

# Engels' Ecological Thought and its Contemporary Value Research

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**Abstract:** The ecological problem is a contemporary global problem, and it is also a practical problem faced by my country's modernization drive. Although in the 19th century when Engels lived, environmental problems had not yet emerged, and the ecological crisis had not yet fully erupted, but Engels was forward-looking and aware of the seriousness of the problem with his keen vision. Although Engels did not directly mention the word "ecology" in his writings, it does not mean that he did not elaborate on ecological thought. This article starts from the theoretical origin of Engels' view of nature, explores the formation of Engels' ecological thought, discusses its main content, namely the new development view of harmonious coexistence between man and nature and the social reconstruction of removing alienation, and finally puts forward the impact of Engels' ecological thought on the reference value of solving ecological problems.

**Keywords:** Engels; Ecological Thought; Contemporary Value.

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## 1. Theoretical Origins of Engels' View of Nature

### 1.1. Absorption: Ancient Greek Natural Philosophy

Before ancient Greek natural philosophy, human beings expressed their views on nature through myths, religions, totems and other mystical ways. Ancient Greek natural philosophy demonstrated a new attitude, treating nature as an objective object that can be recognized, understood and grasped, and understanding nature through the universal connection and mutual movement among substances, instead of relying on mysterious forces to explain nature. Thales, a representative of the Miletus school, put forward the classic proposition that "everything originates from water", and Araximenes put forward the proposition that "everything arises from gas". These classical propositions got rid of the early mysticism and had the spirit of rationalism for the first time. Meanwhile, treating water and gas as the root of everything also embodied the spirit of early simple materialism and the principle of wholeness and universality [1]. In addition, Heraclitus, the master of dialectics in ancient Greece, believed that nature was in constant motion, put forward the ideas of "the world is a living fire" and "everything flows", and emphasized dialectical thinking, such as "opposites make opposites". ". Against the background of low productivity and underdeveloped science and technology, ancient Greek natural philosophy explored the nature of nature, but failed to analyze things one by one and attributed the origin of nature to specific material forms, which was eventually replaced by the modern mechanical view of nature.

### 1.2. Critique: The Modern Mechanical View of Nature

The modern mechanical view of nature from the 15th to 17th centuries thoroughly criticized the medieval religious view of nature. The religious view of nature, represented by the philosophies of Thomas Aquinas and Augustine, emphasized the worship of God, proved the existence of God by natural philosophy, and fell into the era of mystical and

illusory religious theology. The modern mechanical view of nature is founded on the critique of religious theology. Natural scientists challenged the creationism of God since the Middle Ages by revealing the laws of motion in nature through systematized and axiomatic knowledge. Bacon proposed empiricism and scientific induction; Galileo combined mathematical descriptions and experimental measurements; and Newton proposed the law of universal gravitation, which successfully explained celestial, terrestrial, and fluid motions. The development of natural philosophy is inextricably linked to modern natural science, and this relationship has made natural philosophy mechanistic. The modern mechanical view of nature adheres to the idea that "heaven is heaven and man is man", separating heaven and man, and dissecting and splitting nature in detail. This has contributed to the development of modern natural science, but it has also led natural philosophers to regard the movement of all things as the movement of mechanical "dead things", and to look at nature from a static and one-sided perspective, ignoring the overall connection and movement among all things. In addition, for natural phenomena that cannot be explained by formulas and laws, modern scientists have resorted to the creation of Christ and the omnipotence of God, which has led to a modern mechanical view of nature that fails to adhere to a materialistic stance and moves towards idealism.

