

# A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF JÜRGEN HABERMAS' CONCEPTION OF LABOUR IN HIS EARLY WRITINGS

Alex-Flavius DEACONU<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *This paper revisits Jürgen Habermas's early conceptualization of labor, emphasizing its framing as instrumental action. While recognizing that Habermas's instrumental model—centered on efficiency and control over nature—captures a vital dimension of labor, the analysis argues that it overlooks labor's full emancipatory potential. To address this limitation, the paper proposes supplementing the instrumental model with communicative action, emphasizing the interplay between labor's technical and moral-social dimensions. By integrating these complementary perspectives, the paper advances a more comprehensive understanding of labor's role in human emancipation.*

**Keywords:** *Jürgen Habermas, labor, instrumental action, emancipation.*

## 1. Introduction

This paper examines Jürgen Habermas's conception of labor as articulated in his early writings,<sup>2</sup> specifically his analysis of labor through the lens of instrumental action. Reassessing these early works is timely for several reasons. First, instrumental accounts of labor remain dominant in contemporary philosophical discussions,<sup>3</sup> and Habermas's early writings provide a robust foundation for such accounts. Instrumental approaches often bracket moral and ethical considerations, treating them as external to the rationality governing labor processes. These approaches define labor's rationality in terms of increased efficiency, the development of productive

---

<sup>1</sup> West University of Timisoara, Romania.

<sup>2</sup> The main works by Jürgen Habermas considered in this paper are *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974); *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); and "Technology and Science as Ideology," in *Towards a Rational Society: Studies in the Philosophy of Social Science*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> Axel Honneth, "Work and Recognition: A Redefinition," in *The Philosophy of Recognition: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Hans-Christoph Schmidt am Busch and Christopher F. Zurn (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 223–240.

capacities, and control over nature.<sup>4</sup> Second, Habermas's early writings include attempts to elucidate the specific emancipatory potential of labor, efforts that extend beyond the narrow confines of the instrumental model. As this paper will show, these writings expose underlying tensions between defending an instrumental account of labor and introducing premises that challenge it.

The critique advanced in this paper, grounded in the assumptions of Habermas's own framework, contends that his account of emancipation surpasses the boundaries of the instrumental model by incorporating an anthropological-transcendental conception of labor. While the instrumental dimension of labor—centered on technical mastery and control over nature—is necessary, it is insufficient to fully account for labor's emancipatory potential. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of labor's role in human emancipation, it is crucial to supplement Habermas's "analytically explainable" link between labor and instrumental action with a connection to communicative action. Labor's emancipatory potential, therefore, relies not only on its technical achievements but also on the needs and purposes it fulfills, which derive their legitimacy through communicative, rather than instrumental, action. Ultimately, Habermas's framework necessitates the recognition of communicative action as an essential counterpart to instrumental action in fully realizing labor's emancipatory potential.

This paper begins by outlining Habermas's instrumental model of labor. It then examines the tensions between development and emancipation in Habermas's account, arguing that communicative action must be integrated into any comprehensive theory of labor's emancipatory role. The conclusion proposes that a revised conception of labor, incorporating both instrumental and communicative actions, provides a more robust framework for understanding labor's contribution to human emancipation.

## **2. Labour as Instrumental Action: Development through the Control of Nature**

The strengths—and, as this paper will argue, the limitations—of Habermas's instrumental model of labor stem from his conception of labor

---

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas H. Smith, "Three Normative Models of Work," in *New Philosophies of Labour: Work and the Social Bond*, ed. Nicholas H. Smith and Jean-Philippe Deranty (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 181–206.

as a form of purposive action. In this framework, labor is primarily oriented toward the control and manipulation of natural processes, with technical knowledge continuously informing and enhancing the efficiency of labor activities. This section highlights the strengths of Habermas's argument, grounded in the "analytically explicable connection" between labor processes and purposive-rational action.<sup>5</sup> The productivity of labor can be improved through the application of technical knowledge, technologies, and competencies, thereby ensuring increased control over nature. While this connection is plausible, unpacking it requires a closer examination of Habermas's typology of actions.

