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What is Praxis? Discussed in relation to Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Sartre

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Abstract
This essay examines the concept of praxis in the works of four writers; Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Sartre. The first section unpacks the concepts of Hegel central to a praxian approach – becoming and dialectic – together with Marx's utilization of them. The next section constitutes a more extensive discussion of praxis using the works of Nietzsche, extracting from his notoriously equivocal writings a distillation of his praxian intent. The penultimate section mines the writings of Sartre for a reading of praxis that, like that of Nietzsche, posits individual free will as the sole facet of being, and thus the agent for individual purpose and transformation.

The last section compares and contrasts the various conceptions of praxis, with an emphasis on the similarities between them and the transformative promise of each. It is concluded that, while the respective praxes of Hegel and Marx provide emancipatory and revolutionary potential at a societal level, they do not consider the role of individual consciousness once an 'absolute' state is realized. Both Nietzsche and Sartre can offer the individual ways of being in a life with no ostensible meaning, whether that life is lived in an 'ideal' society or one that is deemed to be in 'lack'.

Introduction
The notion of praxis has typically been defined in a Marxist manner, exemplified in Marx's exhortation for theorists to not simply interpret the world but to change it. The thrust of Marxist praxis is the transformation of subjectivity through the process of human action or labour upon an object, which is described in Marx's philosophy by the use of a revised, concretized Hegelian dialectic. However, as Vazquez (1977) has pointed out, the philosophy of Marx does not represent the complete expression of praxis; the philosophical consciousness of praxis has other antecedents, in particular Hegel, from which Marx's notion is derived. Furthermore various forms of praxis have followed Marx's social, productive and revolutionary praxis, which, rather than attending to specific human practical needs, seek to facilitate cognitive transformation in order that full humanity is realized and expressed. Artistic praxis is an example of this, and can be discerned in such theories as those of Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre.

For the purposes of this essay, a broad definition of praxis is required, before a closer examination of notions of praxis in their various configurations. Put simply, praxis is the synthesis of theory and practice and the reciprocal relationship between them. Advocates of human praxis, whether it be artistic, social, productive, political or revolutionary, recognize that the traditional Aristotelian, Platonist, and Cartesian dualisms, which split mind/body and theory/practice while elevating the mind (theory), prevent humans from realizing full humanity, which can only eventuate when the mind and body are working in unity. Because of these hierarchical dualisms any form of practical activity is seen as 'base', and is carried out by the 'average man', while sublime theoretical life becomes confined to the elite, resulting in a general depoliticization of the 'average' people as they concern themselves with practical activity and everyday needs. This then leaves the world of contemplation and ideas to theoreticians and philosophers. In these circumstances, what Vazquez (1977) terms an 'ordinary consciousness' develops, which regards the practical world as a world of things and meanings *in themselves*, maintaining a separation between the practical object and the

subject, rather than seeing objects as having practical significance because they are constituted for and through human beings (human becomings?).

Praxis, then, seeks to overcome the state of affairs that sees humans divested of either their theoretical or practical capacities, through an emphasis on reflective human activity that transforms the natural and social world. For Vazquez (1977) ordinary consciousness, with its spontaneous and unreflective conception of practical activity, cannot rise to a true philosophical conception of praxis until it grasps the significance of the mutually constituting relationship between subjectivity and the objective world; until it recognizes that practical activity cannot be separated from the realm of theory as they both contribute to the writing of history and the process through which humans form and create themselves.

This essay will present praxis as it has been theorized (and practiced) through a chronological trajectory, beginning with Hegel's vital contribution to the development of the current understanding of praxis, and its subsequent adoption and transformation by Marx. The philosophy of Nietzsche will then be examined, where it shall be shown that, although neither a Hegelian nor a Marxian influence is acknowledged in his works, Nietzsche's praxis exhibits implicit Hegelian influences. Nietzsche departs from Hegel and Marx in his scorn for dialectics and his seemingly pre-emptive postmodern notion of truth, but his conception of praxis is decidedly Hegelian in its holistic view of 'man'/nature and its belief that truth can only be known through action. The existentialism of Sartre will then be explored, and again, a Hegelian influence will be identified, in particular the notion of 'being and nothingness', which synthesizes into 'becoming' and is the core category of Sartre's praxis. Throughout this essay the themes raised will be those of 'overcoming', freedom, a realization of full humanity, transcendence of the subject through transformation of the object, nihilism, art, and the notion of truth.

