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WHY WORK? MARX AND HUMAN NATURE

Why work? The answer that most people give when asked this question is that they work in order to earn a living and to meet their basic needs. Work is commonly regarded as toil, as a mere means to an end, as an unpleasant activity which we would avoid if only we could.

These views are so widely held that there must be some truth in them; so many people cannot be entirely mistaken. However, when one digs a bit deeper, it soon becomes clear that attitudes to work are more complex and contradictory than these initial responses suggest. As testimony to this, rather than the usual social scientific studies, I will cite a poem by Philip Larkin, "Toads" (Larkin, 2003, 62–3). I know of nothing which puts the point better.

At the beginning of the poem, Larkin asks himself,

Why should I let the toad *work*
Squat on my life?

He imagines work as a "toad," he regards it as something monstrous and alien, as an unwanted necessity. He thinks of driving it off and freeing him-

self from it. On reflection, however, he realizes that driving it away is not a straightforward matter.

I know, all too well, that's the stuff
That dreams are made on:
For something sufficiently toad-like
Squats in me, too

That is to say, he recognizes that the motivation to work is not purely alien or external to him, it is internal and a part of him. He spells this out and goes further in a later sequel, "Toads Revisited" (Larkin, 2003, 89–90):

Walking around in the park
Should feel better than work . . .
Yet it doesn't suit me

And thus he acknowledges that the "toad" work is inseparably part of him.

Give me your arm, old toad;
Help me down Cemetery Road.

There is a mass of more "objective" evidence, gathered from innumerable empirical — psychological and sociological — studies of attitudes to work which confirms that the ambivalent attitudes described so accurately and honestly by Larkin are widely shared (Jahoda, 1982; *Work in America*, 1973).

Indeed, it may well seem that the question of why people work is straightforwardly an empirical question, which should be answered in a social scientific fashion, by psychological and sociological studies. However, the issues upon which I am going to focus in this paper cannot be resolved by such studies. For these questions are not so much about the role that work *actually* plays in people's lives; rather they concern the role that it *can potentially* play and that it *ought* to play. Must work *necessarily* be experienced as unwanted toil and be regarded as a mere means to an end? What does this imply about basic human motivation, about human nature? These questions are not of the kind that can be resolved by empirical studies alone; they are *philosophical* questions. They concern philosophical theories of the role of work in human life.

The Instrumental View of Work

There has been remarkably little discussion of the role of work in human life in the history of philosophy. The most familiar and widely held theory in philosophy, as in everyday life, is the instrumental view that work is

unpleasant toil, a mere means to an end. This is the account adopted, implicitly at least, in many traditional philosophies. Plato and Aristotle regard a fully human life as the life of reason. This requires exemption from physical labor which they look upon as a “lower” activity catering only to lower needs. For Kant, too, we are rational beings and our physical nature is a lower and merely “animal” aspect of our being. Such attitudes are also evident in an important strand of Christian thought which treats work as a “curse,” a punishment for our “fallen” nature (Anthony, 1978).

The instrumental view of work is expressed with particular clarity in the philosophy of hedonism. This is the philosophy that underlies utilitarianism and classical economics. In this form it has also had a strong influence on recent Marxist philosophy, particularly of the “analytical” variety (Cohen, 1978, 52–3). According to hedonism, in Bentham’s words,

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think. (Bentham, 1962, 33.)

In short, we are pleasure-seeking, pain-avoiding creatures; these are the sole motive forces of human life. Work is effort and toil. It is never an end in itself, only ever a means. According to this philosophy, we avoid it insofar as we can. Indeed, according to Bentham,

desire of labour . . . considered in the character of an *end*, without any view to any thing else, is a sort of desire that seems scarcely to have place in the human breast; yet, if considered in the character of a *means*, scarce a desire can be found, to the gratification of which labour, and therein *the desire of labour*, is not continually rendered subservient. . . . *Aversion* — not *desire* — is the emotion, the only emotion which labour taken by itself, is qualified to produce. Of any such emotion as *love* or *desire* . . . *ease* not *labour*, is the object. . . . In so far as *labour* is taken in its proper sense, *love of labour* is a contradiction in terms. (Quoted in Thomas, 1999, 10–11.)

Locke is more succinct. Work for its own sake, he says, is “against nature,” *i.e.*, human nature (quoted in Thomas, 1999, 10).

Unfortunately, however, we have needs which we can meet only through work. It follows that if we could find a way to consume without the toil of producing we would happily do so. The ideal, according to this philosophy, is therefore a life of “ease,” of luxurious indolence. Hume describes this ideal well.

