Three Key Terms in Understanding the
Law of Beauty in Marx’s Paris Manuscripts
Notes on Rereading the Paris Manuscripts, Part II
Zhu Liyuan
(Fudan University)

Abstract: This article proposes to reinterpret the three key terms regarding the law of beauty in Marx’s Paris Manuscripts: Maß (Measure, standard), Gesetz (Law) and de Gesetzen der Schönheit (the Law of Beauty). It takes the point of departure in the practical philosophy held by Marx in his early years, in which anthropology and ontology is integrated. On the basis of the reinterpretation of his earlier thought, this article reveals the basic content of the law of beauty; there is aesthetic significance of any product of human objectifying labour, as long as the sensible form of the product suits not only the maß of the species to which the product belongs (lawfulness), but also the maß of human value system (purposiveness); objectively, beauty is the dialectical unification of these two measures, while the sense of beauty is the subjective aspect of the integration.

The exposition on “the Law of Beauty” in Marx’s Paris Manuscripts (Hereinafter “the Manuscripts”) has always been a topic of central vitality in the study of aesthetics in China. There have been different interpretations of “Maß” (Measure) and “Law” (Gesetz) as in the context of “the law of beauty” (de Gesetzen der Schönheit). There are still disagreements as to whether “the law of beauty” contains human subjective (inherent) maß, or, in other words, how to understand the meaning and “objectivity” of “the law of beauty”. This article proposes to reinterpret the connotation of “the Law of Beauty” through explaining the three key terms—“Measure”, “Laws” and “the Law of Beauty” in the Manuscripts.
I. The premise to understand the three key terms: the standpoint of Practice Theory integrated with anthropology and ontology

In my opinion, in order to thoroughly understand the three key terms above, first we should take the standpoint of Practice Theory integrated with anthropology and ontology which was held by Marx when he was writing the Manuscripts in his early years. In the past, Chinese scholars generally agreed that Marx had brought the Practice Theory, which centered upon the concept of material labor, into maturity during the time when he composed the Manuscripts. They also agreed that he held the anthropological perspective influenced by Feuerbach’s humanism, while he rarely mentioned ontology. Even then, it is still believed that it was not that much different from the Western Neumrenal Theory. In fact, so far as I can see, the ontological thought Marx delivered in the Manuscripts had already transcended Neumrenal Theory and laid the foundation for the modern Ontology. Furthermore, the ontological thought here in the Manuscripts was further extended and developed in Marx’s later works, such as Das Kapital. (This problem has already been discussed a lot in previous scholarship, so I will gloss it over in this article.) Also, based on Practice theory and ontology, Marx had actually started to get rid of Feuerbach’s influence in his anthropological thought, and turned to communist revolution practice, “to Liberate Mankind”, instead. I will discuss this problem further in other articles. In this paper, I just want to point out that the Manuscript had most clearly demonstrated that the philosophical standpoint held by young Marx was the practice theory united with anthropology and ontology. Marx rarely used this term “ontology” in his later works, but there is a very important paragraph in the Manuscript. This paragraph has been overlooked in aesthetic study for ages, and it needs to be brought back to our attention. It reads:

If man’s feelings, passions, etc., are not merely anthropological phenomena in the [narrower] sense, but truly ontological (ontologisch) affirmation of being (of nature), and if they are only really affirmed because their object exists for them as a sensual object, then it is clear that: 1. They have by no means merely one mode of affirmation, but rather that the distinct character of their existence (Dasein), of their
life, is constituted by the distinct mode of their affirmation. In what manner the object exists for them, is the characteristic mode of their gratification. 2. Wherever the sensuous affirmation is the direct annulment of the object in its independent form (as in eating, drinking, working up of the object, etc.), this is the affirmation of the object. 3. Insofar as man, and hence also his feeling, etc., is human, the affirmation of the object by another is likewise his own gratification. 4. Only through developed industry—i. e., through the medium of private property—does the ontological (ontologisch) essence of human passion come into being, in its totality as well as in its humanity; the science of man is therefore itself a product of man's own practical activity. 5. The meaning of private property—apart from its estrangement—is the existence (Dasein) of essential objects for man, both as objects of enjoyment and as objects of activity. ②

This paragraph is very rich and profound in content. Due to space limitations, we just focus on three points here in this article.

Firstly, Marx mentioned "ontologisch" twice here. He also used an important concept in modern ontology, "Dasein", twice, which was believed to be initially used by Heidegger as a misconception. This not only contributes to the claim that Marx's ontological thought and dimension exists objectively, but also indicates that Marx by no means interrogated the ontological issue with the method of Substantialism in accordance with Noumenal Theory. Instead, he situated it in the modern ontological realm. That is, Marx discussed the ontological issue in a new realm back to the real life. Nevertheless, the connotation of the word "Dasein" is still different between Marx and Heidegger.

