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Hegel, Marx, and the Realization of the Self in Work: Towards a Humanistic Ontology of Labor

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Abstract: It has become evident in advanced capitalism that the worker's relation between their labor and their selfhood remains unclear and distorted. For many, labor is merely a means for putting food on the table and a roof over their head. This does not mean, however, that labor in itself gives rise to this prevailing relation. The objective of this essay is to uncover a fundamental ontological characteristic of labor; namely, its ability to reflect one's subjectivity and capabilities as a human being. I attempt to demonstrate, through thinkers such as Karl Marx and G. W. F. Hegel, that the worker's labor and the exchange of their products are intimately connected with their selfhood—whether they see themselves as creative, competent, and so on. Furthermore, I argue that the advanced capitalist mode of production has distorted this essential relationship to labor, thus estranging the worker from their labor and subjectivity.

Introduction

When a manufacturing company has to resort to installing large nets outside its buildings to prevent employees from committing suicide, the grim and contorted relationship the employees have with their work becomes clear.¹ Under advanced capitalism, a system in which most of the world's population currently participates, the general apprehension of the essential relationship between labor and being human is noticeably obscure. The instability of this present "understanding" of the relation is demonstrated by frequent worker strikes and the need for "suicide nets" on manufacturing buildings. And this issue is not something which has recently developed; through the centuries of capitalist rule, this ill-defined concept of labor as it relates to human experience has become increasingly unclear and distorted. The reasons for this

¹ I am referring to a Foxconn manufacturing plant in Shenzhen, China. This plant manufactures hardware for various technology companies, one of which is Apple.

contortion are numerous and would require an intensive investigation. My object of study is not to look at labor in terms of its functions within the political economy—how labor affects the value of a product, the price of labor as determined by the intersection of supply and demand, etc. Rather, my concern is directed towards the *being* of labor as it relates to selfhood and being human. The objective of this essay is to uncover a fundamental ontological characteristic of labor; namely, its ability to reflect one's subjectivity and capabilities as a human being. Guided by the writings of Karl Marx and G. W. F. Hegel, I expound upon this property in the first and second sections of the following essay. The first illustrates how one's unique human capacities—creativity, intelligence, etc.— can be expressed and cultivated primarily through labor, the objective transformation of the world. The second section attempts to demonstrate how the subjectivity reflected in one's creation (or product) attains certitude only when that creation is used and recognized by another. I contend in the last section that once the intimate interrelation between labor and human subjectivity is neglected, forms of labor that estrange and disconnect workers from their creation (and thereby from their subjectivity and from one another) become socially and politically permissible.

Subjectivity and Labor

In order to observe how engaging in labor serves as a transformation and reflection of one's sense of self, we must direct our attention towards the conditions which allow for this intimate relationship to exist. However, before we do that, it is important that we make the general distinction between the activities of an animal and the labor of human beings. Broadly speaking, the animal's laborious activities that are necessary for maintaining its physical existence are what determine the life of its particular species; or as Marx notes, "[t]he animal is its life activity."² The effort involved in a bird building its nests and its search for

² Karl Marx, *Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 63.

earthworms and mulberries constitute the limitations of what it is capable of. Even when the animal's life is not dominated by the activities necessary for maintaining its life, that is to say if its environment is relatively safe from predators and there is a sufficient supply of food, it does not follow from this that creativity and reason suddenly come into fruition. Conversely, these aforementioned faculties begin to germinate and are made manifest when a human being is liberated from the incessant demand to preserve their own biological life—this will be further discussed later in this section. A cursory glance at the world would suffice in noticing that humans are endowed with abilities far more sophisticated than those of animals. It is the “practical creation of an objective world”—the houses, cars, tools, art, and so on—that displays the multitude of unique capabilities inherent in being human. Moreover, we cannot help but heed the diverse ways in which these abilities take form in the transformation of the material world. Think, for example, of how something as basic and simple as sustenance has become something which defines a culture and is an expression of artistry. It is in this process of creating and affecting the world that human beings develop their sense of self—that which constitutes one's individuality and unique character. However, I must be cautious in this generality, for not all humans find (and have found) their labor to be a source of their selfhood. It has only been those who are capable of exercising agency over their creations that have found their labor to be an expression of who they are and what they are capable of. Intellect, creativity, ingenuity, skill, and so on, are those human qualities that one is capable of expressing and utilizing in one's transformation of the world. So, to see these human capabilities freely expressed in labor, we need to observe the situation where the worker feels as if their activity is “a definite way of expressing their life.”³