Decisive for Habermas's typology is the distinction between "orientation to success" and "orientation to reaching understanding."<sup>6</sup> Purposive-rational actions are oriented toward success, while communicative action is oriented toward reaching agreement. Within the category of purposive-rational actions, Habermas distinguishes between instrumental and strategic actions. Instrumental actions are directed toward the control of nature, whereas strategic actions involve complexes of behaviors aimed at gaining control over "cooperative human beings." For the sake of brevity and clarity, this paper considers only the "analytical connection" between labor processes and instrumental action.

Although both instrumental and strategic actions are oriented toward success rather than understanding, they differ in the specific rules they follow and the meaning of "success" appropriate to each. Instrumental actions adhere to technical rules, with success measured by how effectively goals are achieved in the physical world. Strategic actions, on the other hand, follow the principles of rational choice, with success determined by how effectively they influence the decisions of "rational opponents" in the desired direction.

More specifically, the attributes of instrumental action can be identified through the types of rules governing it and the type of knowledge used to evaluate the validity of these rules. Instrumental action is governed by technical rules derived from empirical knowledge, enabling

---

<sup>5</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Reply to My Critics," in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, ed. John B. Thompson and David Held (London: Macmillan, 1982), 267. I also draw on Thomas McCarthy's exposition of Habermas's typology; see Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978), chap. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Habermas, "Reply to My Critics," 263.

the development of predictions about observable phenomena.<sup>7</sup> A second criterion, closely related to the first, concerns the conditions under which the validity of these rules can be confirmed. Valid technical rules produce correct, empirically verifiable predictions, and their refinement depends on the accumulation of technical knowledge about natural processes. Today, the empirical-analytical sciences are the primary contributors to this body of technical knowledge. Indeed, a key element of Habermas's conception of epistemology as social theory is the recognition of the empirical-analytical sciences as a reflexive system of purposive-rational action.<sup>8</sup>

Labor shares several key features with instrumental action. Both are oriented toward nature—if we understand "nature" not merely as the domain of beings other than humans but also as encompassing human beings in their natural, corporeal condition. From this perspective, humans themselves can be objectified, studied, and controlled, much like any other natural process. Furthermore, labor activity is governed by technical rules, and the laborer relies on technical knowledge to perform work tasks. Building chairs, constructing bridges, transforming landscapes, and other productive activities require adherence to standardized technical rules and the accurate application of technical knowledge. The improvement of labor activities and processes, therefore, depends significantly on the advancement of technical knowledge about natural processes and its integration into labor practices. Finally, as a form of purposive-rational action, labor necessitates a degree of competence or skill from the laborer. The more skilled the laborer, the greater their likelihood of success in activities requiring specific skill sets. In summary, instrumental action, as a type of purposive-rational action, aligns with labor in three fundamental aspects: its orientation toward nature, its reliance on technical rules and knowledge, and its requirement for competence or skill in execution.

The concept of development emerging from the relationship between labor and instrumental action centers on increasing control over natural

---

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Technology and Science as Ideology," in *Towards a Rational Society: Studies in the Philosophy of Social Science*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 92.

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of Habermas's notion of the sciences as systems of purposive-rational action, see, among others, John Keane, "On Tools and Language: Habermas on Work and Interaction," *New German Critique*, no. 6 (Autumn 1975): 82–100; see also Axel Honneth, *Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, trans. Kenneth Baynes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), chap. 7.

processes. In this narrow sense, the rationalization of labor can be understood as the enhancement of our ability to control and transform nature—a process advanced through the accumulation of technical knowledge, which is reintegrated into labor practices. However, this instrumental perspective fails to fully capture the broader potential of labor, as it neglects the essential fact that labor is a fundamental human activity. To fully illuminate labor's intrinsic potential, the action-theoretical view of labor as merely instrumental action must be integrated into an anthropological framework.