Secondly, Marx talked about "ontology" here in contrast to anthropology. And he placed his affirmation of "ontology" above that of anthropology. He thought that it was not enough to discuss man's feelings, passions, etc. from the anthropological

① It should be noted here that the word "existence" cannot express the original German word "Dasein" properly. Actually, "existence" is a general term which usually means "objectively being". But "Dasein" is more of a philosophic term, which means "ontological being". We should pay attention to the important difference between these two words while we are studying.

perspective. Man’s feelings and passions must be conceived for the really affirmation of being (of nature) from “ontological” perspective. That is, “they (man’s feelings, passions, etc.) are only really affirmed because their object exists for them as a sensual object”. That is to say, man achieves his self-actualization by “man’s own practical activity” through his “sensual affirmation” to the natural objects—objectifying sensual activity (practical activity), which, from Marx’s view, is “truly ontological” (ontologisch). It is thus crystal clear that Marx did have a system of ontology in addition to his epistemological thought. This point cannot be denied easily by anyone. Secondly, Marx’s ontological thought distinguishes itself from western Noumenal Theory based on substantial thinking, which is between men and the objective world (nature). This opened a new way of thinking on modern ontology. The ontological thought in the Manuscript can never be mistaken for substantial material noumential theory. Thirdly, the ontological thought here is closely integrated with anthropological thought, not separate from or parallel with the latter.

Thirdly, Marx’s ontological thought is also quite different from other western modern ontological theories (including Heidegger’s). It is closely meshed with human’s practical activities, which just shows the uniqueness and brilliance compared with other kinds of ontological theories. It also says in the Manuscript that, “Man as an objective, sensuous being is therefore a suffering being—and because he feels that he suffers, a passionate being. Passion is the essential power of man energetically bent on its object.” This proved that the trinity of Practice, Ontology and Anthropology serves as theme running throughout the Manuscript, especially in the exposition of the Law of Beauty.

Before the exposition of the Law of Beauty in the manuscript, Marx first revealed the fundamental difference between humans and animals from an integrated perspective of ontology, anthropology, and practice: “Conscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity. It is just because of this that he is a species-being. Or it is only because he is a species-being that he is a conscious being, i.e.,

---

① Karl Marx; Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Translated; by Martin Milligan from the German text, contained in Marx/Engels, Gesamtausgabe, Abt. 1, Bd. 3. Progress Publishers, Moscow 1959. Third Manuscript, Critique of Hegel's Philosophy. XXV.
that his own life is an object for him. Only because of that is his activity free activity." Here, practice as the fundamental difference between human and animals, is both ontological and anthropological. Accordingly, the manuscript points out further as follows:

In creating a world of objects by his personal activity, in his work upon inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species-being, i.e., as a being that treats the species as his own essential being, or that treats itself as a species-being. Admittedly animals also produce. They build themselves nests, dwellings, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc. But an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, whilst man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom. An animal produces only itself, whilst man reproduces the whole of nature. An animal’s product belongs immediately to its physical body, whilst man freely confronts his product.

Obviously, when Marx compared human’s production with animals’, he actually regarded animals as a kind of “species-subject” to deal with at least. It is the same thing that Marx called both the animals’ activities driven by reproduction instinct and human’s material productive labor as “production.” The word conveys a strong sense of subjectification. Of course, just in order to better illustrate the issue, not really regarding animals the same “subject” as human being. It is worth paying attention to as follows in the above paragraph:

1. Marx took the practical activity of “creating a world of objects” as the basic distinction between human and animals.
2. Marx thought that with the objectifying labor practice, “man proves himself a conscious species-being”, that is, a self-conscious social being.
3. So called human “Conscious life activity” is just an objectifying practical activity, of which the basic characteristics are self-consciousness and freedom.

---

1. Karl Marx; Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Translated; by Martin Milligan from the German text, contained in Marx/Engels, Gesamtausgabe, Abt. 1, Bd. 3. Progress Publishers, Moscow 1959. First Manuscript, Estranged Labor: XXIV.

2. Karl Marx; Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Translated; by Martin Milligan from the German text, contained in Marx/Engels, Gesamtausgabe, Abt. 1, Bd. 5. Progress Publishers, Moscow 1959. First Manuscript, Estranged Labor, XXIV.
"Conscious" is self-conscious; while the self-conscious life activity is also the "free activity".

4. Marx revealed the characteristics above in the contrast between animals' production and human's productive practice in many ways. The differences are charted in detail as follows:

- Animals' production
  a. one-sideness
  b. under the dominion of immediate physical need
  c. produces only itself
  d. the product belongs immediately to its physicality

- Human's productive practice
  a. all-sideness
  b. transcend immediate physical needs
  c. reproduces the whole of nature
  d. freely confronts his product

The four differences above emphasize the four characteristics of human's productive practice (creating a world of objects), that is, all-sideness, transcendence, creativity and freedom, among which human's self-consciousness and freedom is the core. These characteristics show that human realizes his self-conscious purpose in the world of objects through his objectifying activity. They also show the human's initiality to the nature (in the suffering). It is just from this paragraph that Marx directly deduced the exposition on "the law of beauty". After that, he emphasized that "man really proves himself to be a species-being" through practice, and also, "this production is his active species-life". This fully proved that Marx regarded practice as the source and motivity for human to be human, for humans to be a species-being. Then practice has a dual significance of both ontology and anthropology. It is just in this specific context that Marx put forward the law of beauty issue and elucidated it;

An animal forms only in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard

---

(1) Karl Marx; *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Translated by Martin Milligan from the German text, contained in Marx/Engels Gesamtausgabe, Abt. 1, Bd. 3. Progress Publishers, Moscow 1959. First Manuscript, Estranged Labor, XXIV.
of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object. Man therefore also forms objects in accordance with the laws of beauty. ①

The original German of this passage is as below:

Das Tier formiert nur nach dem Maß und dem Bedürfnis der species, der es angehört, während der Mensch nach dem Maß jeder species zu produzieren weiß und überall das inhärente Maß dem Gegenstand anzulegen weiß; der Mensch formiert daher auch nach den Gesetzen der Schönheit. ②

Here, the philosophical standpoint of Practice Theory united with anthropology and ontology that young Marx hold will be the theoretical premise and basis of the three key phrases below for us to understand.

