

**MARX ON ALIENATED LABOR  
NOTE FOR PHILOSOPHY 166**

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In the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 Karl Marx describes an undesirable condition he calls "alienated [estranged] labor" and associates the elimination of this condition with the abolition of market exchange and the development of communist society. In general, to be alienated from something is to lack wholehearted identification with it and instead to regard it as strange or alien and perhaps as an obstacle in one's way or as menacing to oneself. One speaks of alienation only where there is a prior expectation that one will identify with the thing in question as one's own or as closely connected to or continuous with one's self. (I might be alienated from my father, from my national community, or from the plans for my high school reunion, but not from the planet Jupiter, even if I regard this planet as strange, alien, and vaguely menacing.)

**Alienated labor as Marx conceives it.** Marx in the section on "Estranged Labour" distinguished four aspects of alienated labor: alienation from the product of one's labor, from the labor process or one's activity of laboring, from one's "species being" or essential human nature, and from other human beings as a result of the character of one's work life. I won't here try to characterize the four aspects that we discussed in class (alienation from the process of work, the product of work, other people, and the species being); the most difficult aspect to understand is the "species being" idea. The picture of unalienated labor that emerges from Marx's account is roughly the ideal of work as it might be experienced by a creative artist or dedicated scientist: One chooses freely to work in ways that involve the development and exercise of one's talents and powers, express one's individual nature, and are inherently satisfying, in order to create a product whose disposition one controls, the work being done in order to serve the human community as well as oneself, and done in ways that promote friendly and harmonious relations to others. Being aware that one's work has all of these qualities, one identifies with it wholeheartedly as an important part of one's good. (This formulation isn't intended to be a definitive, canonical statement of what Marx is saying, but as a stimulant to your own efforts at interpretation.) That unalienated labor so understood would be nice to have is not very controversial. It's evidently a demanding ideal, which few individuals fully achieve in society as we know it. The unalienated labor ideal admits of degrees; one can be more or less alienated. The ideal of unalienated labor is internally complex, and contains several components, each of which might vary in degree: one could be very alienated along some dimensions but not others. Suppose that a starving artist is hired by a rich art patron who stipulates that the artist can create as she likes, for a subsistence wage, under the constraint that the end product will become the sole property of the patron. Here the imagined artist would have very little alienation from her laboring activity and a high level of alienation from the product of her labor. But Marx evidently regards alienated labor as a unified syndrome that tends to appear with all its various components. He is encouraged in this belief by concentration on the plight of the unskilled factory worker under early industrial capitalism.

Some of the features of alienated labor in Marx's characterization of it are subjective or attitudinal: The alienated laborer finds no joy in her work and aims to benefit herself and not the human community by her work. Some of the features of the alienated labor syndrome are objective: e.g., the alienated laborer lacks freedom to choose whether or not to work and in what ways to work, and she would lack this freedom whatever her attitudes toward this lack might be. To be alienated is not just to suffer various negative features in one's work life. In addition, one must respond to these features by experiencing one's labor as alien rather than as a part of one's life with which one wholeheartedly identifies.

**Alienated labor in precapitalist and capitalist economies; unalienated labor in communist society.**

Since Marx focuses on the situation of the industrial worker under capitalism, the question arises to what extent alienation is to be found in work activity at various stages of historical development. Marx is not forthcoming on this topic in the 1844 Manuscripts, but it seems obvious that labor can be alienated under noncapitalist economic arrangements. For example, recall the Biblical account of the condition of the Israelites in Egypt before Moses intervenes: the Israelites are state slaves made to perform arduous labor in the construction of monuments to Pharaoh. The Israelites suffer the condition of alienated labor. In a work written jointly with his collaborator Frederick Engels a year after the 1844 Manuscripts, Marx suggests that labor might fail to be alienated without achieving the ideal of unalienated labor: Call this labor prealienated. Marx writes (p. 178 of the Marx-Engels Reader) of craft labor in medieval times: "Thus there is found with medieval craftsmen an interest in their special work and proficiency in it, which was capable of rising to a narrow artistic sense. For this very reason, however, every medieval craftsman was completely absorbed in his work, to which he had a contented, slavish relationship, and to which he was subjected to a far greater extent than the modern worker, whose work is a matter of indifference to him." The medieval craftsman has more control of his laboring activity, exhibits more of his individual talent, and has a greater opportunity for self-expression at work than the unskilled worker in a capitalist factory. Moreover, according to Marx the industrial worker is detached from his work, cares nothing for it, whereas the medieval craftsman identifies wholeheartedly with his work life. Yet Marx finds in the capitalist worker a significant freedom which the medieval craftsman evidently lacks. This freedom is so closely bound up with the phenomenon of alienation that we might call it the "freedom of alienation." In some important respect, then, Marx holds that the condition of the highly alienated worker in a market exchange economy represents an achievement, a kind of cultural progress, by comparison with his medieval counterpart. How is this so?