Let us suppose that nature has bestowed on the human race such a profuse abundance of all external conveniences, that, without any uncertainty in the event, with-

out any care or industry on our part, every individual finds himself fully provided with whatever his most voracious appetites can want, or luxurious imagination wish or desire. . . . No laborious occupation required; no tillage, no navigation. Music, poetry, and contemplation form his sole business: conversation, mirth and friendship his sole amusement. (Hume, 1894, 183.)

Marx on Alienation

Appealing and plausible as this vision of the ideal life may seem, there are good grounds to question it. The hedonist views that I have just been describing give a false account of human nature, and the instrumental view of work involves a false account of its role in human life. Marx, I will argue, provides a more illuminating and satisfactory alternative.

Marx's views on the place of work in human life are well known, at least in general outline (Venable, 1945, chapters 5–7). Less well known is the philosophical basis for these views. This is implicit in Marx's concept of "alienation."¹ "Alienation" is one of the few Marxist concepts that has entered into ordinary language. In everyday speech, however, it is a loose and vague term which denotes a feeling of meaninglessness, or a general malaise, discontent or unhappiness, particularly in relation to work. In Marx's writings, by contrast, it is a precise theoretical term with a specific meaning. This derives from Hegel and the Hegelian philosophical tradition in which Marx's thought is located.

In this tradition, the term "alienation" refers to a situation in which we relate to our own product or activity as if it is something independent and hostile. In the specific case of work, my work is alienated when 1) its product appears to be an independent and hostile power working against me, and 2) the labor itself seems to be an external and forced activity, a mere means to an end and not an end in itself. Alienation in this sense is a very familiar phenomenon, as we have seen; this is the way in which labor is experienced by the great majority of individuals. It is also familiar at a social level. A great paradox, noted by Marx and by many other social commentators in the 19th century, is that the development of capitalism and large-scale industry has resulted in a gigantic growth of human productive powers, but this is experienced as a loss of power for the producers themselves, for it appears to result not in their enrichment but in their impoverishment. As Marx puts it,

There is one great fact, characteristic of this our nineteenth century, a fact which no party dares deny. On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and

1 I am using the word "alienation" to cover two of Marx's terms: "*Entäusserung*" and "*Entfremdung*" (sometimes translated as "estrangement").

scientific forces, which no epoch of the former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors recorded of the latter times of the Roman Empire. In our days, everything seems pregnant with its contrary: Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The newfangled sources of wealth, by some strange weird spell, are turned into sources of want. (Marx, 1977, 339.)

The exercise of our productive powers is experienced as alien and external. Work is regarded as an unwanted activity that is forced upon us, a mere means to an end. Implicit in the concept of alienation, however, is the idea that work need not, and should not, be experienced in this way. For the concept of alienation carries with it the implication that work can be *un-alienated*. It implies that work — productive, creative activity — can and should be fulfilling, an expression and confirmation of our creative powers; not simply a means to an end but an end in itself.

In this way, Marx interprets the hedonist and instrumental theory described earlier, the theory that it is human nature to experience work as a painful necessity, as itself a symptom and an expression of alienation. And Marx criticizes this theory for mistaking our current, alienated experience of work for the inescapable character of work as such, and thus for portraying what is a specific historical condition as the inevitable result of what is supposed to be universal human nature.

Work and Human Nature

Thus, underlying Marx's concept of alienation is the view that work can potentially be a fulfilling activity. This implies an account of human nature and of the role of work in human life very different from the hedonist and instrumental view.

According to Marx, as human beings we are not only creatures of need and desire. We are not purely passive consumers who would ideally like our needs to be met with, as Hume puts it, "no laborious occupation required." Rather, we are active — productive and creative — beings. We get satisfaction from actively exercising our powers, from overcoming obstacles and being productive. In short, human beings are *producers* as well as consumers.

It should be noted that Marx is by no means the only thinker who opposes the hedonist account and puts forward the view that humans are active and creative beings and not just creatures of need. There is another important philosophical tradition, running from Plato to Kant, which sees human beings in this way. However, these philosophers tend to see our productivity and creativity as occurring primarily in the realm of reason.

Marx, by contrast, stresses that our productivity and creativity operate also in the material sphere. We are essentially *material* productive beings. This is an original and distinctive feature of Marx's approach. Concrete, material creative activity is what Marx calls our "species activity," by which he means our distinctively human activity. He also describes productive activity as "man's spiritual essence, his human essence" (Marx, 1975, 328, 329; Sayers, 2003). Unfortunately, Marx does not spell out in much detail what he means by these phrases, and there is little about this in the existing philosophical literature on Marx. For an explanation of these ideas it is necessary to go back to their source, which is in Hegel.