II. Maß (Standard, measure)

The term, Maß (Standard, measure), appears consecutively three times in mere four sentences, which is closely connected to shaping. This term generally contains a variety of meaning, which is unit of measurement, system of measuring, prescribed distance or quantity, scale, assessment of capacity or a fitting amount, etc. “Maß” in the sense of “unit of measurement”, mainly refers to the sensible quantitative relation on the surface of things; in the definition of “a fitting amount”, it mainly refers to the relation in the external form between all aspects of factors, also the harmony and property of the relation between form and content. It is thus clear that “Maß” mainly relates to the form of things, so that “the law of beauty” mainly refers to the law of formal beauty.

This can also be proved from the verb “formiert” in this sentence. The verb “formiert” means “shape”, “form” or “construct”. The noun form of this word means “appearance”, “figure”, which refers to the sensible surface of things, therefore it is different from the general production, “produzieren” (produce) or making, “machen” (make). It seems more appropriate that Mr. He Sijing translated this word into 造型

① Karl Marx; Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Translated; by Martin Milligan from the German text, contained in Marx/Engels, Gesamtausgabe, Abt. 1, Bd. 3. Progress Publishers, Moscow 1959. First Manuscript, Enslaved Labor, XXIV.

(formation) in Chinese. “Man therefore also forms objects in accordance with the laws of beauty” means that the law of beauty is only applicable for the tangible and sensible things, especially for the external sensible beauty of form, shape and image. So, if translated into “produce”, “manufacture”, “make” and “construction”, it will lose many important meanings referring to the proper application range of the law of beauty, including the sensibility and visualization of beauty, formal beauty, etc.

However, it should be noted that all the maß is for man to generalize the characteristics of things. And it is also used as the standard, regulation, requirement, or principle to measure whether the things are complied with it. The first two “Maß” are the measure of “species”, which mainly refers to animal’s (as “species subject”). Animals cannot possibly understand its maß. They can only “produce” unconsciously according to their own species’ maß as standard, regulation, requirement and principle etc. This kind of production can only be limited within not beyond their own species. Their production and reproduction can only take place within the inherent maß of their own species. Nevertheless, in this sentence, the maß of species is human knowledge and the generalization of each species’ inherent maß (standard, regulation, requirement or principle etc.) It ultimately presents humans’ understanding and interpretation of the specific species’ characteristics, which animals’ species themselves can never come to. In this regard, the maß of species still relates to man, which needs human knowledge and generalization. However, the maß of species definitely should be objective (as man’s object) in the exterior of man.

As for the third “Maß”, or “the inherent standard”, it is completely human, which embodies man’s knowledge, need, purpose and rules. There are different views in aesthetic studies. Some scholars believe that the third Maß does not belong to human; but to the object instead, so that “the inherent standard” (das inhärente Maß) should be translated as “固有尺度” (“intrinsic standard”) of the objects, which I do not agree with. I think, in order to understand the attribution of “the inherent standard” precisely, we should firstly understand this verb “anlegen” Marx used here correctly. At this point, I agree with Mr. Ying Bicheng, who pointed out that when the verb “anlagen” is used with a direct object and an indirect object, it means “to put... onto”. If the “inherent maß” is “originally inherent to the object, then it need not to be from outside; it is illogical to say that man who is out of the object puts the inherent
maß of the object onto the object.”⁵ I want to say more about this. That is the basic use of the verb “anlegen” in German; the original meaning of it is “to artificially lay or put something (direct object) onto or against something (indirect object).” The extension meaning can be used as “apply...to”. The key point here is that the two objects which “anlegen” refers to are two different things. These two things which do not relate directly to each other are combined together through the human action “anlegen” (lay). The distinction here should be with regard to the indirect object, “object” (dem Gegenstand). In this words association, what is different from the object can only be subjective, human. If we regard this as the intrinsic maß, which is objectively free, irrelevant to man, then we can not literally explain the difference caused by the verb “anlegen” between “das inhärente Maß” (the inherent standard) and the “object” (dem Gegenstand), because actually both of them are parts of an integral whole. The object and “the inherent standard” of the object cannot be regarded as two irrelevant, different things. Even if we understand this verb from its extension meaning “to apply...to” and “to add...to”, it also means to apply one thing to another. In this context, the direct object is “the inherent standard,” which is different from the indirect object, “object” can only belong to human and the subject. Only if this phrase is understood as human inherent maß, it is correct with the unique usage of “anlegen”. So, based on the unique usage of the verb “anlegen” in German, we can rule out the possibility that “the inherent standard” (direct object) belongs to “the object” (in direct object). Or else, both of the two objects will belong to the same thing, which is not correct with the usage of “anlegen”; After that, “the inherent standard” in the context, can only belong to another thing which is different from “the object”, that is “human”. In that case, it makes sense by either its denotation or its connotation.