### **3. Labour and its Role in Human Emancipation**

In Habermas's early writings, which form the focus of this paper, the theoretical framework is grounded in an account of human emancipation. Drawing on the works of Hegel and Marx, Habermas argues that labor embodies distinct emancipatory potentials. In this context, emancipation refers to the process by which rational human self-determination is achieved through liberation from internal (e.g., ideology) and external (e.g., material) constraints, mediated by various forms of action, such as interaction or labor. More specifically, Habermas conceptualizes labor as an activity with emancipatory potential by synthesizing Hegel's account of labor as a medium for the formation of subjectivity, as articulated in his Jena writings, with Marx's notion of "objective activity."<sup>9</sup> Habermas's interpretation of Hegel's Jena lectures provides a critical context in which labor is revealed as a fundamental medium for both the formation of subjectivity and the emancipation from external nature. Unlike philosophies of reflection, which posit the formation of subjectivity as a monological act of self-reflection, Hegel asserts that this development is mediated by dialectical relationships, where the "I" functions as only one of the poles.<sup>10</sup> Within this theoretical framework, labor serves as a crucial medium for the formation of subjectivity in its engagement with external nature.

The dialectics of labor represents the process by which the initial condition of bondage, characterized by the "animalistic spirit" of immediate drives and desires, is transcended. Labor achieves this transcendence by

---

<sup>9</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Labour and Interaction," chap. 4 in *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974).

<sup>10</sup> Habermas, "Labour and Interaction."

subjecting the subject to the constraints of nature in a twofold manner. First, it requires the suspension—or rather the postponement—of drive satisfaction, as the fulfillment of desires depends on goods yet to be produced.<sup>11</sup> Second, it subjugates the subject to the laws of nature. The subject can intervene in natural processes only to the extent that its energies and efforts are objectified as natural forces. Tools serve as the distinct medium of the subject's objectification in labor, as they translate, so to speak, the causality of nature into technical rules that the subject must abide by while laboring. However, in employing tools, the subject is not merely subjected to the causality of nature but also actively uses these tools to control natural processes for its own benefit, namely, the satisfaction of drives and desires. Thus, the dialectic of labor entails the objectification of the subject, which assumes a "thing-like" appearance, and is realized in the formation of a "cunning" consciousness that "controls the natural processes through its tools."<sup>12</sup>

In Hegel's Jena writings, the dialectics of labor is one of three media of subjectivity formation, alongside linguistic symbolization and interaction, which together constitute the movement of the Spirit's self-constitution. However, as Habermas shows, the model outlined in these writings remains underdeveloped, and the three dialectics lose their centrality—or disappear altogether, as in the case of the dialectics of labor—in Hegel's mature conception of the Spirit. According to Habermas, this shift occurs because Hegel further develops his model based on the premises of a philosophy of identity. In this framework, although nature

---

<sup>11</sup> In Hegel, this possibility is explained through the dialectics of linguistic symbolization. Linguistic symbolization enables things to be represented *in absentia* and designated in their meaning for consciousness. As a result, in contrast to the "animalistic spirit," for which experiences are given immediately as sensations, consciousness distances itself from the objects of immediate perception and experiences itself as a subject for which nature holds meaning. Yet, because symbols are its own products, consciousness experiences itself as objective by encountering nature as both its other and as meaningful. Through the dialectic of representation, with language as its medium, the "being of consciousness" and "the being of nature" become separated "for consciousness" (see Jürgen Habermas, "Labour and Interaction," chap. 4 in *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel [Boston: Beacon Press, 1974]).