The medieval craftsman is wholly identified with his social role. He does not consider himself as an individual distinct from his social role, who could be a craftsman or something else. Even if the medieval craftsman has no freedom to be other than what he is, he will not experience this freedom as constricting, because he does not envisage alternatives to his present condition. In contrast, the factory worker under capitalism enjoys the formal freedom of an agent in a market economy: He is legally free to engage

on any mutually agreeable terms with any other economic agent. Being formally free, the industrial worker is not likely to identify himself with his social role as factory worker; he knows himself to be an individual distinct from his role, who might have played some other social role. If the worker is forced by the compulsion of economic necessity to go to work as a factory worker, he experiences himself as unfree, and does not identify even halfheartedly with his labor role. As Marx says, "his work is a matter of indifference to him." The industrial worker, alienated as he is, has the freedom to conceive himself as an individual distinct from his economic role, and this significant freedom the medieval craftsman lacks.

We can identify three stages in which a subject might stand to an object: undifferentiated unity, separation, and differentiated unity. An example of this transition is the relation of a child to its society: as an infant the child does not experience herself as an individual distinct from her parents; she is engulfed by them. As an adolescent she experiences herself as a separate individual, distinct from adult society, and very likely in conflict with it. As a mature adult the former child continues to experience herself as an individual distinct from others but also regards herself as united with other members of society in ways that do not threaten her status as separate individual. Marx envisages precapitalist, capitalist, and postcapitalist communist labor as occupying the three stages of this sequence: In precapitalist labor, the individual is glued to her economic role and does not distinguish herself as distinct from it; under capitalism the awareness of individuality develops, and one regards one's work life as alien to oneself; under communism the individual continues to regard herself as a distinct individual but is free and fulfilled in her work life and so identifies wholeheartedly with it without compromising her individuality. To see Marx's point, think of the relation between an individual and his economic role in a hunter-gatherer society. Here each individual may have a role that is defined by custom and from which one is not free to deviate, but this requirement to work in a certain way is not experienced as constricting, because one does not envisage desirable alternatives that one is being denied. One identifies with the way of life of the clan and with one's role within it. The hunter-gatherer is at the stage of undifferentiated unity and lacks the freedom of alienation which the capitalist worker has. In Marx's vision work under communism combines the best of both worlds. He writes (p. 160 of the Marx-Engels Reader): "For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic." In Marx's vision the communist worker moves freely between various challenging and interesting work roles.

**A utopian ideal?** The ideal of unalienated labor is undeniably attractive. But one might regard it as a utopian and impractical ideal. Or one might view it as one good that competes with others, so that a just and decent society might organize its economic life in ways that impose alienated labor on its citizens but are, all things considered, acceptable to these citizens, because their alienated labor is offset by compensating benefits.

It's worth noting that in the course of his intellectual career, Marx expresses skepticism about the extent to which a modern industrial economy, regardless of whether it is capitalist or communist, can provide opportunities for unalienated labor to its participants. In a famous passage of *Capital*, vol. 3, Marx writes (p. 441, Marx-Engels Reader): "In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases, thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with the realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working day is its basic prerequisite." According to this passage, the realm of economic production is inherently a realm of unfreedom, hence cannot support unalienated labor. Only in leisure time can the individual be free. In contrast, according to the hunter-fisher-critic passage, a communist society can organize economic production so that each individual is fully free and labor is unalienated as necessary goods are produced. In both passages unalienated labor (freedom at work) is upheld as an ideal, but in the *Capital*, vol. 3 passage Marx is pessimistic about the extent to which the ideal can be achieved.

Can alienated labor be eliminated? Would such elimination be desirable, all things considered? To what extent is the condition of the alienated industrial worker under capitalism due to the capitalist organization of work, according to Marx? In the 1844 Manuscripts Marx identifies the coming of communism and the elimination of alienated labor with the abolition of market exchange and private ownership. One might doubt this claim on any of the following grounds:

1. One might suppose human nature is inherently selfish, at least to a large degree, so the vision of a society organized around altruistic caring for others (the desire to serve the human community) is not achievable. Marx must hold either that human nature changes in history, so man can be selfish under capitalism and altruistic under postcapitalist society, or he must hold that the latent disposition to selfishness that is part of our human

nature is triggered only in certain circumstances, which obtain under capitalism and will not obtain, or will occur less frequently and on a lesser scale, under communism.

2. One might suppose that the causes that sustain the various components of alienated labor are various, so no change in the mode of organizing the economy would suffice by itself to eliminate alienation. One might hold that a given level of technology dictates certain ways of organizing economic production, and that there is little freedom to organize the economy inefficiently if the efficient arrangement promotes alienation. On this view, at a given level of technology, a certain range of amounts of alienated labor will be unavoidable. Marx agrees that the level of technological development is one important constraint on the prospects for organizing economic life so as to reduce unalienated labor. But he emphasizes the technological sophistication and the rise of material wealth brought about by capitalism and holds that these economic achievements make possible a hitherto unrealizable degree of escape from alienated labor by all.

3. The unalienated labor ideal is an ideal of producer freedom. To some extent producer freedom may compete against consumer freedom: one cannot maximize both simultaneously. If happily unalienated bakery workers are producing bread just as they like, they may choose to produce only whole wheat bread, while consumers clamor for white bread. The desires of consumers may place restraints on the desirable freedom of producers, no matter how the economy is organized.