To hark back to Marx’s philosophical standpoint of Practice Theory united with anthropology and ontology mentioned above, we can find that in this sentence, “whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object”, the term “inherent standard” has profound meanings behind, which is the purpose, self-

---

consciousness, consciousness, freedom and activeness of man’s practical activities. From that, we can easily find that the inherent maß belongs to man. Obviously, comparing the “production” of the two different “subjects” (animal “species-subject”), man and animal, Marx pointed out here that an animal can only “produce” within the species natural standard in accordance with the standard of the species to which it belongs, whilst men can not only transcend the species natural standard, but also knows (are aware of) how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply “the inherent standard” in accordance with his own needs and purposes to the objects and to reconstruct the objective world practically. So, the third maß, that is “the inherent standard”, can only belong to man, the subject whose essence is self-conscious practice.

Of course, “the inherent standard” man himself “applies to” things can be invented subjectively and freely by no individual. It is not a priori that exists innately in human brain. Also, it is not the nature that the God bestows to man, but is brought into shape by men themselves through long-term objectifying practical labor. From Marx’s standpoint which integrated Practice Theory with anthropology and ontology, just as “human sense, the human nature of the senses, comes to be by virtue of its object, by virtue of humanized nature”①, human maß and the humanity of maß also come out through long-term objectifying practical labor; The formation of human requirements on the maß of each specific objects, just as the five senses, is “a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present.”② Besides, the inherent maß develops continuously according to the level of human’s objectifying labor. It also varies and enriches itself through the evolution of human nature and the “objectively unfolded richness of man’s essential being.”③ The maß that man uses to measure and effect the objects (species) has come into being over time and developed through the

① Karl Max: Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Translated; by Martin Milligan from the German text, contained in Marx/Engels, Gesamtausgabe, Abt. 1, Bd. 3. Progress Publishers, Moscow 1959. Third Manuscript, Private Property and Communism, VIII.

② Karl Max: Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Translated; by Martin Milligan from the German text, contained in Marx/Engels, Gesamtausgabe, Abt. 1, Bd. 3. Progress Publishers, Moscow 1959. Third Manuscript, Private Property and Communism, VIII.

③ Karl Max: Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Translated; by Martin Milligan from the German text, contained in Marx/Engels, Gesamtausgabe, Abt. 1, Bd. 3. Progress Publishers, Moscow 1959. Third Manuscript, Private Property and Communism, VIII.
practice in social life; it does not come out from some a priori, constant human nature.

As for the human property of maß, we can also get circumstantial evidence from the history of Western Philosophy. It is Protagoras, the famous Greek philosopher in the 5th century BC, who first put forward the category “Maß” in the history of Western Philosophy. He said in his On Truth that “Man is the measure of all things; of things which are, that they are, and of things which are not, that they are not.” The etymology of the term “Maß” (μ. έρρημος, meton) in this paragraph has been researched by such scholars as Mr. Wang Zisong etc. as “Plato, Aristotle and Sextus Empiricus all interpreted this term as standard and measure. Aristotle interpreted ‘metron’ in Metaphysics as the measure of knowledge as well as the standard of measure. But Winterseiner translated it as ‘dominat’ (‘owner’ or ‘balancer’).” Here are three points worth particular attention. In the first place, when he mentioned the term “Measure”, Protagoras clearly attributed it to the subject of “human”, not to the objective world; Secondly, Aristotle, not far from Protagoras’ era, interpreted this term in Metaphysics as that “as if he had said ‘the man who knows’ or ‘the man who perceives’; and these because they have respectively knowledge and perception, which we say are the measures of objects.” Aristotle didn’t agree with the relativism aspect of this view, so that he criticized it. But he definitely affirmed that Protagoras’ “measure” not only belongs to the subject of human, but also, is nothing but human knowledge and perception. It is his knowledge and perception that man uses as the measure of objects. The term “Maß” has more sense of humanity and subjectivity as Winterseiner translated this word into “dominant” or “balancer”. From this, it can be seen that the category “Maß” was originally human when it first came into being in the history of western philosophy. It is the standard or balancer for the subject to measure the objects. In other words, it is the inherent criterion for the subject to apply to or produce an effect on the objects.