One might suppose that living a life comparable to a prehistoric human, a human

³ Marx, 107.

unfettered from the restraints of others, constitutes a free relationship with their labor and its products. This is problematic simply because a human in this primitive state is confined to activities that are similar to those of an animal. Living outside an organized society or a *polis* would entail living without a structured division of labor, and thus in some form of state of nature. Alone and dependent on only themselves to obtain sustenance, the human would spend most of their waking hours hunting and scavenging for food. There is no relationship to their labor that allows them to find themselves and their potential in the products of their labor. The spear they make is not constructed for any reason but to use it for killing wild boar. Most of the time of the human's day is spent expending energy on activities necessary for maintaining their biological existence, a life similar to an animal. So in this sense, they are not free and the conditions are such that the idea of cultivating a sense of self (what they are capable of and so forth) through creation, is nonexistent. We are able to locate those engaged in genuine creation only in some form of organized community or society. As Marx remarks: "Only in community do the means exist for every individual to cultivate his talents in all directions. Only in the community is personal freedom possible."⁴ And the conditions for an individual to 'cultivate his talents' in labor can be found throughout various economic modes of production; although it is in capitalism that we find this particular relationship to labor taking on alienating and often restrictive forms. Marx notes that even during feudalism, many had a relative degree of freedom in their craft and were able to find their labor reflecting their character. He states in the *German Ideology* that:

[t]he medieval craftsman still exhibited an interest in their special work and their skill in it which could develop to a certain limited artistic talent. For that very reason every medieval craftsman was completely absorbed in his work, had a contented slavish relationship to it, and was subjected to it to a far greater extent than is the modern

⁴ Marx, 144.

worker for whom his work is a matter of indifference.⁵

Despite master craftsmen being required to get permission from the guild in order to be self-employed, there were not many restrictions impeding on their craft. Similarly, when we look at the very few in capitalism that have the privilege of working for themselves, insofar as they own the products they produce and are actively engaged in the craft, we find a relationship to labor that closely resembles that of the master craftsman.

Thus far, we have yet to get at the concrete ways in which labor and subjectivity are intimately connected. To understand the way subjectivity is apprehended and cultivated through labor, we must direct our attention to the situation where the worker is free, or at least relatively free, in their creation. That being said, let us observe a self-employed carpenter during the nascent stages of capitalism. Although, we could very well look at a master craftsman or journeyman during feudalism and still observe the worker acquiring a sense of who they are through their labor.

The carpenter who is able to exercise complete control over her product is, at the most fundamental level, able to see the process of work in terms of potentiality and actuality. Before commencing with the activity of building a chair, she must first devise a general image or model of it. In this particular stage of production, the carpenter envisages the chair in various forms; which is to say that it has the *potential* of taking on different shapes and structures. Once a rough blueprint has been established, she then proceeds to cut the wood and collect the necessary materials. It is in this process that she actively actualizes the possibility of the raw material being transformed into a chair; and throughout this endeavor, the desired end is always subject to change. For instance, after mounting the splat (the back part of the chair) on the chair, she notices that its convex shape does not suit the overall aesthetic of the creation; so as a result,

⁵ Marx, 135.

she constructs one that is aesthetically congruent with the surrounding parts. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt succinctly asserts this process into two parts: “first, perceiving the image or shape of the product-to-be, and then organizing the means and starting the execution.”⁶

