of thought.”<sup>50</sup> Of course our earlier discussion of Aristotle's view that we should

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<sup>48</sup>Marx (1990), p.125. In *Critique of Political Economy*, Marx adds the term “at first sight” again reflecting Aristotelian categories.

<sup>49</sup>The notion of working through, but never fully leaving behind appearances can be seen throughout *Capital*. For instance, when discussing exchange value and value, Marx states, “The progress of the investigation will lead us back to exchange-value as the necessary mode of expression, or form of appearance, of value” Marx (1990), p.128. Given our discussion of Aristotle above, this passage clearly begs an Aristotelian interpretation.

<sup>50</sup>*Metaphysics*, II.1 993b12-14. Aristotle also argues that though truth may in one sense be difficult, in another it may be easy. That is common beliefs are formed on the basis of interaction with the world, and generally contain some degree of truth. Thus truth is like, “the proverbial door, which no one can fail to hit” (*Metaphysics*, II.1 993b5-6).



begin with, “things which are more knowable and clear to us and proceed towards those which are clearer and more knowable by nature” is clearly applicable here. The commodity world is what is clear and more knowable to us. So clear and knowable in fact, that we can reach out a touch its unit (the single commodity) with great ease. We then proceed to the “hidden” nature of the capitalist mode of production. In addition of course, appearance includes a relation with perception. Capitalist society is thus immediately linked to us (the observers), and is thus not strictly objective.<sup>51</sup>

We can say however, along Aristotelian lines, that the starting point is not a presupposition *per se*. That is, the existence of the capitalist mode of production is “self-evident” and an “ordinary belief” about the world. Philosophy for both Marx and Aristotle is a common undertaking.<sup>52</sup> We thus begin with the world as it appears to *us*. We are not only observers but active participants in the capitalist mode of production. That is, “the world is not merely the object of our understanding, it is the occasion for it.”<sup>53</sup> The common experience of the capitalist mode of production is not something limited to the sophisticated observer. If one were to ask the average person on the street whether *we* live in a capitalist economy, the answer would invariably be yes, even if their notion of what capitalism is may be fuzzy. Similarly, as we shall see, Marx’s discussion of labor has a great deal of relevance to the actual experience of the worker on the shop floor. The appearance of the world to those who exist in it is to be taken quite seriously, and investigated thoroughly, even if ultimately, appearances are not the full truth.<sup>54</sup>

In addition, Aristotle as we have seen, argues that, “though one perceives the particular, perception is of the universal.” Experience for Aristotle is possible because the universal (or concept, or order, etc...) is embedded in the particular, prior to investigation. The path along which the natural world leads our investigation is from the particular to the universal, with each stage grounded in the previous stage.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the commodity itself contains the capitalist mode of production within it. The commodity world leads us along a path toward understanding the system itself.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>The starting point of actually existing appearances not only separates Marx from Hegel, but separates him from both Smith and Ricardo. While Smith and Ricardo begin with generalities (the division of labor and value itself respectively) Marx begins with a concrete appearance, the individual commodity.

<sup>52</sup>Thus Aristotle argues that a considerable amount of truth is amassed by the, “union of all” (*Metaphysics*, II.1 993b3).

<sup>53</sup>Lear (1997), p.7.

<sup>54</sup>This of course can be contrasted quite starkly with the approach of neo-classical economics, as anyone who has had the thankless duty of instructing introductory microeconomics can attest. It can be quite difficult to convince students that the economy appears as the calculus of utility on the margin. A decidedly easier task is discussing the appearance of alienation in wage labor.

<sup>55</sup>Lear (1997), pp.2-3.

<sup>56</sup>The parallels that Marx makes with the natural world are worth noting. See for instance the section on “The Metamorphosis of Commodities” Marx (1990), p.198.

We believe then that a fuller understanding of Marx's choice to begin chapter one with the commodity (as opposed to the process of production for instance, or labor in general) is gained by an Aristotelian reading. Indeed, much of the language, with its references to appearance, form, etc..., seems to be influenced by Aristotle's method. In the next section we will investigate the way in which Marx's discussion of labor (and indeed its centrality to his theory of value) builds on Aristotelian categories.

## 6 Conclusion

Previous literature has generally noted the influence of Aristotle on Marx's theory of value, or has understood the Aristotelian categories apparent in certain aspects of Marx's thought as manifestations of Hegel's interpretation in *Logic*.<sup>57</sup> We here argue that Marx categorically rejected the Idealist dimensions Hegel projected onto Aristotle's system, taking instead his own reading of Aristotle to his dialectic. In purposefully beginning with the commodity Marx appropriates an Aristotelian materialism, thus it is our conclusion that Aristotle's thought factored into Marx's method in a significant and meaningful way.

In particular we have focused on the starting point of inquiry. The unmediated starting point is neither possible nor interesting for both Marx and Aristotle. By beginning with what is most knowable and clear to us (the collective participants), Marx is able to demystify Hegel's conceptions of history, self-creation, and alienation, bringing into view the real life-process of human subjects within the historical conditions of capitalism.

An Aristotelian reading of Marx points far beyond his starting point. One of Marx's most important contributions to the labor theory of value, is his theory of the labor process (in particular the distinction between labor and labor power). As has been hinted at in this paper, Aristotelian notions of potentiality and actuality feature prominently throughout Marx's work, particularly in his discussion of the labor process. The process as described in chapter one of *Capital* can be thought of as a movement toward actuality. Labor becomes coagulated in the produced commodity. For both Marx and Aristotle, when human action, imposed on an object, leaves something of itself in the object. Form that exists potentially in the soul (or *techne*) of the architect is actualized in the object. But it is the same form throughout. Thus when Marx argues that, "what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax,"<sup>58</sup> we would argue

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<sup>57</sup>Or in some cases has emphasized the role of Aristotle's *Ethics* and his theory of *praxis* in Marx's thought. See for instance the collection of essays in McCarthy (1992). As far as we are aware, no one has laid out the methodological connection argued in this paper.

<sup>58</sup>Marx goes on to say, "At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes [actualizes] his own purpose in those materials" Marx (1990, p.284).

he has in mind an Aristotelian formation. Form thus has a separate existence from both the architect and the house. This lends an objective quality to labor power (labor potentiality). Aristotle clearly has an objective notion of labor in its potential form. Marx similarly believes labor in its potential form has such a degree of objectivity, that it can be bought and sold on the market. We believe that this understanding of the labor process through an Aristotelian lens is able to contribute to the line of research linking Marx's philosophy (in particular his theory of alienation) and his economics, highlighting the central role of labor.

This reading of Marx also points toward Aristotelian interpretations of value (as a social form embedded in the commodity – essence or universal embedded in the particular), the role of money (actualization of value in the process of exchange), the universality of machine production (machines, like value, call forth their own transformation), and others. Though just an initial foray, we hope this paper lays the groundwork for subsequent explorations. Indeed, once a preliminary understanding of the terms outlined above is gained, there is no shortage of passages in Marx's works that cry out for Aristotelian interpretations.

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