---


It was Plato who first related beauty and ugliness to "Maß" in the history of western aesthetics. When he talked about purifications of the body, Plato thought that there were there were two kinds of “evil” in the soul: the one responding to diseases in the body, and the one to deformity. "And is deformity anything but the want of measure, which seems more unsightly"① In other words, in Plato's view, “Maß” differentiates beauty from ugliness. “Maß” therefore is determined by men. That is to say, the beauty and ugliness of human body depends on the availability of human “Maß” (that is, whether it meets the needs that human sets for his body). Obviously, “Maß” is for human, not for the objects. Besides, he talked about “Maß” again on the theory of arts. He said, “to place in the one part all the arts which measure number, length, depth, breadth, thickness with their opposites; and to have another part in which they are measured with the mean, and the fit, and the opportune, and the due, and with all those words, in short, which denote a mean or standard removed from the extremes.”② Plato's views in a word: first, all arts are human arts not object's, definitely not of the inorganic world. The "Maß" of arts is certainly human; second, one part of arts relates to "Maß", as Plato cites examples of such “opposite” Maß as length, depth, breadth, thickness etc. The “opposites” here should contain not only the comparison between the objects, but also the contrast with the human needs. The latter is more important, as it is just from his own needs and purposes that man measures the objects; third, another part of arts relates to “mean”, as Plato cites examples of the fit, and the opportune, and the due etc. Actually, these are all "Maß". The Maß of “mean” belongs more directly to the subject, taking human needs as standards. Literature and art in Greece fell into the category of arts, so the standard (including mean) to measure literature and art links closely to the subject, or we can say, to human.

All above is the author's interpretation of the key term "Maß" in the Manuscript.

① Plato; Sophist 228A0, quoted from Fan Mingsheng, A History of Western Aesthetics, Shanghai: Shanghai Literature And Art Publishing House 1997, Vol. 1, p. 337.
III. Law (Gesetz)

Next is the understanding of the term “Law” (Gesetz).

In the aesthetic study in China, scholars regard all laws (including law of beauty) as the principles, rules and regulations, which determine the essential connection and developing trend of things. The Law is purely objective and irrelevant to human. But things will be different in Western languages. Gesetz or Law has many meanings which are not necessarily irrelevant to human.

First let’s see from the perspective of etymology. “Law” originates from “Logos” in Graeco Philosophy. The entry of the term “Law” in an American authoritative dictionary, Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion says:

A Greek term, means “reason, word, statement, discourse, thought, definition, principle, proportion and ratio. Its philosophical function has mainly turned into the meaning of logos, that is ‘reason’. "

So, the original meaning of Logos primarily refers to reason, word, statement, discourse, thought, definition, principle etc. It is human reasoning through his reason. The meaning of proportion and ratio is also subsumed into logos. It is used primarily as human reason in philosophy. Nevertheless, the meaning of logos varied in the history of Western philosophy, which will not be discussed here.

“Logos”, as the origin of the term “Law”, will certainly somewhat limit the basic meaning of Law. The basic meaning of law is a rule of conduct or procedure established by custom, agreement; a legal system; the science and study of law; authority; the system of judicial administration giving effect to the laws of a community; an agency or agent responsible for enforcing the law; a piece of enacted legislation. Laws are established by human to protect normal social orders, so such meanings as “the laws of a community” and “an agent responsible for enforcing the law” refer to human. So, from the perspective of etymology and original meaning, Law (Gesetz) is human, inextricably bound to man (subject), not purely belongs to the objects at all.

Then let’s see the other meaning of Law; one is “principle”, such as the

principle of poem (versification), the principle of game etc.; one is code, rule, custom, such as the rules of physical and mental health (the law of keeping good health), family rule, etc.; one is the body of principles or precepts held to express the divine will; another is appetite, such as the self-preservation instincts, etc. All these entries are human or are established by human, that is, inseparable from the subject. The meaning “rule” is only a secondary or derived meaning of “Law” (Gesetz). “Rule” means the essential connections and the inevitable trends of things in the course of its changing. It is surely objective, but it can be used to instruct man’s practical activities only if man can discover, reveal, generalize and summarize it.

In conclusion, in western languages, “Law” (Gesetz) primarily belongs to human, surely also linking closely to the essential connections and the inevitable trends of the objects themselves. So, we should understand the term “Law” (Gesetz) in the Manuscripts out of our habitual conventional thinking. It cannot be regarded as something objective and irrelevant to human. Meanwhile, in view of the text above, in which “Maß” is explained primarily as human property, I would suggest that the term “Gesetz” in the Manuscripts should be translated as “rules” or “laws” and “de Gesetzen der Schönheit” should be translated into “the beauty of rules” or “the beauty of laws”. But this is just my personal suggestion.

Some scholars think that “beauty” has objective rules irrelevant to human just as the natural laws on the ground that the nature has its own objective and inexorable law to develop. But I beg to differ.

Firstly, the objectivity of nature and natural laws cannot be broadly defined. The “natural laws” theory represented by Mr. Zhu Guangqian, is that in Marx’s sentence, “man knows how to apply the inherent standard to the object to create”, “the inherent standard” is “the inherent standard of the objects”, “the inherent objective rules of every objects”, which is just the “natural law” as Engels said. The author cannot agree with this view. Since the emergence of mankind and the subsequent formation of the new relationship between man and nature, the nature is no longer the object external of man or irrelevant to man; it has gradually turned into the “humanized nature”, which resonates with the argument in the Manuscripts. Marx says, “the nature which develops

---

in human history—the genesis of human society—is man’s real nature; hence nature as it develops through industry, even though in an estranged form, is true anthropological nature." Thus, here come two different kinds of nature: the raw nature and the humanized nature; thereby it is different between the laws of raw nature and “humanized nature”. Furthermore, the latter has actually already become the nature in which man directly exists and lives. Marx criticized Feuerbach that he only knew the former, that is, the raw nature which is irrelevant to human. But in fact, “the nature that preceded human history, is not by any means the nature in which Feuerbach lives, it is nature which today no longer exists anywhere (except perhaps on a few Australian coral-islands of recent origin) and which, therefore, does not exist for Feuerbach.” So from Marx’s view, after the birth of human society, the raw, irrelevant nature no longer exists. Even though we suppose that the law of the raw nature was really irrelevant to man, the “humanized” nature is impossible to eliminate the intervention of human, because circumstances and elements created by the subject of man constitute the integral part of the laws. So “natural law”, especially the law of humanized nature, is by no means the purely objective rule “inherent in the object” irrelevant to human.