<sup>12</sup> Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, 155.

initially appears as the "other" of subjectivity, it is revealed, in the course of the Spirit's self-development, to be subjectivity in disguise.<sup>13</sup>

Habermas finds Hegel's metaphysical framework of the philosophy of identity unconvincing. However, recognizing the value of the idea of labor dialectics, he seeks to develop it further by appealing to Marx. In Habermas's view, one of Marx's greatest achievements is his materialist development of the dialectics of labor, which explains the emancipatory potential of labor. For Marx, the dialectics of labor does not signify the process by which nature, initially disclosed as the absolute "other" of Spirit, is ultimately revealed as subjectivity in disguise. This self-limitation is consistent with Marx's rejection of the philosophy of identity. Instead, Marx understands dialectics as the process through which the human species externalizes its productive powers—transforming nature—experiences these powers and their outcomes as objectified "otherness," and overcomes the condition of alienation by reappropriating these externalized powers. In other words, labor mediates the "synthesis" of subjectivity and nature. Unlike Hegel, however, Marx does not conceive this synthesis as absolute; through labor, nature does not disclose itself as subjectivity. Rather, the relationship between subjectivity and nature is understood in terms akin to Kant's transcendental philosophy: objective nature is not nature in itself but the counterpart of the "objective activity" of subjectivity. Nevertheless, Marx diverges from Kant by explaining the "synthesis" not as the achievement of transcendental consciousness but as the accomplishment of the human species engaged in labor. Through labor, the world is disclosed as a space in which "reality appears subject to conditions of the objectivity of possible objects of experience."<sup>14</sup> Against idealist philosophy, Marx's materialism posits that the basic categories of reality—those that structure human experience and ground the possibility of objective knowledge of nature—are not the accomplishments of transcendental consciousness or absolute mind but the achievements of the species' "objective activity," labor.<sup>15</sup> Habermas contributes to this argument by asserting that the possibility of objective knowledge of nature is

---

<sup>13</sup> Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, 162–163.

<sup>14</sup> Although this may not necessarily appear so to social agents, i.e., the laboring subjects (see Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1971], 27).

<sup>15</sup> Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, 27–30.

epistemologically secured because the conceptual-perceptive schemes through which nature is experienced and objectively known are “rooted in deep-seated structures of human action.”<sup>16</sup>

Habermas draws on Hegel and Marx to conceptualize labor as a medium of emancipation from the constraints of external nature in a twofold sense. First, labor serves to make nature available to human needs and purposes. It achieves this by bringing natural processes under human control and transforming them in desired directions. Second, emancipation extends beyond control over natural processes to include the formation of subjectivity. In Hegel's idealist philosophy, the process of emancipation also involves the development of a "cunning consciousness." In contrast, Marx's materialist perspective interprets the self-formation of the human species as the subject pole of labor processes—through which nature is brought under human control—as a natural outcome of the development of the productive forces.

#### **4. The Tensions between Development and Emancipation in Habermas' Conception of Labour**

The analysis of Habermas's account of labor in his early writings, as discussed thus far, reveals underlying tensions regarding the potential of labor. In the narrow sense of labor as instrumental action, the internal goal of labor is the control of natural processes, which serves as the criterion for measuring the development of productive forces. However, within the broader context of emancipation, control over nature emerges as a necessary but insufficient condition for liberation from external constraints. As previously noted, Habermas's account of the dialectics of labor presupposes an additional stage—one he mentions but does not fully develop in terms of its conditions for realization or its significance for emancipation through labor. Labor is not solely aimed at controlling natural processes; rather, it seeks to make nature—through that control—available to satisfy human needs and purposes. Emancipation from the constraints of external nature is achieved not merely through environmental control but through the production of goods and commodities that fulfill human needs. In this sense, labor contributes to human emancipation by transforming nature to serve human purposes.

---

<sup>16</sup> Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, 36–37.



The tension between the concept of development within the instrumental view and the notion of labor-based emancipation could, in theory, be resolved in favor of the instrumental-technical conception of labor if the conditions for emancipation were implied within it. However, as argued in this section and the next, this is not the case. Nor can labor's contribution to emancipation be considered external to its *telos*. In simple terms, the mediated satisfaction of human needs and purposes is a condition for labor-based emancipation, one that cannot be fulfilled by instrumental rationality alone, as described in Habermas's analysis of labor as instrumental action. To make explicit the connection between human needs or purposes and the emancipatory potential of labor, it is useful to examine Habermas's commentary on Hegel's conception of labor as a medium for subjectivity formation. Habermas endorses the notion that the labor process

terminates in mediated satisfaction, the satisfaction in the commodities produced for consumption, and in the retroactively changed interpretation of the needs themselves.<sup>17</sup>