### 1.3. Abandonment: The Classical German Philosophical View of Nature

The concept of nature of German classical philosophy was formed on the basis of criticizing the modern mechanical concept of nature, which was of great significance to the formation of Engels' concept of nature. Represented by Kant, Hegel and Feuerbach, Kant emphasized the subjective position of man, believing that man's knowledge of nature was limited, and that the "thing-in-itself" outside of experience could not be known; Hegel believed that the "thing-in-itself" was the easiest to be known and understood, and put forward a rigorous Dialectical thought. The "thing-in-itself" is a kind of existence without any temporal, spatial, qualitative, material or spiritual stipulation, and it is the product of absolute spiritual movement. [2] Hegel's

philosophy of nature is idealistic, believing that nature is the result of absolute spirit, that man is the highest form of nature, and that nature is the spiritual externalization of man. Feuerbach criticized Hegel and put forward abstract anthroposophy, removing the fog of religious theology and discursive philosophy and restoring nature to its original form. He believed that modern philosophy should study the reality of man and nature, and understand nature through sensory communication, but only regarded man as a biological entity, ignoring emotion, subjectivity and sociality, so that his view of nature has sensual intuition and abstraction.

## **2. The Formative History of Engels' Ecological Thought**

### **2.1. The Germ of Engels' Ecological Thought**

Engels' ecological thought germinated in his examination of the living conditions of workers under the capitalist system. He was keenly aware of the deterioration of the ecological environment in the context of capitalism and documented the impact of environmental pollution on people's lives. This realization was first made explicit in Letters from the Wupper Valley in 1839, observing the remarkable changes in workers' lives as a result of ecological destruction. In the Barmen and Northfield areas, workers lived in doubly degraded environments, and the Wupper River was turned into a red wave by industrial pollution. Alarmed by the alienated state of nature caused by human intervention, Engels saw the cruelty of the capitalist system and the absurdity of religious pietism as the root causes of ecological problems. He penetrated into the underlying social practices and had a deeper understanding of capitalism than the young Marx, focusing on the social problems caused by ecological pollution due to industrial problems. In *The English Condition - A Review of Thomas Carlyle's Past and Present*, he criticized Carlyle's pantheism and revealed the distortion and obstruction of the development of the view of nature by religious teachings. Engels believed that only by overcoming religious doctrines could one correctly understand the self and the relationship between man and nature, and gain true freedom. In 1844, Engels published *Outline of a Critique of National Economy*, pointing out that the relations of production in the economy contain two main components, nature and man, and that the successful completion of production relies on the dialectical unity of these two elements. He refuted the capitalist interpretation of ground rent, pointing out that capitalist private ownership leads to a vicious cycle of competition between labor, land, and capital. In that book, Engels began to think about overthrowing capitalist private ownership in order to dissolve the antagonism between man and nature.

### **2.2. Formation of Engels' Ecological Thought**

Engels shifted from idealism to materialism, and in the process of exploring his worldview gradually developed a materialist view of history and delved into ecological issues. His early attention to the environment was more sporadic, but he first systematically thought about ecological problems in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. In *The German Ideology*, which he co-authored with Marx, he discussed the relationship between human history and natural history, emphasized the importance of material materials to human existence, and pointed out that humans were constrained by nature in their interaction with it. In *Principles*

of Communism, Engels proposed the overthrow of capitalist private ownership, the improvement of land resources and the orderly utilization of natural resources to achieve economic development and urban-rural convergence. In *The Communist Manifesto*, he criticized the ecological crisis caused by capitalism's profit-seeking mode of production, pointing out that the bourgeoisie's unlimited exploitation of nature inevitably triggered economic and ecological crises. Engels' ecological thought moves from empirical investigation to in-depth analysis and gradually forms a systematic ecological theory, which inherits the ecological thought of the previous period and possesses dialectical thinking and analysis of the real situation, which is the key transitional link in the interpretation of Engels' systematic ecological thought.

### **2.3. Development of Engels' Ecological Thought**

Engels' ecological thought gradually developed and matured along with his experience, and deeply explored the relationship between man and nature. In *Dialectics of Nature and Anti-Dühring*, Engels systematically discussed the dialectical and unified relationship between man and nature and society and the subordination of human evolution. He emphasized the antecedence of nature and the agency of man, advocated the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, regarded labor as an intermediary for the unification of nature and human society, and warned against the blind transformation of nature. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Ownership, and the State*, Engels pointed out that the production of material means of subsistence is the basis for the development of human society, and argued that the replacement of the capitalist system by the communist civilization is an inevitable part of historical development. In *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Engels elaborated on the critical inheritance relationship between Marxist philosophy and the philosophies of Hegel and Feuerbach, revealed the law of universal connection and eternal development of nature, further elucidated the systematic nature of the relationship between human beings and nature, and emphasized the importance of respecting the laws of nature and living in harmony with nature. Engels' ecological thought emerged from empirical evidence, developed from practice, and gradually matured through dialectical analysis and systematic cognition.