What is of vital importance here is that it is the carpenter who precisely transformed the world in a constructive and creative manner. When the individual sees themselves as the subject (or agent) that propels the creation process, from the conception of the form (eidos) to the material actualization of that potential, the idea they have of themselves is reinforced. In other words, their skills, knowledge, creativity, etc, that are embodied in the chair they built become tangible and concrete evidence that those characteristics are a part of who they are. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel contends something quite similar in his account of the condition of the slave in the master-slave dialectic. He states that the slave’s “formative activity is at the same time the individuality or pure being-for-self of consciousness which now, in the work outside of it, acquires an element of permanence.”⁷ After having physically altered the world in a constructive way (through work), the bondsman’s sense of self or “individuality” becomes something concrete rather than vague and determined solely by the master. Alexandre Kojève, in his transcribed lectures on *Phenomenology of Spirit*, expands on Hegel’s analysis of work by remarking that, “[i]t is the realization of his project, of his idea...it is he that is realized in and by this product.”⁸ Furthermore, he adds the following: “In his work, he transforms things and he transforms himself at the sametime; he forms things and the world by transforming himself,

educating himself...”⁹ This active transformation of oneself through one’s productive

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* 2nd Edition (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 225.

⁷ G.F.W. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 118.

⁸ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), 25.

⁹ Kojève, 25.

activity is especially pertinent when it comes to taking on new projects that require the acquisition of additional skills and knowledge. The carpenter's determination to build a French bergère, a type of upholstered armchair, demonstrates this dual transformation of the subject and the creation. She is initially confident in her ability to take on such a formidable project; however, as she begins cutting the wood and configuring the various parts, she gradually comes to recognize that her present capabilities are no match for the elegant and sophisticated design of this particular chair. The limitations of her aptitude in carpentry are disclosed when she fails or falls short in building something intricate and new. It is in virtue of this revelation, however, that she retreats from the hands-on work in order to study various skills and techniques that are applicable for the construction of bergères. And her newly acquired skills and knowledge about bergères are realized only in its objectification, in the material application of her abilities. In other words, it is only once she successfully transforms the wood into the intricate chair that she can physically locate the cultivation and expansion of her knowledge, creativity, embodied skill, etc. After this formative experience, after altering the real objective world by presenting it with another expression of human feat, does the carpenter find herself transformed. However, one's personal evaluation of their creation, and thereby of their capabilities and talents, does not necessarily provide apodictic truth; it may very well be that the chair the carpenter designed is hideous. Seeing oneself in the object is certainly a necessary condition for realizing one's subjectivity, but it is not the sufficient condition. The way others respond to one's creation must also be accounted for when thinking about how one's productive activity operates as a reflection of their subjectivity. To understand why this is the case, let us explore Hegel's theory of recognition.

Subjectivity, the Object, and the Other

One of the crucial takeaways from Hegel's theory of recognition, developed in the fourth

chapter of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is that it is through the other that one acquires a more concrete understanding of who they are. The reason that self-consciousness (i.e. the individual) fights the other is in virtue of its desires to attain “the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness.”¹⁰ Which is to say simply that the individual wants the other to recognize them as independent and free in order to corroborate a feature of their being which they hold to be true (that is, that they are a free and independent being). And while an object produced by work serves as a means for individuals to recognize their subjectivity, as illustrated in the previous section, it nonetheless remains limited in that it is only the individual producing the object who is determining the value of the object. This solipsistic determination engenders a one-sided evaluation of the object, and thereby a one-sided grasp of themselves and their capabilities. Let us return to the case of the carpenter to observe this relation. When the carpenter is finally finished constructing the French bergère, and finds herself satisfied and proud of her creation, her sentiments remain merely personal. For her positive assessment of the chair, and of herself, is deprived of a comprehensive and complete truth; or as Hegel would articulate, her own “self-certainty still has no truth.”¹¹ For all she knows, the values she attributes to herself (creative, intelligent, skillful, capable of building a bergère, etc) may very well be illusory or exaggerated. It is precisely because of this partial evaluation of herself that makes others serve an imperative role in apprehending one’s self. In Arendt’s discussion on action and its way of disclosing the actor’s character, she writes: “This revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are *with* others...in sheer human togetherness.”¹² The worker’s labor, similar to the actor and their actions, is truly revealed only when it affects the human world. Supporting this claim, Kojève states that, “...he must impose the idea that he has of himself on a being other than

¹⁰ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 144.

¹¹ Hegel, 115.