There are two main claims in the above quote. The first states that the endpoint of labor is "mediated satisfaction," specifically the production of commodities suitable for consumption that fulfill human needs and purposes. This implies that labor must be guided not only by technical knowledge about natural processes but also by knowledge of the needs and purposes it seeks to satisfy. Without this second form of knowledge, labor processes might achieve control over nature and the production of commodities, but these accomplishments would be insufficient for emancipation if the resulting products fail as mediums for satisfying needs. Labor processes contribute to emancipation when they incorporate knowledge of these needs and allow themselves to be guided by it during commodity production. Successful labor results in commodities with functional properties that can be realized precisely within the context of need and purpose satisfaction. For example, producing a comfortable chair requires transforming wood, which establishes a relationship between labor and external nature. However, beyond this transformation, the process must also incorporate knowledge of the need to sit, what this need entails, and the distinction between comfortable and uncomfortable sitting.

---

<sup>17</sup> Habermas, "Labour and Interaction," 155.

Only by integrating such knowledge can the labor process result in a comfortable object for sitting. Additionally, the chair may serve aesthetic purposes, reflecting stylistic elements or cultural and moral norms.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, knowledge about the needs and purposes of the human species—and the development of a feedback mechanism between labor and this knowledge—represents a crucial condition for labor to play a role in human emancipation. Emancipation through labor, therefore, entails two fundamental conditions: the expansion of labor's productive powers to enhance the control and transformation of natural processes, and the incorporation of knowledge regarding the needs and purposes to be satisfied through labor's products.

The notion of labor as instrumental action is compatible with labor-based emancipation only if the conditions of labor *development* are sufficient to explain the possibility of *emancipation*. More specifically, this compatibility holds only if knowledge concerning the needs and purposes mediately satisfied by labor can be understood as an achievement of instrumental action. While the argument that the first condition of emancipation—the development of labor forces—derives from the achievements of instrumental action is compelling, it is less evident that instrumental action alone can fulfill the second condition. Admittedly, technical knowledge is necessary for the production of useful goods. The transformation of "nature" into goods depends on technical knowledge about the properties of objects valuable to human life and the technical procedures by which these objects can be shaped and transformed in desired directions. However, while technical knowledge is required to translate purposes and needs into technical problems that the labor process can address, it does not itself pertain to human purposes and needs. Rather, it concerns their translation into solvable technical problems and, as such, presupposes an underlying understanding of human purposes and needs.

The second part of the quote provides valuable insights, suggesting that the understanding of needs and purposes is not solely the result of technical knowledge. It states that the dialectic of labor culminates in "the

---

<sup>18</sup> Support is offered by Boltanski and Chiapello's sociological finding that even in contemporary societies, the products of labor are linked not merely to utilitarian considerations but also to the notion of the "common good." See Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2018).

retroactively changed interpretation of the needs themselves.” This implies that needs are not fixed or predetermined; rather, what qualifies as a need to be fulfilled through labor is shaped, in part, by labor processes’ capacity to meet those needs and purposes. As productive capacities expand, so too does the scope of needs and purposes that can be satisfied within natural constraints. Habermas emphasizes this trajectory of development, highlighting that the evolution of labor processes and the increased power of control they bring reshape our understanding of human needs and purposes. This transformation occurs through reflection and reinterpretation, which depend on both the plasticity of human needs and the interpretive processes that shape them. At the same time, the stage of development of labor processes exerts a determining influence on the plasticity of needs and their reinterpretation.

This raises a central question: is the understanding of needs and purposes, gained through interpretation, an achievement of instrumental action? The following section argues that, despite Habermas's emphasis on the interrelation between technical knowledge feeding back into labor processes and shaping the form of needs and purposes, other premises of his theoretical framework support the view that this interpretation-based understanding—central to the process of emancipation from external nature through labor—is not a product of instrumental action. Instead, it arises from a second, distinct form of action that is irreducible to the first: communicative action.