Hegel too sees work as a distinctively human or, as he says, "spiritual" activity. He contrasts the human activity of labor with the way in which other animals satisfy their needs. The latter he characterizes as purely "natural." Most other animals are directly driven by their immediate appetites and instincts. They react to the immediate promptings of their appetites by consuming what they can find present in the environment. They satisfy their needs immediately and directly. In doing so, moreover, they devour and destroy the object.

In work, by contrast, this immediate relationship to nature is broken. Through work we develop a more complex and mediated relation to nature, both to our own natural desires and to the natural environment around us. Thus work is not the immediate satisfaction of need; it requires that gratification be deferred. Moreover, in work the object is not consumed immediately, it is not simply devoured and destroyed. Rather it is preserved: it is shaped and formed for later use or consumption. In this way, a mediated and distinctively human relationship to nature is established. And, according to Hegel, it is through this process that the self-conscious and distinctively human self develops.

Some qualifications need to be made at this point, for the distinction between what is animal and what is human is not as clear-cut as Hegel suggests. Many animals "work" in the sense just described: spiders spin webs, birds build nests, squirrels hoard nuts, etc. Conversely, some humans satisfy their basic needs directly, without the mediation of "work" in Hegel's sense. Thus hunter-gatherers satisfy their material needs immediately from nature for the most part (although of course they work to create their tools, dwellings, clothes, utensils, etc.).²

Nevertheless, Hegel's argument expresses an important insight which should not be lost sight of. This can be better expressed by distinguishing between the purely natural and specifically human forms of work. This is

2 Of course hunting and gathering involve "work" in other senses; *e.g.*, they involve the expenditure of effort.

Marx's approach. He argues that the labor of animals is driven by immediate need and is purely "instinctive."³ He distinguishes this from "labor in a form that stamps it as exclusively human" as follows.

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will. (Marx, 1967, 178.)

Moreover, work is not the only respect in which humans and other animals differ. The ability to reason and to use language is also vital to our distinctiveness. Hegel and Marx are both aware of this. Traditional and contemporary philosophers, however, have concentrated on this almost exclusively. The recognition that material productive and creative activity, work, is fundamental to our human distinctiveness is one of the most important and original contributions of the Hegelian and Marxist philosophical traditions.⁴

In any case, and with these qualifications, work, according to Hegel, is one of the fundamental ways in which human beings break their immersion in nature, separate themselves from the natural world, and develop as separate subjects over against an objective world.

Self-Realization

This breach with nature is one aspect of work; it is the *negative* aspect. There is also a positive aspect. For work is also one of the ways through which we overcome this division from nature and reestablish our unity with it. By shaping and forming the object, we transform ourselves, our natural environment, and our relationship to it.

As a self-conscious subject, the self initially finds itself confronted by a world which is separate and strange, alien and foreign. Human development, both individual and social, is a process of reconciliation through which, gradually and by stages, we overcome this estrangement and separation and make ourselves more at home in the world.

³ In *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, he cites animals that build nests and dwellings, such as "the bee, the beaver, the ant, etc." (Marx, 1975, 329).

⁴ Marx and Hegel also stress that human work is an essentially social activity. I do not deal with this aspect of their thought here, but will return to it in a forthcoming article, "Individual and Society in Marx and Hegel."

In this way, both Hegel and Marx reject the romantic idea that we are “naturally” and immediately at one with nature, and that our alienation from it is due to the “corrupting” impact of civilization. Such Rousseauian views have been an influential and popular way of responding to the impact of industrial society from the 18th century right up to the present (Rousseau, 1984). Hegel and Marx reject them completely. Our coming to be at home in our world is not our natural and initial condition; rather it is an *achievement*, a result of human activity and work, both individual and social.

Specifically, according to Hegel, the overcoming of our estrangement from the natural world is achieved partly by theoretical activity, by the work of thought. This certainly plays an important part, as many philosophers since Plato have stressed. For by the development of knowledge and understanding, the world is made more comprehensible and familiar to us. And partly the reconciliation is achieved through practical activity, by working on the world, as I have been describing. Hegel explains this practical process of reconciliation as follows. Through work,

the human being impregnates the external world with his will. Thereby he humanises his environment, by showing how it is capable of satisfying him and how it cannot preserve any power of independence against him. Only by means of this effectual activity is he no longer merely in general, but also in particular and in detail, actually aware of himself and at home in his environment. (Hegel, 1975, 256.)