¹² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 180.

himself: he must be recognized by the others.”¹³ Translating this in terms of productive activity and subjectivity, the individual must impose their creation on others in order to ascertain whether their assessment of it contains any truth; and the way to discover this is through exchanging or selling their very creation. Whether or not another individual will feel compelled to purchase the chair is the chief affirmation of the carpenter’s sentiment that the chair is aesthetically unique, intricate, functional, etc; and by extension, whether she is capable of building a bergère that is functional and pleasing to the eye. With creations like paintings or sculptures, the situation becomes a bit more complex; one culture or generation might deem a work of art to possess beauty while another might not. However, for the time being, we will put aside this particular matter and concern ourselves mostly with everyday objects and utilities. Additionally, what comes with this exchange is an active communication with others about the very objects the individual creates. This aforementioned feature, while it may appear to be inconsequential, proves to be rather essential for transforming oneself and one’s future creations. For instance, a few who purchased chairs from the carpenter informed her that a couple of the bolts were loose; because of this response, she felt an obligation to be more diligent and attentive when bolting on the legs. From then on she developed a sense of astuteness when it came to assembling the parts. Notice how this communication with others functions as a reflection of her capacities and its limitations. Her idea that the chairs she built were firmly constructed remains private until others use and appropriate the object, the material manifestation of her subjectivity. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that work which is reflective of subjectivity and agency is contingent on a set of conditions that make such a relationship with creation possible. We will see in the following section how neglecting this understanding of labor—as an activity that is intimately connected to subjectivity—can result in degraded relations to productive activity.

¹³ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 11.

The Distortion of Labor in Industrial Capitalism

From the depiction of labor as explicated above, we obtain two fundamental conclusions: (1) Productive activity and the objects created are material realizations of one's subjectivity, abilities, agency, humanity, etc. And, having a free relationship with labor allows for these aforementioned features to be cultivated and expanded. (2) The value one attributes to the objects they create are affirmed or denied by observing the way the objects transform the social objective world—that is, the way others use and respond to the objects they produce. Industrial capitalism has demonstrated an irreverence to this understanding of labor in a multitude of ways. However, there are two that I want to focus on which are relevant to the previous sections: the widespread fragmentation of productive activity and the worker's detachment from those who purchase the objects they “produce.”

Given that capitalists own most of the property and the means of production (raw materials, buildings, tools, etc), those who do not own anything but their labor (the workers, the majority) are forced to sell it to the capitalist as a means to survive. This unilateral distribution of power has allowed the capitalists to have authority over the conditions of production, which is to say that they are the ones who control what is being produced and how it is produced. The latter detail explains the extensive employment of the mechanized division of labor. And by “division of labor” in this context, I am not referring to the macro division of labor we see in any organized society where each person takes on a different vocation (some are bakers, some are doctors, etc). The mechanized division of labor I speak of is the type Adam Smith promotes in *The Wealth of Nations*, and what we see occurring in most manufactures today. In these large manufactures that produce high quantities of products, work is subdivided into as many tasks as possible. Instead of having each worker engaged in the entire production of a chair from start to finish, the workers are subjected to being responsible for a single operation (e.g. screwing in the

arm rests). Smith praises this arrangement of labor, maintaining that “by reducing every man’s business to some one simple operation, and by making this operation the sole employment of his life,” you allow for the worker to develop an adeptness to the particular task.¹⁴ One of the consequences of subjecting workers to this particular relation to labor is a fragmentary and distorted understanding of what it means to create a useful object. Rather than having to learn various skills and understand the construction of a chair in a relatively holistic manner, all the worker is required to learn is a single bodily gesture. Georg Lukács describes something similar in the following statement: “The process of labor is progressively broken down into abstract, rational, specialized operations so that the worker loses contact with the finished product and his work is reduced to the mechanical repetition of a specialized set of actions.”¹⁵ The “repetition of a specialized set of actions” does not constitute the ability to build a chair. The worker who is forced to endure these conditions cannot say they know how to build a chair, for they only know how to screw in arm rests. Recall the carpenter’s relation to creation described in the first section: she was able to clearly recognize her abilities and creativity in the product of her labor. And most importantly, her agency was being exercised in her production, which was expressed in her resolve to expand her competence and creativity in building different types of chairs. This relates to Marx’s contention that workers have been alienated from their “species-being,” expounded in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. He states, “free conscious activity is the species character of man”; which is to say that the essential feature that marks one out as human is the fact that they are able to exercise agency.¹⁶ This unique quality, which should be held sacrosanct, is diminished and constricted when someone other than the worker—the capitalist—

¹⁴ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 1994), 5

¹⁵ György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1971), 88.