I would like to point out that the theorists examined in this essay (like most of their time) have a tendency to use 'man' when referring to human beings in general. Whether this is meant to encompass women under the generic term 'man' or to exclude them as lesser actors in the human project as a whole, in this essay the terms employed will be replaced with 'human', unless used in a direct quote or concept.

Praxis in Hegel and Marx

Hegel incorporated Cartesian and Kantian philosophy in his own, but surpassed the dualisms inherent in these philosophies because he realized that accepting splits between mind/body, knowledge/being, and theory/practice made knowledge impossible. Feeling compelled to frustrate the expectations of 'ordinary' understanding, Hegel posited a conception of human existence that unites a strong emphasis on the historicity of human life with an equally strong emphasis on human freedom (Houlgate, 1998). In Hegel's ontological logic, reality is not separate from our experience – as in the Kantian notion that all that is real or certain resides only in the mind – but appears *within* it; consciousness is not detached but is always social, thus truth and certainty are inseparable. For Hegel, our knowledge lacks a complete account, but it is through these lacks or inadequacies that we discover further truths, leading eventually to a state of Absolute Knowledge – the highest point of the level of wisdom.

This is a dialectic which is core to Hegel's philosophy – its roots being in what Hegel sees as our moving ontological process; becoming. In *Science of Logic* (first published 1812) Hegel argues that the thought of pure *being* is indistinguishable from the thought of *nothing whatsoever*; as through its own emptiness and lack of determinacy *being* slides immediately into *nothing*. In turn, the thought of *nothing*, which is equally unsustainable, slides back into *being*. Hegel concludes that "Their truth, is therefore this movement, this immediate disappearance of the one into the other, in a word, Becoming; a movement wherein both are distinct, but in virtue of a distinction which has equally immediately dissolved itself" (p.95). If something is present and absent at the same time, it must therefore be moving, which, for Hegel, is our existence – when we 'think' we 'become' – and is also praxis.

Hegel's dialectic sees specific states of affairs as being overcome by their negation and carried forward into higher stages of development. The processes overall represent a greater and greater realization of something universal or absolute in reality (Kilminster, 1979). Hegel affirms that the processes of such a historical dialectic always have a positive result, since the course of the moving principle of transition embodied in the world "contains what it results from, absorbed into itself and made part of itself" (Hegel, 1972, p.152). Perhaps the most well known example of this process is Hegel's master/slave dialectic, which was later appropriated by Marx, representing for him the full meaning of praxis as the slave realizes the relationship between his/her actions and the transformation of the natural world.

Marx, however, regarded Hegel's dialectic as a coded, mystified way of talking about the real material activity of humans in history. He believed Hegel's philosophy to be carried to its ultimate universality only in theory. Influenced by Feuerbach, who took Hegel's idealism and 'turned it on its head', Marx aimed to make actuality strive towards its self-realized ideality; he materialized Hegel's dialectic and notion of praxis to carry through into social reality what in Hegel remained abstract (Kilminster, 1979).

Like Hegel, Marx's dialectic possessed two moments; positivity and the moving principle of negativity, welded together in an historical totalizing process. The positive moment (an in-itself) affirms what history has handed down, whereas the negative moment (a for-itself), which Marx saw as having simultaneous destructive and creative powers, carries a radical and revolutionary meaning. As a Young (left) Hegelian, Marx looked to praxis in the world as the conscious road to freedom, and aimed to achieve Hegel's condition of Absolute Knowledge, which would be embodied (in communism) after the historical completion of theory in the human practice of history (Kilminster, 1979).