Secondly, the law of nature and the law of social history should be differentiated. So is the different expression of the objectivity of these two kinds of laws. The author thinks that since the natural (humanized) law, which is intervened and participated in by human, is not purely objective, the law of human society should definitely be tempered by human intervention. The factor which cannot be denied is that the law of social history came into being after the emergence of human society. Although it is objectively mandatory just as all kinds of laws that no one individual can transfer, its own content implies man’s subjective purposes and activeness is also beyond question. As Marx says, “history is nothing but the actions of men in pursuit of their ends” Engels made a clear exposition about this, “the history of the development of society proves to be essentially different from that of nature. In nature—in so far as we ignore man’s reaction upon nature—there are only blind, unconscious agencies acting upon

---

1. Karl Max; Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Translated; by Martin Milligan from the German text, contained in Marx/Engels, Gesamtausgabe, Abt. 1, Bd. 3. Progress Publishers, Moscow 1959. Third Manuscript, Private Property and Communism, XI.
2. See Marx; The German Ideology.
3. See Karl Marx; Die Heilige Familie, Chapter VI.
one another, out of whose interplay the general law comes into operation. Nothing of all that happens—whether in the innumerable apparent accidents observable upon the surface, or in the ultimate results which confirm the regularity inherent in these accidents—happens as a consciously desired aim. In the history of society, on the contrary, the actors are all endowed with consciousness, are men acting with deliberation or passion, working towards definite goals; nothing happens without a conscious purpose, without an intended aim. But this distinction, important as it is for historical investigation, particularly of single epochs and events, cannot alter the fact that the course of history is governed by inner general laws." Obviously the latter "general laws", that is, the laws of social history, are the laws after the emergence of human society. They cannot avoid the imposition of human's subjective intention and purpose, so that they are human laws; however this doesn't prevent them from playing a role as the "objective" laws which cannot be transferred by any one individual. Their objectivity is embodied in the "resultant force" generated by numerous individuals' subjective purpose and action. Thereby it is no doubt that this "general laws" contains everyone's willed, purposive and self-conscious activities, which are also not irrelevant, purely objective and purely natural. The laws of social history are the laws of social human activities in some certain sense.

Thirdly, "the Law of Beauty" is socially historical, so it is human, socially historical law. First, the law of beauty as the important research content and issue of aesthetic theories, should be within social history field. This has already been discussed by Marxist classic writers. For instance, Engels points out when he evaluates Hegelian system that Hegel's "philosophy of mind ... worked out in its separate, historical subdivisions: philosophy of history, of right, of religion, history of philosophy, aesthetics, etc.—in all these different historical fields Hegel labored to discover and demonstrate the pervading thread of development." Obviously, Engels places aesthetics in "historical subdivisions" or "historical fields", that is to say, within the social, historical realm. Therefore "the Law of Beauty", as one of the core elements of

---


aesthetic research, should be only studied and researched within this clear scope of social historical realm so that it can only belong to the social historical laws. Second, it is said clearly in the Manuscript that the difference between human production and animal's is human self-consciousness, purpose and subjectivity. The manuscripts especially emphasizes that man can apply his own “inherent standard” to the processing and alteration (labor practice) of the objects at the same time when he is able to understand the measure of species (objects) and then puts forward that “Man therefore also forms objects in accordance with the laws of beauty.” Here Marx tells us clearly that he denies that animals can form in accordance with the laws of beauty. That is to say that as for animals, there is no problems of whether beautiful or not, or of the laws of beauty. The laws of beauty makes sense to man, which gradually forms and plays a role as objective rules only after man broke away from animal kingdom. In short, “the law of beauty” can only be the laws of human society and history, not of nature.

IV. The Law of Beauty (die Gesetze der Schönheit)

Above, we discussed the meaning of the term “law” and the humanity and social historical nature of “the law of beauty”. Then, what exactly is “the law of beauty” (die Gesetze der Schönheit)? What exactly is the meaning of “the law of beauty”? There is no clear answer or definition in the Manuscripts. This demands us to further explore the concept in context.