¹⁶ Marx, *Selected Writings*, 63.

owns the worker's labor and its products. Learning how to utilize different tools and understanding the variety of ways to connect different parts (dovetail joints, lap joints, etc) are aspects of the creation process which are not fostered under the dominion of the mechanized division of labor. Being denied the ability to express agency and cultivate artistry through creation inevitably results in the worker viewing themselves as devoid of creativity and someone who is incapable of spontaneous activity.

Another way in which advanced capitalism has warped the worker's apprehension of productive activity, and consequently of their sense of self, is by estranging the worker from those who use the objects they produce. The products are not owned by the worker, so they are not the one who exchanges them. As a consequence, the worker is not able to interact with the consumers to ascertain how they evaluate the product (what aspects of the chair do they find appealing, the flaws about the chair, etc). And as we explored in the second section, communication with those who use the objects one creates plays a significant role in mastering and developing one's craft. Even when the customer finds a defect with the product, the worker

is not the one they speak to in order to resolve the issue. The employer is typically the one who is informed, as well as the one who expresses dissatisfaction towards the worker. And when a worker is subjected to an intense division of labor, where their exclusive duty is a single operation, they invariably feel no responsibility towards the product; for the worker fails to "see himself in the world he made."¹⁷ In industrial capitalism where large retailers purchase in mass quantities, rather than individuals directly purchasing the products, the relationship between the worker and the one who purchases the object they produce is even further removed. Moreover, the rise of bureaucratic "red tape" found in corporation's customer service adds a few inches in

¹⁷ Marx, 64.

the separation between the consumer and the producer (the worker). One may raise the objection that the rise of the internet has engendered numerous ways for individuals to find self-employed work that is creative and meaningful; eBay, Etsy, and Artfire are a few examples of online services that have opened up this employment space. While I am willing to concede that there is hope in utilizing these services as a means for establishing meaningful labor, labor which allows the worker to see themselves in the products, most of these services are limited in that they primarily deal with artistic creations. Components of the economy such as food or vehicle production would be difficult to incorporate in the small-scale production that takes place on websites like Etsy or eBay. And while there seems to be hope with these web services, capitalist countries are nevertheless experiencing an excessive decline of small businesses, and a concurrent rise of large manufacturing monopolies (like Amazon, Walmart, Foxconn, etc).¹⁸ Consequently, with the prevalence of massive corporations comes a collective sense of disaffection and powerlessness with regards to the individual's relationship to labor.

Conclusion

There are many more facets of advanced capitalism which distort a worker's understanding of their productive activity, and thereby of their sense of self. Subjects such as false consciousness and ideology play a role in contorting the definition of labor. Additionally, the rise of bureaucratic vocations, or what David Graeber calls "bullshit jobs," further muddles the most fundamental properties of labor and creation.¹⁹ Any form of labor where the worker cannot exercise agency, creativity, intelligence, etc, will find the activity to absorb and deplete their subjectivity, rather than reflect it. This is one of the consequences of capitalism that I

¹⁸ Stacy Mitchell, "Monopoly Power and the Decline of Small Business," 9.

¹⁹ David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

attempted to make explicit in the essay. My chief objective in this essay was to uncover an essential property of productive activity; namely, its ability to reflect one's subjectivity and capabilities as human beings. Guided by the writings of Marx and Hegel, I expound upon this characteristic in the first and second sections. The first illustrated how one's unique human capacities—creativity, intelligence, etc— can be expressed and cultivated primarily through labor, the objective transformation of the world. The second section attempted to demonstrate how the subjectivity reflected in one's creation (or product) attains certainty only when that creation is used by another. I contended in the last section that once there is a neglect of the intimate interrelation between labor and human subjectivity, forms of labor that estrange and disconnect workers from their creation (and thereby from their subjectivity) become socially and politically permissible.

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