One can imagine a society that offers rich opportunities for fulfillment for all of its members. Some members choose to enhance their provided opportunities by working at tiresome, boring, or closely supervised jobs, so that they can save money to achieve some life goal of paramount importance: embarking on a religious pilgrimage, or spending vacation time surfing at the world's most challenging beaches. Here individuals are trading away freedom at work for enhanced satisfaction of nonwork goals. Would Marx object to this imaginary scenario? He tends to hold that labor is a crucial component of life and that it must be good if one's life is to be good. (Here the "species being" ideal comes into play.) In the 1844 Manuscripts (p. 74 in the Marx-Engels Reader), Marx suggests that if one's work life is degrading, one will not be able to employ one's time off the job in ways that are valuable and satisfying. He writes, "man (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions--eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and dressing-up, etc; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal." The idea here and in the next paragraph seems to be that seeking fulfillment in consumption activities alone will not suffice for a good life.

**The overcoming of alienation.** In the 1844 Manuscripts Marx argues for a close connection between the existence of alienated labor and the phenomenon of private property. On p. 70 (Marx-Engels Reader) he complains that the political economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo do not provide a deep and satisfying explanation of private property: "Political economy proceeds from the fact of private property, but it does

not explain it to us." Marx urges that alienated labor as he characterizes it provides an explanation for the phenomenon of private property. P.78: "If the product of labour does not belong to the worker, if it confronts him as an alien power, this can only be because it belongs to some other man than the worker." On p. 79 the thought continues: "Through estranged, alienated labour, then, the worker produces the relationship to this labour of a man alien to labour and standing outside it. The relationship of the worker to labour engenders the relation to it of the capitalist, or whatever one chooses to call the master of labour. Private property is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence, of alienated labour, of the external relation of the worker to nature and to himself."

The simplest way to see that there is something amiss in this argument is to note that there could be a form of society in which labor is alienated, so the worker controls neither his work activity nor the disposition of his product, but nobody else has private property in these things. For example, the work life of the tribe might be rigidly fixed by custom. One might press the point by asking, what sustains the custom--surely some elite benefits from customs or they would be altered. But even if this is so, there need be nobody who has full private property rights over the disposition of the worker's product and activity, in any society in which labor is alienated. (Recall the example of the ancient Israelites in Egypt recounted in the Exodus story. Alienation of the workers exists there even if the Pharaoh does not have full private ownership rights over the monuments the Israelites are forced to build.) The tight relation that Marx tries to forge between alienated labor and private property does not hold. One might also raise the question whether in theory an economy organized around private ownership that was sufficiently wealthy and in which wealth was sufficiently widely distributed could eliminate or greatly reduce alienated labor as Marx conceives it. This is to ask: if there is private property, must there be alienated labor?

If the existence of alienated labor implies the existence of private property, then if one succeeds in eliminating private property, one will have succeeded in eliminating alienated labor as well. This appears to be Marx's view. But the "Private Property and Communism" section of the Manuscripts shows that simply passing a law abolishing the practice of private property is insufficient to eliminate private property from society, according to Marx. Marx's account of "crude communism" describes a society which has collective ownership of productive resources but is animated by a culture of greed and envy, and has not transcended the culture of private property. In the 1844 Manuscripts Marx does not specify a mechanism that would successfully eliminate private property, but he clearly believes this abolitionist project is tricky and elusive.

What causes alienation? Towards the end of the "Estranged Labour" section of the Manuscripts Marx asks, How "does man come to alienate, to estrange, his labour? How is this estrangement rooted in the nature of human development?" The section trails off without answering the question. In later writings Marx's answer is roughly that at the dawn of history, humans are oppressed by forces of nature, which enable us to satisfy our wants only to a scanty extent. By division of labor and the organization of society into

dominant and subordinate economic groups, humans collectively succeed gradually at taming nature, harnessing nature to serve human wants, though the fruits of the hierarchical organization of economy and society are very unevenly distributed. Ultimately, with the coming of capitalism, modern society becomes sufficiently wealthy that the major obstacle standing in the way of wide human fulfillment and freedom is no longer nature red in tooth and claw, but the way that economic production is organized and the vastly unequal distribution of its burdens and benefits. This is evidently a reworking of Rousseauian themes, but with significant changes in the analysis.

Notice that in the 1844 Manuscripts Marx's discussion of alienated labor includes both a normative claim (a claim about what a desirable form of human labor would be) and a causal explanatory claim (a claim about what is explained or can be explained by invoking the phenomenon of alienated labor) and perhaps a social science methodology claim (a claim about what constitutes a satisfactory explanation of economic phenomena). So far as I can see the two latter claims are not articulated very clearly and anyway seem to have been abandoned by Marx rather soon after he wrote these reading notes on English political economy. The extent to which Marx continues to affirm the former claim, the normative ideal, throughout his later writings is harder to determine. Commentators disagree on this point.