## **5. Beyond Instrumental Action: The Role of Communicative Action in Labour's Emancipatory Potential**

The argument thus far has established that the mediated satisfaction of needs and purposes relates to the goal of labor in connection with the possibility of emancipation. Knowledge of these needs and purposes guides the labor process, as they determine the commodities to be produced. This section contends that such knowledge cannot be purely technical. Simply put, the question of which needs and purposes labor should serve—where this service is a condition for labor to assume an emancipatory role—cannot be answered solely on the basis of technical knowledge or the developmental potential of labor as instrumental action. This section further reinforces the argument by asserting that the mediated satisfaction of needs and purposes through labor is insufficient to realize its emancipatory potential. The moral quality of these needs and purposes is

also essential. As will be shown, basic Hegelian premises underpinning Habermas's typology of action support the idea that understanding their moral quality is not an achievement of instrumental action but of a fundamentally distinct form of action: communicative action.

This distinction becomes clearer when we examine Habermas's account of communicative action.<sup>19</sup> He categorically differentiates communicative action from instrumental action based, among other criteria, on the types of rules that govern it and their specific conditions of validation. Communicative action is governed by consensual norms established between at least two subjects, norms that define "reciprocal expectations regarding behavior."<sup>20</sup> These norms are valid only if they arise from mutual understanding and are affirmed through the recognition of obligations that emerge from them. Individuals become competent participants in interactions by internalizing these norms—a process embedded in socialization that contributes to the development of personality structures. Additionally, analogous to his pairing of instrumental action and labor—as a type of action and a fundamental activity of the human species, linked through the "analytically explainable connection" that illuminates the emancipatory potential of labor—Habermas establishes a similarly close connection between communicative action and interaction. This pairing highlights the specific emancipatory potential of interaction. As with labor, a key context in which Habermas explores the relationship among interaction, communicative action, and emancipation is his commentary on Hegel's Jena writings.

In Hegel, interaction represents a distinct medium of subjectivity formation, involving a process in which the "I" is only one pole and self-identification is achieved through the reconciliation of the "I" with the other individual. More specifically, interaction serves as the medium within which practical self-consciousness and the moral identity of the "I" are realized. Accordingly, interaction enables participants to freely develop their subjectivity, but only insofar as it entails mutual recognition. This occurs when the terms of interaction are not unilaterally imposed by one party through force but are instead the outcome of communication free

---

<sup>19</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Technology and Science as 'Ideology,'" in *Towards a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 91–92.

<sup>20</sup> Habermas, "Technology and Science as 'Ideology,'" 92.

from compulsion. Hegel illustrates the formation of intersubjectivity free from compulsion as a dialectical process mediated by struggles for recognition. As Habermas observes, it is not “unconstrained intersubjectivity itself” that is dialectical—since this represents the endpoint of the formative process—but rather “the history of its suppression and reconstitution.” The formation of the moral self—this dialectical process—is, according to Habermas, triggered when the moral basis of interaction, consisting of “the complementary interchange of noncompulsory communication and the mutual satisfaction of interests,” is disrupted.<sup>21</sup> Such disruption occurs when one party negates the moral foundation of social life by “putting himself as an individual in the place of the totality.” In doing so, the perpetrator not only violently negates the identity of the other by refusing to recognize it as a self-standing identity, but also undermines the foundation of their own identity, which is rooted in intersubjectivity. Consequently, the “criminal” experiences alienation not only from the other but also from themselves. This condition of alienation, rooted in violent self-assertion, can be overcome only when “the dialogic relationship of recognizing oneself in the other,” through which both parties “experience the common basis of their existence,” is restored.<sup>22</sup> Habermas’s reconstruction of the logic and *praxis* characterizing the dialectics of moral life leads to the conclusion that the establishment of “unconstrained intersubjectivity” in interaction depends on communicative action.<sup>23</sup> In other words, interaction functions as a medium of emancipation only insofar as it supports the development of moral self-identity free from domination. Ultimately, only unconstrained communication can transform interaction into a medium of moral emancipation.

