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The Unity of Marx's Concept of Alienated Labor

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In his 1844 manuscripts, Marx famously argues that labor under capitalism is alienated. What does he mean by this? Among other things, he says of alienated labor that it does not belong to the worker but is external to her, that it issues in a product that does not belong to her either, that it is unfulfilling, that it is unfree, that it alienates the worker from her fellow human beings—for instance, in being egoistically motivated—and that it alienates the worker from her human nature. He suggests, moreover, that the first of these features in some way grounds all the others. On the face of it, though, these features are all quite independent of one another. They can in principle come apart; they share no obvious common cause or explanation; and if they often occur together this seems more or less accidental. It is not clear, then, how Marx's concept of alienated labor could possess the strong sort of unity which he apparently takes it to have.

While traditional readings, grounded in a substantive conception of human nature, struggle to explain this unity, I show that Marx has the resources to do so. To see this, we must attend to a dimension of alienated labor whose significance has not been properly appreciated, namely the fact that such labor is motivated not by its product but by a radically extrinsic incentive. I argue that this formal motivational structure explains the sense in which alienated labor and its product fail to belong to the worker, why the labor is necessarily both unfulfilling and unfree, and why it necessarily alienates the worker also from her human nature and from her fellow human beings.

1. Marx on Alienated Labor

By “alienated labor,” I mean the kind of labor which Marx calls “*entäußert*” or “*entfremdet*.”¹ In this section, I draw on the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (hereafter *Manuscripts*) and the *Comments on James Mill* (hereafter *Comments*, written in the same year) to identify some of the characteristic features and consequences of such labor which a satisfactory reconstruction of the concept ought to explain.²

¹ When quoting Marx, I will use the standard translations of these German terms as ‘alienated’ and ‘estranged’, respectively—but I will treat them as meaning the same thing, given that Marx frequently uses them interchangeably. See, for example, EPM 274–75.

² The *Manuscripts* and *Comments* were not only written in the same year and as part of the same project of Marx's critical study of political economy; they also exhibit striking and specific similarities of content, such as the fourfold classification of relations of alienation

The most fundamental, definitive characteristic of alienated labor is that it is an activity which does not “belong” to the worker. That is to say, it is not fully or without qualification her own activity—or to put the same point another way, she is not fully or without qualification its agent. “The relation of labour to the *act of production* within the *labour* process,” Marx says in the *Manuscripts*, “is the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him” (EPM 275).³ He presents this statement as a summary of the following more detailed description:

What, then, constitutes the alienation [*Entäußerung*] of labour?

First, the fact that labour is *external* [*äußerlich*] to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature [*Wesen*]; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labour*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague. External labour, labour in which man alienates himself, is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Lastly, the external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else’s, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another. (EPM 274)

Once again, the most basic feature of alienated labor, which Marx here calls its “external” character, is said to consist in the fact that the activity does not “belong” to the worker, or (as he puts it here) does not belong to her “*Wesen*,” her “intrinsic nature” or “essence” or “being.” Of course, this formula remains highly abstract. In the rest of the passage, though, Marx also describes several more concrete marks which he takes to be characteristic of alienated labor, of which I will highlight the two most frequently discussed.

First, alienated labor is unfulfilling, both objectively and subjectively. Objectively, alienated labor is not a site for the worker’s self-realization—the development and exercise of her capacities. In her work, she “does not develop freely [her] physical and mental energy”; in this respect, she “does not affirm [herself] but denies [herself].” Subjectively, she finds her work a source not of contentment but of unhappiness. Second, alienated labor is unfree. It is “not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labour*,” chosen only under some

described later in this section. I therefore think it is reasonable to try to formulate an account of alienated labor that makes sense of central claims of both texts. I will make no attempt in this paper, however, to account for forms of alienation other than the alienation of labor (as Marx understands it), except insofar as they bear directly on the latter.

³ Throughout this paper, all emphases within quotes are the quoted author’s own.

“physical or other compulsion.” Together, the unfulfillingness and unfreedom of alienated labor seem to explain the merely instrumental character of such labor. Labor which enables the worker to develop and realize her capacities and which she chooses freely might well be valued for its own sake, as itself “the satisfaction of a need.” But labor which is unfulfilling and unfree can only be valued as “a *means* to satisfy needs external to it.”