What were the processes that would bring about this state of affairs? For Marx, the contradictions inherent in capitalist society (and all previous societies) would result in a realization by the proletariat of their alienation from their externalized creations. This would bring also a realization of their human potentialities, culminating in a revolutionary praxis that would overturn the social order and set society on the road to the 'absolute' state of communism. In and through changing our material conditions comes a transformation of consciousness. "When humans in their practical activity, have created both the congruence and incongruence of their thinking with their world, they are then in self conscious 'critical' praxis, and society is rendered less determining, more directive and planful" (Kilminster, 1979, p.17).

On the dialectical journey toward communism, which appears to incorporate forces of contradiction and human agency, theory will be *transcended* (abolished in praxis) if it has proven an adequate and true expression of each process. What then, becomes of praxis and humans creating their world when an ultimate state is reached? And if the ideal of a better society is written into the results of the developed and developing historical dialectic, what place has human action or agency? Perhaps the answers to these lie in the differences between humanist and scientific Marxism. Or maybe Nietzsche can give us some ideas on what becomes of praxis if society reaches a state of Absolute Knowledge: perhaps we can 'overcome' ourselves individually with a 'will to power' that will see us striving toward the 'overman'.

Nietzsche
Integral to the interpretation of the diverse, scattered, and at times seemingly incoherent theories of Nietzsche is an understanding of the man himself. Through his writings he embodied the very thoughts he was espousing, and it is here that is perhaps the starting point for an exploration of Nietzsche's thought, which, as shall be shown, can only lead to full human praxis. Like Hegel, Nietzsche was against the separation of mind and body, and aimed to confound traditional philosophical ways of thinking through a critique of religion, reason, nature, God, time, space and morality. It can be argued that Nietzsche personified the very praxis he advocated, as through his works he opened up a way of thinking and valuing *that grows out of the transformation process itself*(Scott, 1998). Through his critical encounter with the ideas that are central in our traditional Western culture, Nietzsche's way of thinking was formed and empowered by the transvaluing

process that develops. His philosophy is itself a *process of self-overcoming*, an idea that is central to Nietzsche's thought.

This process of self-overcoming is an accumulation of Nietzschean thought that has its beginnings in several core concepts, which shall now be described. Firstly, in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (first published 1887) Nietzsche calls into question the value of morality, and reveals the dubious pedigrees of moral concepts such as goodness, evil, guilt and self-sacrifice, thus undermining the view that they are absolute and apply to all people at all times (Warburton, 1998). For Nietzsche morality is not something fixed for all time to be discovered in the world, but is rather a human creation. He therefore argues that meanings of key moral concepts can be transformed by a creative act of will.

Nietzsche, through his prophet Zarathustra in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (first published 1883), proclaims the death of God. God is dead, says Zarathustra, and human beings should remain true to the earth. There is no God, nor any other ordering principle, thus, just as morals are relative and can be altered at will, so can *perspective*, something Nietzsche deems necessary in the face of a life with no ultimate meaning. Does Nietzsche capture another meaning to life after the death of God? His earlier works would indicate not; as Chamberlain (1996) has found, his early thought was decidedly nihilist in tone. He hated everything and found no justification for life whatsoever. However, as an intellectual and philosopher Nietzsche appears to have been unable to rest upon nihilism, so he pushed his theories to an ultimate solution (something Hollingdale (1969) terms an 'eruption') in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where we meet the concept of the Ubermensch (overman), and later the eternal recurrence and the will to power. These concepts are life affirming, and embody Nietzsche's idea of individual human praxis.

The concept of the eternal recurrence can be best understood in relation to an 'overcoming' of the ascetic ideal. According to Nietzsche, the Christian interpretation of the world, with its focus on self-denial (ascetic values) and a linear view of time (which involves a progression toward death after which we will be rewarded or punished on the basis of whether our souls are in a state of grace of sin) is life negating and ultimately nihilistic. It suggests that the real significance of any particular action has nothing to do with its connections to other parts of the causal scheme of life (Higgins, 1988). By contrast, the notion of the eternal recurrence holds that "…the entire flux of life is a causal nexus which cyclically repeats itself over and over again" (Higgins, 1988, p.144). It emblemizes life affirmation, and, as Magnus (1978, p.142) puts it, is a "…visual and conceptual representation of a particular attitude toward life". This attitude must be one of accepting that we do not need answers to eternal questions, we do not need to be free from pain, and that life will repeat itself with no ultimate purpose or meaning – with no deathless transcendence – which is for Nietzsche an important aspect of self-overcoming.