There were some explanations of “the law of beauty” in aesthetic field, but no consensus. For example, the “natural characteristic” theory represented by Mr. Cai Yi thinks that both of “the measure of species” and “the inherent measure” is the purely objective, but the former is an “external standard” while the latter is an “internal standard”. The so-called “measure” (or “standard”) is the same with the words “natural characteristic”, so “the law of beauty” mainly reflects the “natural characteristic” of species and is “the nature of what makes the beautiful things beautiful”. From thus, Mr. Cai further deduced the conclusion that “the law of beauty” is “the law of stereotype”①. Similarly, Mr. Zhang Zhi thinks that the law of

① Aesthetic Review, series 1, pp.49—52, p. 54.
beauty is irrelevant to human subject and "objective outside of the labor subject" but is "the reflection of the nature of what makes beauty beautiful". The view represented by Mr. Li Zehou is that "the law of beauty" (Mr. Li translated into "the measure of beauty") is the unity of purpose and regularity and the unity of freedom and necessity. "The real images caused by the free practice of man who grasps necessity, affirm man's practice (life) everywhere, from which the objectification of man's essential power can be seen everywhere. Thus reality becomes the reality of beauty, and the object of aesthetic feeling". What Mr. Li means is that the law of beauty does not only link to the object, but also to the subject. If man can create the object that is in accordance with both the purpose of the subject and the measure of the object through his objectifying labor practice, the object is certainly beautiful. Other scholars who hold the similar view think that, "the inherent standard" that Marx said is "human standard" of subject, and is "the combination of all human essential power". All the human initiative activities are the dialectical unity of these two standards, which refers to what the sentence, "man forms object in accordance with the laws of beauty" mainly means. Obviously, although these views are different, some of which are even opposite to each other (the views on whether the two standards both belong to the species or to the object are opposite to each other), but the basic line is similar, that is, to grasp the meaning of "the law of beauty" from the two standards and their relations. Mr. Jiang Kongyang however, linking the aesthetic practice, made relatively comprehensive understanding on "the law of beauty". He pointed out that,

I think "the law of beauty" that Marx said includes at least the following several layers of meaning: first, the law of beauty is one of the basic characteristics of human labor. We cannot discuss the law of beauty in abstraction or isolation regardless of human labor practice. Second, the laws of beauty should be in accordance with the laws of different objective things themselves. Thus, the laws of beauty should be of a wide variety, not mechanically identical. The mechanical identical things violate the laws of beauty. The reason why animals cannot produce in accordance with the

---

② Li Zehou: Selected Essays on Aesthetics, p. 148.
laws of beauty is that they have only one rigid way of life while men’s production is free and various so that men’s production is in accordance with the laws of beauty. Third, the law of beauty links closely to the purpose of human labor practice. Only because that, can man realize his aim; only because that, can man exert his essential power in his labor. So only for man can labor be an initiative activity. Only because that, can labor be not compulsory but full of characters, excitement and joy; and only because that, make it a feast to the eye, so it is beautiful. Fourth, the law of beauty is specific, not abstract. Only in “creating the objects” and “forming”, can it come to the law of beauty. ... so the law of beauty should be reflected in the specific material form or image, shining with the colors and sounds.

To sum up, I think that the law of beauty should be as follows: humans change the world according to the laws of objective things in the objective world, combining with men’s individualized aims and wills, through human’s labor practice, which can not only change the external formation of the objective world, but also can realize human’s own essential power and turn this essential power freely into the images joyful and enjoyable. So where there is the relationship between human and nature (reality), there is labor and there should also be the law of beauty.①

In the former point of view, the two kinds of human measure are both considered objective; the purpose, freedom and activeness of the subject are not in consideration, for they do not help develop a correct understanding of “the law of beauty.” Mr. Li Zehou and some other scholars don’t discuss from the front what “the law of beauty” really means, although they’ve noticed this point. From Marx’s anthropological practical theory, Mr. Jiang Kongyang, linking human aesthetic practice, made so far the clearest and the most comprehensive illustration on “the law of beauty”. I generally agree with this point of view, but still want to say something more. I think, generally speaking, the laws of beauty should be the laws that enable the objects (including human) to be beautiful, to be of aesthetic characteristics and value, and to be aesthetic objects which provoke aesthetical pleasures. In details as follows:

Firstly, just as previously mentioned, “the law of beauty” should be human,

should embody the species-nature of human freedom and self-consciousness. Throughout the Manuscripts, Marx thinks about the law of beauty in the comparison between human and animals, who deduced the conclusion that "man therefore also forms objects in accordance with the laws of beauty" from the comparison between animals’ limitations and human subjective activity. This, on the one hand, actually identifies the effect of the law of beauty in the range of human. That is to say, the laws of beauty are human laws, which only make sense to human. It is only man who can cognize and apply the laws of beauty while animals cannot form in accordance with the laws of beauty. Whether beautiful or not doesn’t matter to animals’ products themselves. On the other hand, Marx, in particular, compared the productive practice between human’s and animals’. He points out that human’s productive labor practice reforms the world purposefully according to human requirements. This is "free, conscious life activity" which embodies human nature. Labor practice objectifies human essential power, brands human marks on the world of objects, and also combines all kinds of human essential power on the objects. It is just because of this free, conscious human practical activity that objects have the possibility to turn beautiful. After the comparison above, Marx used a conjunction, "therefore", from which he concluded that "man forms objects in accordance with the laws of beauty". This word, "therefore", suggests that there is an intrinsic causal link between the law of beauty and free, conscious human productive practical activity. Although the law of productive practice cannot be directly equated with the law of beauty, it is closely related to the law of beauty, or to say, is the significant ground of the law of beauty.