## **3. The Scientific Discourse of Engels' Ecological Thought**

### **3.1. A New Development Concept of Human Beings and Nature: Harmony between Human Beings and Nature**

Engels believed that nature, society and human beings are inseparable. Nature precedes human society and provides it with basic material needs. Since the formation of humankind, human beings have been dependent on nature, drawing from it such basic materials as water, soil, atmosphere and rivers to meet their survival needs. In the early days, human beings depended on nature for food, clothing, shelter and transportation, i.e., "living off the land". With the development of society, human beings created things that were not found in nature through labor, such as industrial

civilization, which gradually reduced the dependence on nature. Nevertheless, Engels pointed out that this does not mean that humans no longer need nature. Without the basic material materials provided by nature, human society cannot survive, much less achieve self-evolution and civilization. Therefore, human beings must learn to live in harmony with nature instead of trying to dominate and control it. In his *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels pointed out that human society is stronger than other creatures because it is able to correctly recognize and make use of the laws of nature. Only by following the laws of nature can we achieve a harmonious symbiosis between human beings and nature, a symbiosis that transcends capitalist alienation and unlimited production and is a harmonization of human activities with the limits of nature. Engels emphasized that harmonious symbiosis does not mean a regression in history or a return to the primitive age, but rather that human beings recognize the laws of nature in their labor and continue to labor under their guidance. Mastery of the laws of nature enables human beings to more accurately recognize and foresee the long-term effects of their activities on nature, and thus to be more careful in their production, labor, and transformation of nature. In this way, human beings can achieve a higher level of civilized evolution and eventually move towards a communist society. Engels' harmonious coexistence of mankind and nature is the mutual progress of mankind and nature, a two-way realization of mankind's self-evolution and nature's benign development. [5]

### **3.2. Answers to Ecological Problems: Social Reconstruction to Remove Alienation**

In the logical chain of capitalism, the combination of capital appreciation and unidirectional technological development constitutes a unidirectional mode of operation of "production-consumption-waste". [6] In order to gain more profit, capitalists will endlessly dig out the direct material materials needed for production from nature, without considering the regenerative capacity of nature. With capital appreciation, production is no longer for people's material needs, but becomes a tool for capitalists to make money, and production itself is alienated. Under the endless production, the relationship between human beings and nature is also gradually alienated. Nature is no longer a pastoral field where human beings live, but a site for capitalists to excavate industrial raw materials and discard industrial wastes. This alienation of nature is not only reflected in the increasingly poor water supply, the atmosphere and other natural environments, but also in the proletariat, the object of alienated labor. Long before the *Dialectic of Nature*, Engels found that this one-way mode of operation of capitalism left poor workers often with a bad environment. At work, workers often work in abusive environments filled with noise, dust, and dirt; at life, the dispossessed proletariat with their meager incomes are forced to live on the fringes of the city or in the abandoned sites where the capitalists dig for industrial raw materials and discard industrial wastes. The natural crises caused by the endless production of the capitalists have been put on the shoulders of the working class who labor for the capitalists. This makes the life of the proletariat, which already has nothing, even more unsustainable. Therefore, Engels pointed out that only through the elimination of the capitalist mode of production and the capitalist system that this mode of existence is parasitic on, and through the entry into a communist society, can the alienation of production be

truly eliminated, so that production can be returned to production itself, and the alienation between human beings and nature can be completely eliminated, so as to realize the harmonious coexistence of human beings and nature. What Engels meant by the arrival of a communist society is actually a kind of social reconstruction that eliminates the alienation of capitalism and realizes the harmony and unity of human beings, nature and society through social reconstruction.