Linked to this is the idea of the overhuman: a human being who has overcome the ascetic ideal, who accepts the image of the eternal recurrence while realizing that there is no truth and no justification for life, and who affirms a life that is *nothing more than its own passing*. The overhuman "creates for creation's sake, loves without further justification, and has a sense of play and an aesthetic appreciation of life – which is the will to power" (Scott, 1998, p.159).

Will to power is for Nietzsche a continuing force throughout all transformations, and as such can be read to constitute an essence of life. In *Zarathustra* we see how self-overcoming characterizes the movement of will to power:

> And life told me this secret: 'Behold', it said, 'I am that *which must overcome itself again and again*. To be sure, you call it will to procreate or impulse towards a goal, towards the higher, more distant, more manifold: but all this is one and one secret….And you too, enlightened man, are only a path and footstep of my will: truly, my will to power walks with the feet of your will to truth! He who shot the doctrine of "will to existence" at truth certainly did not hit the truth: this will – does not exist! For what does not exist cannot will; but that which is in existence, how could it still want to come into existence? Only where life is, there is also will: not will to life, but – so I teach you – will to power! The living creature

values many things higher than life itself; yet out of this evaluation itself speaks – the will to power' (p.138).

This passage displays not only the links between the eternal recurrence, the overhuman (who has overcome his/herself to the extent that he/she can endure the thought of an eternal return) and the will to power, but also Nietzsche's scorn for 'enlightened man and his will to truth'. For Nietzsche, there can be no truth, only that which we create. Truth will become apparent in our material world as we act upon it, but will not remain the truth for long, as it is continually transformed. Clearly a precursor of postmodern thought, Nietzsche argues for a plurality of perspectives, a plurality of 'truths' – with none taking precedent over the others. However, how does Nietzsche escape the paradox (which has often plagued postmodern theorists) in which one asserts and undermines simultaneously the truth of the claim that there is no truth? As Solomon (1988) has argued, that after giving us a framework where there are no facts – only interpretations – Nietzsche hits us with his 'hammer' approach to philosophy, using uncompromising judgments and statements of the facts that are often brutal, disruptive, and anything but 'just an opinion'.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche's unorthodox opinions and philosophies challenge a lot of traditional and cherished beliefs. His 'pessimism of strength' is life affirming, showing that he wanted to side with the world whatever it was like. Yet, the world to Nietzsche was essentially illusory, and he managed to see the world positively by viewing life as a form of art (Chamberlain, 1996). Nietzsche's praxis therefore, is one that is individual, life affirming, artistic, and experimental. One could even discern a dialectical process in his thinking (though he appeared to reject such 'common' modes of thought and resolution) – such as in the process of self-overcoming, whereby "one constellation of values is transformed into another one by means of powers and conflicts within the first constellation" (quoted in Scott, 1998, p.154).

Nietzsche's praxis allows for self-creation in the midst of uncertainty. He suggests we can find our lives meaningful if we approach their events as aesthetic material; he postulates an aesthetic goal that we can pursue with maximum effort, arranging our activities in such a way that they contribute to our project. The visions of the overhuman, the eternal recurrence, and the will to power are part of Nietzsche's answer to the meaning of individual human life (Higgins, 1988). Nietzsche almost adopts a ludic approach to life, demonstrated in Zarathustra's quote: "We should consider every day lost on which we have not danced at least once. And we should call every truth false which was not accompanied by at least one laugh" (p.372). Like Sartre, who shall now be discussed, Nietzsche stresses self-transformation and personal resolution, and shares with Sartre a personal, passionate, and engaged sensibility. His own life and works have displayed an exercise in self-creation and self-validation. As Solomon (1988) points out, Nietzsche is no one other than the net effect of his writings - an idea that will be explored further with Sartre.