Secondly, in the comparison between these two kinds of production, Marx emphasized the comprehensiveness, self-consciousness and purposiveness, that is, freedom and activeness. The sentence in the Manuscripts that "whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object" stresses the comprehensiveness of human production, which is obviously; and also means the self-consciousness and purposiveness of human production, which is always neglected by people. As a matter

---

1) Karl Marx; Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Translated; by Martin Milligan from the German text, contained in Marx/Engels, Gesamtausgabe, Abt. 1, Bd. 3. Progress Publishers, Moscow 1959. First Manuscript, Estranged Labor. XXIV.
of fact, if we peruse this sentence, we’ll find that the law of beauty is not only related to the measure of objects, but also to the measure of subjects (human). It is the dialectical unity of the two measures. What we shall pay more attention to is that here Marx used the active words and phrases such as man “in accordance with the standard” and “apply the inherent standard to the object” to tell us that human productive activity is self-conscious, purposive. The reason why production can be produced on one hand is to correctly understand and grasp the measure of the species and objects (lawfulness); on the other hand is that man knows to apply everywhere the inherent measure to the object, which necessarily implies the other meaning of serving the subjective purpose (purposiveness). So the law of beauty should embody the dialectical unity of the measures of both the subject and the object. The unity is the unity of purposiveness and lawfulness, freedom and necessity, human and nature, which embodies the freedom and consciousness of human production. This is just the deepest foundation on which “the law of beauty” may stand in all human labor practical activities. If we discuss the law of beauty in abstract forms without paying attention to the foundation, it would be poles apart.

Thirdly, further more, the law of beauty is actually the aesthetic law which is that man constructs the aesthetic relations within the real (objective) world through his practical activities. Just as mentioned before, the law of beauty takes effect in the practical activities when man applies inherent standard to the object. That is, the law of beauty can only make sense or be embodied itself in the generalized objectifying activity which can corroborate human essential power. That is to say, man can cognize and grasp the law of beauty only because that he has free will to produce and labor, and he sets his standard with which he can measure the object, and his essential power as the purpose which will be realized on the object at the same time when he cognizes, follows the law and measure of the object. This generalized objectifying labor (activity) and its products will be of aesthetic properties and be according to the laws; that is to say, it is just in the practical activity when human essential power is freely objectified that (human) the subject’s measure and the object’s measure, purposiveness and lawfulness, freedom and necessity can be united organically, so that man and the world may form or construct the real aesthetic relations between each other, that is, to generate the object’s aesthetic properties or beauty in realization, as
well as the subject's aesthetic consciousness or feelings. The generation of the aesthetic relations between people and the world just lies deeply in the endless source, human objectifying labor (practice). In that sense, the law of beauty is actually an aesthetic law that man constructs the aesthetic relations with the real (objective) world through his practical activities.

Fourthly, as mentioned above, measure mainly refers to the measure of external perceptual form, so the law of beauty mainly refers to the law which man applies to the beauty in form (including the law that the subject creates and enjoys the beauty in form, and the law that man constructs and forms aesthetic relations with the form of nature and the art object).

Fifthly, the law of beauty develops over time through a process of gestating, generating, developing and enriching. It is not a fixed close system.

In conclusion, the basic connotation of the law of beauty is that man sets his standard with which he can measure the object, and his essential power as the purpose, which will be realized on the object at the same time when he cognizes, follows the law and measure of the object so as to achieve the organic unity of the subjects’ measure and the object’s measure, purposiveness and lawfulness, freedom and necessity. Then man can construct the specific aesthetic relations with real (objective) world; this kind of aesthetic relations are mainly embodied on the object's external specific perceptual shape, image and form, which are in accordance with not only measure of the species that the object belongs to (lawfulness), but with human requirements and measurements for this object (purposiveness); this aesthetic relation embodied on the object is beauty, while on the subject is sense of beauty. In this sense, the law of beauty is also the aesthetic law.
理解《巴黎手稿》关于“美的规律”论述的三个关键词

——重读《巴黎手稿》札记之二

朱立元
（复旦大学）

【内容摘要】本文提出应该从青年马克思所持的人类学和存在论（本体论）相结合的实践论哲学立场出发，来具体地解读《巴黎手稿》关于美的规律的三个关键词：尺度、规律和美的规律，认为美的规律的基本内容是：任何人的对象化劳动的产品（包括艺术产品），只要其外在的具体的感性形式、形象、形式既符合该产品所属的物种的尺度（合规律性），又符合人对该产品的衡量尺度（合目的性），它就具有审美的意义；这两种尺度辩证统一的客体表现就是美，主体表现就是美感。

【作者简介】朱立元，上海崇明人，现为复旦大学中文系教授、博士生导师。主要著作包括《黑格尔美学论稿》、《美的感悟》等共 11 部、译著 3 部。主编著作和教材包括《现代西方美学史》、《西方美学通史》等共 17 部，与美国学者 J. Block 合编英文版《当代中国美学》（Contemporary Chinese Aesthetics），1995 年由 Peter Lang Publishing 公司在美国出版，是第一部向国外介绍中国当代美学的著作。另发表论文 300 余篇，获省部级以上奖 10 多项。