So much for a preliminary description of what alienated labor *is*. Marx also argues that this alienation has three further consequences: the worker’s alienation from the product of her labor, from her human nature, and from her fellow human beings. First, just as the activity of alienated labor does not belong to its agent, Marx claims that the product of this activity does not belong to her either: “The object which labour produces—labour’s product—confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer” (EPM 272). Whatever exactly this may mean, it is supposed to be a consequence of the alienation of her labor itself. “In the estrangement of the object of labour,” Marx says, “is merely summarised the estrangement, the alienation, in the activity of labour itself” (EPM 274).

A second consequence of the alienation of labor is supposed to be the worker’s alienation from her human nature. Unalienated labor, Marx thinks, would be more than a mere means to securing what she needs in order to survive: it would itself be an expression of her humanity. In this regard, Marx particularly emphasizes the freedom of properly human labor. “The whole character of a species—its species character—is contained in the character of its life activity,” he says; “and free, conscious activity is man’s species-character” (EPM 276). By contrast, insofar as alienated labor fails to exemplify this character, an activity which in its proper form would itself be an expression of human nature becomes a mere means to securing the worker’s survival, and thus “estranges from man ... his *human aspect*” (EPM 277).

Finally, Marx argues that the alienation of labor entails the worker’s alienation from her fellow human beings. Interestingly, he spells out what this means by returning to the features of the alienated laboring activity itself. Each of the principal facets of alienated labor—most generally its not belonging to the worker, and more concretely its unfulfillingness and unfreedom—turns out necessarily to imply an interpersonal relation. In the long passage already quoted, Marx says that alienated labor “is not [the worker’s] own, but *someone else’s*” He repeats this point at length later on: “If my own activity does not belong to me, if it is an alien, a coerced activity, to whom, then, does it belong? To a being *other than myself*” (EPM 278). Specifically, it must belong to “some *other man than the worker*” (EPM 278). More concretely, the worker’s relation to this other person is also implicated in the unfulfillingness and in the unfreedom of alienated labor: “If the worker’s activity is a torment to him, to another it must give *satisfaction* [*Genuß*] and pleasure [*Lebensfreude*]. ... If [the worker] treats his own activity as an unfree activity, then he treats it as an activity performed in the service, under the dominion, the coercion, and the yoke of another man” (EPM 278–279).⁴

At this point, it is worth turning to the *Comments*, too, as the interpersonal dimension of alienation is arguably the most important theme of that text. To be sure, the immediate subject-matter of the *Comments* is slightly different from that of the *Manuscripts*. Whereas in

⁴ ‘Lebensfreude’ might be translated more precisely as ‘*joie de vivre*’.

the *Manuscripts* Marx is primarily interested in labor done in the service of “the capitalist (or whatever one chooses to call the master of labour)” (EPM 279) in the *Comments* he focuses more generically on labor for the sake of a familiar, self-interested kind of exchange—what he would later have called “commodity-producing labor.”⁵ But it is clear that he also thinks of this latter kind of labor as alienated. “The relationship of exchange being presupposed,” Marx says, “labour becomes *directly labour for an income* [*Erwerbsarbeit*]” (CJM 219, translation modified⁶). And such labor, he suggests, involves forms of alienation that echo those discussed in the *Manuscripts*:

Labour for an income [*Erwerbsarbeit*] involves: 1) the estrangement [*Entfremdung*] and accidentality [*Zufälligkeit*] of labour to the labouring subject; 2) the estrangement and accidentality of labour to the object of labour; 3) the determination of the worker by social needs which, however, are alien to him and a compulsion to which he submits out of egoistic need and necessity, and which have for him only the significance of a means of satisfying his dire need, just as for them he exists only as a slave of their needs; 4) that to the worker the maintenance of his individual existence appears to be the *purpose* of his activity and what he actually does is regarded by him only as a means; that he carries on his life’s activity in order to earn means of *subsistence*. (EPM 220, translation modified⁷)

The first two forms of alienation described here are clearly the worker’s alienation from her laboring activity and from the product of that activity, respectively. The fourth echoes the worker’s alienation from her human nature as described in the *Manuscripts*, her “life’s activity” being turned into a mere means to her individual survival. And the third speaks to the alienation of the worker from the society of her fellow human beings.