Sartre
Jean-Paul Sartre was a French philosopher, novelist and playwright whose philosophical movement – existentialism – gained wide currency in Europe and North America during the 1940s and 1950s. The basic premise of existentialism is that *existence comes before essence*; that is, that explanation of human action can never be found in a resort to a given human tendency as 'essence', but only through practical, lived and experienced 'existence'. Sartre has obvious influences in Hegel and Marx, yet in *The Problem of Method* (1963) he criticizes Marxism as a 'fossilized schematic system' in dire need of contact with lived experience. (He states that "Marxists insist on standing in their own light" (1963, p.38). Here, Sartre attempts to reconstruct a dialectical method for Marxism, and to make a bridge between Marxism and existentialism (whereas his earlier works were more phenomenological). Drawing on such writers as Weber and Lukacs, Sartre formed a conception of praxis as having *the shape of a transcendental project dominated by situated intentionality*.

Sartre's Hegelian influence can be seen in *Being and Nothingness* (1969), in which Sartre sees that "the nature of consciousness simultaneously is to be what it is not and not to be what it is" (quoted in Warburton, 1998, p.194). We are, in one sense, our *possibilities of transcendence* (what we are not), yet we are not simply a product of our genes or environment (not

to be what we are). In addition, for Sartre human consciousness is characterized as a gap at the heart of our being – a nothing. Consciousness is always consciousness of something - it is never only 'itself'. Concrete nothingness is experienced when we recognize that something is absent, and for Sartre, this ability of human consciousness to see things as missing is part of the 'transcendence' of consciousness (Warburton, 1998). Much like Hegel's 'lack', which drives us to discover further truths or a more complete account of knowledge, Sartre's account sees that it is our ability to see things as unrealized that reveals to us a world of potentialities.

According to Sartre, humans are free – not free from something specific, but simply free – 'condemned to be free':

> Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing – as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself (Sartre, 1948, p.28).

This is the first principle of existentialism, and of Sartre's praxis, which contends that as we are free (from any morals, values, essence or human nature) we must *choose*. Individual human life consists of choices; we are responsible for everything we do and thus we are nothing more than the sum of our choices to date. There are aspects of our lives which are given, such as where we were born, who our parents were, eye colour etc., which Sartre terms aspects of our 'facticity'. Our past choices are also part of our facticity, and the self-project advocated by Sartre posits a need to think beyond these aspects – the facts of our past and the givens of our existence – and project ourselves into future possibilities. This is 'transcendence'.

Sartre draws on Hegel further with his notions of transcendence and immanence, or 'for-itself' and 'in-itself'. A being for-itself is any being capable of self-consciousness; a being in-itself relates to inanimate objects, and anything which lacks self-consciousness. Transcendence is the capacity for the 'for-itself' to project itself into the future (Warburton, 1998). For Sartre, this process is hindered by what he terms 'bad faith', which is a kind of self-deception in which we lie to ourselves and flee from freedom. We attempt to deny our freedom to act and become an 'in-itself' rather than a 'for-itself'. Sartre's most famous example of bad faith is of a café waiter. The waiter seems determined by his role as a waiter, but Sartre points out that the waiter, however hard he tries to become his role, cannot *be* a waiter as an inkwell is an inkwell. A human consciousness is something *becoming*, and as such cannot transform into something that *is.* Therefore, the waiter is in bad faith as he is trying to deny his freedom; his freedom to choose and thus transcend (Sartre, 1948).

Rather than fleeing the unstable condition in which our mental acts and states are always troubled by a lack of complete coincidence of consciousness with its object or its very self, Sartre admonishes us to live authentically (Flynn, 1998). Much like Nietzsche's exhortation to accept the pain and unknowability of the world and to overcome it, Sartre believes we must learn to live with existential 'anguish' (man is 'without excuse', we must always make choices) instead of attempting to avoid it, which is being in bad faith. We cannot coincide with ourselves consciously – we cannot be fully factical and totally transcendent at the same time (Flynn, 1998).

Sartre's praxis then, like that of Nietzsche, is a way of living that draws the full conclusions from a consistently atheistic position (God is dead): "Life is nothing until it is lived, but it is yours to make sense of, and the value of it is nothing else but the sense that you choose" (Sartre, 1948, p.54). The human subject is an "irreducible centre of free praxis" (Gane, 1991, p.18), and as such our purpose in life is to take our raw materials and arrange them in such a way that we are continually and intentionally creating, which, in being directed toward a specific project will ultimately transform us.