## **4. The Contemporary Value of Engels' Ecological Thought**

### **4.1. Establishing a New Concept of Development in Which Human Beings Live in Harmony with Nature**

In his *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels sketched out a picture of natural materialistic dialectics, arguing that mankind and nature are inseparable organic wholes and that human activities should be carried out within the constraints of the laws of nature. Although industrial civilization has created a great deal of material wealth, it has also led to the over-consumption of natural resources and the deterioration of the relationship between human beings and nature. To achieve modernization, China must avoid the waste of resources and environmental damage caused by the industrialization process in Western countries, explore a new path of development, and realize a revolution in its concept of development. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that green development means solving the problem of harmonious coexistence between human beings and nature. Green development requires transforming the mode of economic development, improving economic quality, and realizing the benign interaction between economic development and environmental protection. Economic development and ecological protection must proceed in both directions, neither focusing on the economy at the expense of the environment, nor protecting the environment at the expense of the economy. Governance of the environment should be based on systemic thinking and holistic approach to solve environmental problems that jeopardize people's health, avoiding the old one-sided governance model. The realization of the new development concept of man and nature in harmony with the development and application of science and technology also needs to be correctly treated. 21st century science and technology has made great progress, but also brought new ecological problems, such as global warming and plastic pollution. Against this background, anti-science thinking has emerged in Western countries, believing that modern science has led to the alienation of human society and made people lose their nature and freedom. [7] Engels pointed out in *The Dialectics of Nature* that although the age of steam had worsened the relationship between man and nature, it should not be denied. Engels emphasized that what should be negated is the capitalist mode of production and its institutional underpinnings. Scientific and technological progress is an important manifestation of mankind's self-evolution, not in terms of alienation, but in terms of ability and moral improvement. Human beings should utilize science and technology correctly so that they can benefit mankind. Green and low-carbon technologies, guided by the concept of green development, are key to promoting the transformation of production and lifestyles.

## 4.2. Bringing into Play the Institutional Advantages of Socialist Ecological Civilization

Socialist ecological civilization is the theory and practice of redefining the relationship between human beings and nature, human beings and society, and human beings and human beings in the context of global care. It combines the Marxist theory of social development, the traditional Chinese moral concept of "unity of heaven and mankind" and the development path of the new era to form a revolutionary, pragmatic and civilized new ecological concept that transcends and criticizes the anti-ecological development model of capitalism.

First, socialist ecological civilization is the practice of Marxist scientific socialism in the ecological field. In his *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels mentioned the realization of the harmonious unity of humankind, nature and society through social reconstruction. Socialist ecological civilization, with this harmonious unity as its goal, is the fruit of years of practice and development in socialist countries. China has experienced a stage of purely focusing on economic development, leading to serious environmental pollution, but since the 18th National Congress, General Secretary Xi Jinping has proposed that "green water and green mountains are golden mountains", organically combining economic development and environmental protection, and realizing the organic unity of human activities and natural development. It can be said that socialist ecological civilization is the primary stage of the "ecological civilization" of communist society, and it will realize the real "ecological civilization" through long-term and continuous development. [8] Secondly, unlike the narrow and nationalistic nature of capitalist ecological philosophy, socialist ecological civilization is based on the community of human destiny and aims to realize the aspiration of all mankind for a beautiful and clean earth. It advocates a new, positive and open concept of global ecological governance in the overall interests of mankind. The "eight environmental disasters" experienced by capitalist countries triggered reflection on the natural crisis caused by industrial civilization, and various anti-environmental pollution movements and ecological political parties emerged. Although the natural environment of the capitalist countries has improved, behind the scenes they are transferring energy-consuming and highly polluting industries to developing countries and continuing to create natural crises. Western

countries' solutions to ecological problems have mostly remained on slogans, and there has even been ecological regression, such as Trump's announcement in 2017 that he was withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, claiming that climate change is a "hoax." Western countries have not really solved the ecological crisis, but are hiding it.

In the face of this situation, achieving harmonious coexistence between human beings and nature requires the establishment of a new ecological system that is more revolutionary, practical and civilized. Socialist ecological civilization proposes a new model of global ecological governance aimed at overcoming the limitations of capitalism and achieving sustainable development and ecological balance.

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