It is with respect to this third dimension of alienation that Marx emphasizes an aspect of alienated labor not foregrounded in the *Manuscripts*: that the agent of such labor has a distinctively selfish motive. The thought, which he fleshes out at length in the surrounding text, is that although the worker may be non-accidentally producing what another person needs, insofar as her labor is alienated, it is not the prospect of satisfying

⁵ I return to the relation between these two kinds of labor in section 4.

⁶ Here and elsewhere, I have translated ‘Erwerbsarbeit’ as ‘labour for an income’ instead of the standard ‘labour to earn a living’. I find the standard translation potentially misleading because it could imply that labor done to procure the basic necessities of life, such as subsistence-farming, necessarily counts as *Erwerbsarbeit*—which cannot be Marx’s view given the context of this sentence (quoted on pp. 8–9 below).

⁷ In addition to making trivial changes for readability and to mirror the structure of the original German sentence more closely, I have translated ‘Erwerbsarbeit’ again as ‘labour for an income’, ‘Zufälligkeit’ as ‘accidentality’ rather than the standard ‘fortuitous connection’, and ‘die Bestimmung des Arbeiters durch’ as ‘the determination of the worker by’ rather than the standard ‘the role of the worker is determined by’ (there being nothing in the German to justify the insertion of ‘the role of’).

the other's need which motivates her to produce the relevant good. Instead, she is motivated by whatever consideration she receives in exchange. When you and I produce the objects of each other's needs in this way, Marx says, "I have produced for myself and not for you, just as you have produced for yourself and not for me. ... Each of us sees in his product only the objectification of his *own* selfish need, and therefore in the product of the other the objectification of a *different* selfish need, independent of him and alien to him" (CJM 225). In this situation, "the *social* relation in which I stand to you, my labour for your need, is ... a mere *semblance*, and our complementing each other is likewise a mere *semblance*, the basis of which is mutual plundering" (CJM 226).

To summarize, then, alienated labor is, most basically, labor which is "external" to the worker in the sense that it is not without qualification the worker's own activity. This externality is distinctively interpersonal: the labor belongs not to her but to someone else. More concretely, alienated labor is characteristically both unfulfilling and unfree, again in distinctively interpersonal senses: instead of being fulfilling to the worker, it gives satisfaction to someone else, and instead of being free, it involves subjection to the will of another. Furthermore, such labor is egoistically motivated; even if it happens to satisfy another's need, it is not done for that reason. And finally, the alienation of labor results in the alienation of the worker both from the product of her labor and from her own human nature.

2. Two Kinds of Conceptual Unity

Evidently, Marx's concept of alienated labor is rich and multi-faceted. Actually, it is suspiciously rich and multi-faceted. On the face of it, several of the features which Marx attributes to alienated labor—in particular, its unfulfillingness, its unfreedom, and its egoistic motivation—seem to have little to do with one another. Certainly it seems possible for labor to exhibit any one of these features without the others. What unifies them, then? Why should we think of the alienation of labor as a single condition rather than a cluster of basically unrelated problems?⁸ In this section, I describe the relatively thin kind of unity which standard readings of Marx attribute to alienated labor, and I motivate the search for a more robust unity.

On the standard reading, what unifies the many faces of Marxian alienation is their relation to a substantive conception of human nature. Fundamentally, the alienation of labor is said to consist in its failure to conform to some standard of what labor ought to be like, where this standard may have any number of separate dimensions. In Daniel Brudney's words, "alienation is a function of a multiply deficient relation between the worker's actual activity and the proper form of that activity" (2018, 216–17; compare Kandiyali 2020, 571). More specifically, this proper form of labor is typically identified with the properly human form of labor, labor within which the worker realizes a distinctively human set of powers. Call this interpretation of Marx the "essentialist" reading: essentialist because, on this reading, we cannot understand what it is for labor to be alienated or which

⁸ For a skeptical take on the unity (or lack thereof) of Marx's concept of alienation, see Schacht 2015 [1970], 91–92, 113. Compare Wood 2004 [1981], 4; and Maguire 2022, 4.

features are characteristic of alienated labor except by reference to a prior, substantive conception of human nature.