Sartre has been criticized however, for overestimating human freedom and focusing almost entirely on the individual and the choices he or she makes, rather than on the social context in which groups of people live. His rebuttal in *Existentialism and Humanism* (1948) though, states that

when humans choose for themselves, they choose for all humanity. All of our self-creating actions create, at the same time, an image of humans as how they 'ought to be'. Sartre argues:

> To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse. What we choose is always for the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all (1948, p.29).

Responding to the charge that existentialism overestimates human freedom, ignoring real physical or socio-economic constraints, Sartre later acknowledged the limitations placed on organic praxis (Flynn, 1998), but continued to insist that "a man can always make something out of what is made of him" (1974, p.35), which is perhaps the axiom of Sartrean existentialism/humanism. A further critique is that Sartre's philosophy is decidedly 'moral' in tone – as he exhorts us to live authentically and responsibly – despite his emphasis on the contingency and fictitiousness of morals.

Conclusion
In comparing and contrasting the respective praxes of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Sartre, it has been shown that all respect the irreducible difference between consciousness and the world. All of these theorists accept that *we are aware of more than we know*, which is illustrated in Hegel's 'lack' which leads to further 'knowledge'; Marx's revolutionary consciousness contained in the negative moments of the dialectic; Nietzsche's eternal recurrence and striving toward the overhuman; and Sartre's acceptance of the anguish in a life filled with choices. A key difference between the theorists is that for both Hegel and Marx, we can reach a state of complete or absolute knowledge, whereas for Sartre and particularly Nietzsche, *we will never know everything*, and we must accept this. All of these theorists believe that humans must prove the truth of their thinking in practice; we can only know our human consciousness of objects through ongoing activity. 'Truth' for both Hegel and Marx is contained in each stage of cognitive development – when it is proven to lead dialectically on to the next stage. The idea of truth for both Nietzsche and Sartre differs in that there is no external truth; only that which is self-defined through activity or projects, and which alters as each project is realized and our 'intentionality' or 'striving' reaches toward a new truth.

A further similarity between the praxes of Marx, Nietzsche, and Sartre is an emphasis on the material world. Marx's self-mediating historical dialectic took a stand on the status and possibilities of human action within such a dialectic – mediated by the Feuerbachian 'inversion' of Hegel. The theories of Nietzsche and Sartre are similarly atheistic, creating meaning in the only way possible in a life with no God or any other ordering principle. For both Nietzsche and Sartre the accumulation of one's life moments are to be directed toward some definite end (although for Nietzsche the world is ultimately without goal – it is circular), but the 'end' in mind is made up of projects that constitute the drive to self-overcoming. The events of one's life should be approached as artistic raw material – to be harnessed into an aspirational project toward 'greatness'. This is one crucial departure from the praxis of Marxism, which has as its project the transformation of society. The praxes of Nietzsche and Sartre focus on the individual; both are an artistic 'aesthetic' personal endeavour that will transform society as the individual transcends him/her self. Both initially nihilistic, the theories of Nietzsche and Sartre eventually display life affirmation. For Nietzsche, what drives the transformative process is the will to power, while Sartre emphasizes an acceptance of utter freedom and responsibility, insisting on the primacy of free organic praxis in the midst of alienation.

Marx had a practical conception of history as an endless ongoing process of reality-transcendence. As critics have pointed out, and as was suggested at the outset of this essay, this view cannot be reconciled with the Utopian ideal of communism as an *end state* of humanity/society. In exploring the more personal notions of praxis put forward by Nietzsche and Sartre I have attempted to offer an example of what might become of praxis if an ultimate society eventuates. Rather than attempting a merger of all the theories discussed into a new 'grand narrative', I have employed a little theoretical speculation. As Nietzsche has pointed out, "(u)nder peaceful conditions the militant man attacks himself" (Nietzsche, 1923, p.87). The respective

praxes of Nietzsche and Sartre give us an example of what humans might strive for, or the meaning that might be given to life from an individual basis.

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