Marx terms this the process of “objectification” (*Vergegenständlichung*) (Marx, 1975, 324). There are two aspects to it. First, by “objectifying” ourselves, by giving a human shape and form to the world through working on it, we embody our powers and capacities in outward things and come to recognize them as objective and real. Thus we develop a consciousness of ourselves. Second, by thus giving things a human form, we overcome our alienation from the natural world and come to feel at home in it and in harmony with it.

Man brings himself before himself by *practical* activity, since he has the impulse, in whatever is directly given to him, in what is present to him externally, to produce himself and therein equally to recognize himself. This aim he achieves by altering external things whereon he impresses the seal of his inner being and in which he now finds again his own characteristics. Man does this in order, as a free subject, to strip the external world of its inflexible foreignness and to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself. (Hegel, 1975, 31.)

According to Hegel there is a basic human impulse for objectification and for self-recognition in this way. This impulse is present not just in work in the narrow economic sense, but in all practical activity which has an effect in the world. Hegel gives a graphic example to illustrate this point.

Even a child's first impulse involves this practical alteration of external things; a boy throws stones into the river and now marvels at the circles drawn in the water as an effect in which he gains an intuition of something that is his own doing. This need runs through the most diversiform phenomena up to that mode of self-production in external things which is present in the work of art. (Hegel, 1975, 31.)

In this way, according to Hegel, work is an activity through which we can objectify ourselves in the world and realize ourselves in our product and our activity. Marx follows Hegel in this. Work, as a self-realizing activity of this sort, is not only a means to satisfy our material appetites and needs but an end in itself. The highest human development of such practical activity is in artistic creation.

Alienation and Its Overcoming

This, at least, is the character that productive activity can potentially have according to Hegel and Marx. However, to come back now from the realm of philosophy to the actual world: work in the real world is seldom like this. Work can be, and indeed should be, fulfilling, but too often it is not so. Most of the actual work that most people do most of the time is unwanted and unpleasant toil. For the most part work is simply a means to an end of meeting needs and making a living.

So people are not wrong to say that this is why they work. What is wrong, however, is the philosophical theory of hedonism which holds that work must necessarily be like this because we are mere consumers by nature, and that the very idea of satisfying work is "against nature." This philosophy portrays the present, alienated form of work as its inevitable and necessary character. Whereas for Marx and Hegel, work — productive, creative activity — even when it involves effort and difficulty, can be a source of satisfaction and fulfilment.

This thought is at the basis of Marx's critique of present-day capitalist society. It is a great indictment of contemporary conditions, he argues, that our productive and creative activity, our "essential" activity, which is what most people do for most of their time, instead of being a source of fulfilment is experienced as hated toil.

This criticism applies not only at the individual level, but at the social level as well. Modern technology and industry constitute enormous developments of our productive and creative capabilities. These are human social powers and great human achievements. We should be able to recognize them as such, to affirm them as our powers and achievements, and to find realization in and through them. But for the most part we cannot and do not do so.

To describe our situation, Marx uses the graphic image of a genie which we ourselves have summoned up, but which “by some strange weird spell” has now become an alien and hostile force, out of our control and turned against us.⁵ The industry and technology that we ourselves have created have become powers that threaten to consume and destroy us, and indeed to poison and destroy the whole planet.

This need not and should not be the way in which we relate to our own products and powers, Marx argues. It is neither necessary nor inevitable that they should be experienced in this way. Such alienation is not the inescapable result of human nature. On the contrary, that it should appear to be so is itself a symptom of alienation and an indictment of contemporary society. This is the critical force of the concept of alienation, and the fundamental basis of Marx’s critique of capitalist society.

Here of course Marx diverges from Hegel. Hegel is a more conservative thinker. Although he, too, was aware of the human and social problems created by capitalism and large-scale industry (Sayers, 2003), he ultimately treats them as mere “anomalies” of the system which should be capable of resolution within it. For he believes that alienation can be overcome and reconciliation achieved within the structures of industrial capitalist society.

Marx, by contrast, sees that the problems are much more deeply rooted in the present order; they are intrinsic to the capitalist system itself. A complete and revolutionary social transformation is needed before our present alienation can be overcome and before we can begin to be at home with our own powers and creations. Only then will we finally be able to recognize that the “genie” of our technology and industry is in fact an emanation of *ourselves* — of our own powers and selves in alienated form. And only then will we be in a position to begin to take conscious social control of these powers and use them in a free and conscious way for our own real benefit.

SEAN SAYERS

*School of European Culture and Languages
University of Kent
Cornwallis Building
Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NF
United Kingdom
s.p.sayers@kent.ac.uk*

5 “Modern bourgeois society, with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells” (Marx and Engels, 1977, 226).

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