Equally important for our discussion, Hegel’s dialectics of moral life points to the idea of complementary needs and interests as an ethical ideal, with communication free from domination as a condition for achieving it. In this regard, Hegel seeks to overcome the empty formalism of Kant’s morality of duty by presenting the moral relation as a *praxis* of life.<sup>24</sup> This moral relation is made possible by the prior—albeit initially unacknowledged—interconnection of the lives of participants. Hegel

---

<sup>21</sup> Habermas, “Labour and Interaction,” 148.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Habermas, “Labour and Interaction,” 152.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 150–152.

conceives the self-formative process mediated by the dialectic of moral life as incorporating the mutual disclosure of needs and purposes that participants can recognize as their own and regard as legitimate aims of cooperative interaction. The expansion of communication within interaction allows for the retrospective reinterpretation of those needs and purposes whose realizability is ensured by the institutional framework of society. In this sense, we can speak of emancipation in relation to needs and purposes when barriers to the evaluation of their desirability are overcome through communication free from coercion. Therefore, knowledge regarding the needs and purposes to be socially satisfied cannot be purely technical, nor can it result solely from instrumental action. Instead, it is an achievement of communicative action within interaction. With this clarification, the foundation for critiquing the reduction of labor to merely instrumental action has been fully established.

## **6. A Critique of the Instrumental Model**

To reiterate, Habermas maintains that labor is the medium of emancipation from external nature and attributes the developmental potential of labor to the achievements of instrumental action. This account correctly identifies the achievements of instrumental action as one of the conditions under which labor contributes to emancipation from external nature. The development of technical knowledge enhances the human species' power over objectified natural processes, while labor processes themselves rely on this power to increase production capacity. The productivity of labor is augmented through the application of technical knowledge. As instrumental action, labor is understood as a productive activity enabled by the control over natural processes and guided by technical knowledge, resulting in the transformation of nature.

However, a closer examination of the premises underlying Habermas's conception reveals that emancipation through labor presupposes not one but two conditions: the expansion of control over natural processes and the production of goods capable of satisfying human needs and purposes. The instrumental account of labor on which Habermas relies fails to fully develop the idea that the dialectic of labor, which elucidates the dynamics of emancipation from nature, is not achieved solely through the instrumentalization of natural processes but also through the mediated satisfaction of needs and purposes.

Labor cannot be reduced to instrumental action because, unlike instrumental action, it relies not only on technical knowledge but also on practical knowledge to fulfill its purpose. As demonstrated, the fundamental premises of Habermas's own framework lead to the conclusion that the problem of needs and purposes belongs to the dialectic of moral life. Unconstrained intersubjectivity emerges as a precondition for the mutual clarification of needs and purposes—a condition that is not given but achieved through the expansion of free communication in interaction. Since the increase in the productive powers of labor cannot provide guidance regarding the needs and purposes whose material preconditions are created by labor, the emancipatory potential of labor transcends the category of instrumental action.<sup>25</sup>

Accordingly, the Hegelian premises of the action-theoretical framework in Habermas's early works—within which the dialectics of labor and moral life are articulated—lead to the conclusion that the emancipatory potential of labor is rooted in both the achievements of instrumental and communicative action. This potential is fully realized only when the interrelation between these dialectics is acknowledged, rather than treating them in absolute isolation, as Habermas tends to do. Indeed, the level of development of labor power is relevant to determining

---

<sup>25</sup> Other critiques of the instrumental model of labor focus on the question of the worker's subjectivity and its relevance for the notion of labor. For example, Axel Honneth, Jean-Philippe Deranty, and others argue that the instrumental model is reductionist and deficient because it overlooks the fact that labor matters to workers—not purely for its instrumental nature, but also as a distinct medium of self-confirmation. Without passing judgment on this critique, I note that the argument proposed in this paper is distinct by engaging with the goal of labor as recognized by the instrumental model, making the case that labor depends not only on technical but also morally relevant knowledge to achieve its basic goal: emancipation from external nature. For critiques focused on the subjectivity of the worker, see Axel Honneth, "Work and Instrumental Action: On the Normative Basis of Critical Theory," in *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 15–49; Christophe Dejours, Jean-Philippe Deranty, Emmanuel Renault, and Nicholas H. Smith, *The Return of Work in Critical Theory: Self, Society, Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Andrea Veltman, *Meaningful Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

the content of needs and purposes, as without adequate development, the satisfaction of needs and fulfillment of purposes dependent on labor would remain empty or utopian. However, the production of goods, even under conditions of increased productive power, fails to support the reproduction and development of the human species if it serves no needs or satisfies ideologically defined needs. Perhaps the most striking contemporary reflection of the inadequacy of the instrumental model is the ecological crisis. This crisis arises from the development and application of labor processes, which, despite increasing control over nature, result in environmental destruction. One could argue that this trajectory contradicts genuine human purposes, as emphasized by ecological critiques. A society in which labor is directed toward perpetual development but produces goods that serve no real needs—or the wrong kinds of needs—is on a path to moral self-destruction. In such a society, labor that ensures only the "mediated satisfaction" of these needs cannot be considered emancipatory.

## **7. Conclusion**

This paper has shown that, within Habermas's framework, labor operates in both a narrow and a broader sense. In its narrow, instrumental sense, labor focuses on controlling nature, with the criterion of progress being the development of productive power. In its broader sense, labor encompasses the activity through which humans secure the material basis of their existence. This broader perspective integrates not only instrumental action but also the practical knowledge required to address human needs and purposes. In this context, labor must be understood in relation to the dynamics of moral life, where unconstrained intersubjectivity and communicative action are essential for fulfilling human needs.

As discussed, the connection between labor and moral development becomes evident when considering that labor's effectiveness in supporting human reproduction and development depends on producing goods that fulfill authentic human needs, rather than those shaped by ideology or defined unilaterally. A society that fails to align labor with genuine needs risks moral decline, thereby undermining the possibility of emancipation. Consequently, the developmental potential of labor in its purely instrumental sense falls short of encompassing the full meaning of emancipation. True emancipation involves not only productivity and control over nature but also an ethical orientation toward satisfying legitimate human needs through free and communicative interaction. From



the perspective of human emancipation—the central concern of Habermas's critical social theory—the instrumental model of labor requires correction.

## REFERENCES

- BOLTANSKI, Luc, and Ève Chiapello. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, 2018.
- DEJOURS, Christophe, Jean-Philippe Deranty, Emmanuel Renault, and Nicholas H. Smith. *The Return of Work in Critical Theory: Self, Society, Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.
- HABERMAS, Jürgen. *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.
- . “Labour and Interaction.” In *Theory and Practice*, Chapter 4. Translated by John Viertel. Boston: Beacon Press, 1974.
- . “Reply to My Critics.” In *Habermas: Critical Debates*, edited by John B. Thompson and David Held, 219-83. London: Macmillan, 1982.
- . “Technology and Science as ‘Ideology.’” In *Towards a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*, translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro, 81-122. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.
- HONNETH, Axel. *Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*. Translated by Kenneth Baynes. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991.
- . “Work and Instrumental Action: On the Normative Basis of Critical Theory.” In *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*, 15-49. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.
- . “Work and Recognition: A Redefinition.” In *The Philosophy of Recognition: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Hans-Christoph Schmidt am Busch and Christopher F. Zurn, 223-40. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010.
- KEANE, John. “On Tools and Language: Habermas on Work and Interaction.” *New German Critique*, no. 6 (Autumn 1975): 82-100.
- MCCARTHY, Thomas. *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978.
- SMITH, Nicholas H. “Three Normative Models of Work.” In *New Philosophies of Labour: Work and the Social Bond*, edited by Nicholas Smith and Jean-Philippe DERANTY, 181-206. Leiden: Brill, 2011.
- SENNETT, Richard. *The Craftsman*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.
- VELTMAN, Andrea. *Meaningful Work*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.