On the essentialist model, alienated labor fails to “belong” to the worker in the sense that it fails to belong to her human nature; it is “external” to her “*Wesen*,” her “being” or “essence,” in the sense that it is external to her specifically human essence. “The alienation Marx finds in capitalist society,” as Allen Wood puts it, “is the condition of being unable to actualize oneself, unable to develop and exercise the powers belonging to one’s human essence” (2004 [1981], 23; see also Ollman 1976 [1971], 131–52, 254–55; Adams 1991; Brighouse 1996, 150; Brudney 1997, chapters 4–6; 2001; 2018; Sayers 2003; 2005; Wolff 2003; Wolff and Leopold 2021; Weeks 2011, 89–92; Jaeggi 2014, 14–16; James 2017; and Gilabert 2020, section 2.2).

For example, human beings have the distinctive ability to develop complex skills, so their labor, we might say, is not properly human unless it enables them to develop and exercise such skills within their work. On the essentialist reading, it follows that labor which is unfulfilling on account of being rote and unskilled is alienated (Wolff 2003, 34, 36; compare Elster 1985, 103–4; 1986; and Adams 1991, 250). Likewise, it belongs to human beings to act freely: properly human labor, we can say, is free. On the essentialist reading, it follows that labor which is unfree, for instance on account of being done under the compulsion of dire need, is alienated (James 2017, 275). And lastly, we are deeply social animals, so our labor can be said not to be properly human unless we engage in it for the sake of satisfying one another’s needs. On the essentialist reading, it follows that egoistically motivated labor, done not to satisfy the consumer’s need but merely, for instance, to obtain a wage or some other form of consideration, is also alienated (Wood 2004 [1981], 22; compare Brudney 1998, chapter 5; and 2018). From an essentialist point of view, then, what unfulfilling labor, unfree labor, and egoistically motivated labor have in common is that all of them are examples of labor which falls away from the human standard.

This is a disappointingly superficial kind of unity. To see why, consider the following analogy. Fatigue, shortness of breath, and fever are all ways in which someone’s body can fall short of a human standard of health: that evaluative feature is something these conditions have in common. If we defined a syndrome as constituted by these conditions, the concept of this syndrome would accordingly possess an *evaluative* unity, the elements of the syndrome being unified by their common evaluative significance. This is a relatively superficial kind of unity, however, for it does not follow from this unity alone that the conditions in question jointly constitute a single ailment in any interesting sense: they might all be upshots of different, unrelated illnesses, such that it is accidental if they all afflict someone at the same time.

Sometimes, we can go further. Sometimes we can say, for instance, that a person’s fatigue, shortness of breath, and fever are all symptoms of a single underlying illness—*influenza*, perhaps. The concept of this illness then possesses not merely an evaluative but a *diagnostic* unity: what unifies the various symptoms is not merely a generic evaluative consequence but a common cause, by virtue of which it is no accident if they all afflict someone at the same time. We are then entitled to say that the various symptoms, however diverse they may be in appearance, genuinely belong to a single ailment.

Merely evaluative unity is not nothing: it is generally helpful to know that various conditions all fall short of some relevant standard. A concept with diagnostic unity, however, is more powerful, both theoretically and practically. A doctor who tells her patient that he has influenza advances his understanding more than a doctor who tells her patient merely that his symptoms constitute various forms of unhealth, for the former distinctively gives her patient knowledge of the cause of his symptoms. By the same token, the former doctor also does more to put her patient on the path to recovery, for it is difficult to cure the symptoms of an illness without identifying the underlying illness that causes them.

To return to alienated labor, it is clear that the standard reading gives this concept only the comparatively weak, purely evaluative kind of unity. Even if the unfulfillingness, unfreedom, and egoistic motivation of labor all make it fall short of a human standard, it does not follow that they jointly constitute a single (social) ailment in any interesting sense: they might all be upshots of different, unrelated problems, such that it is entirely accidental if they all afflict one laboring activity at the same time. To observe that labor is alienated, on this reading, is neither to advance our understanding of the causes of its alienation nor, by the same token, to make significant progress toward its de-alienation.

By contrast, if to call labor alienated were already to identify a single ground explaining the presence of the various special features of such labor, then we would be entitled to say that the alienation of labor genuinely constitutes a single condition in an interesting sense. By the same token, the concept of alienation could then play a more robust role in social theory and practice. It could play a role in explaining why labor with various problematic features possesses those features, and it could play a role in formulating a strategy for transforming such labor so as to rid it of those features. This gives us reason to want a more robustly unified concept of alienated labor.

There is textual evidence that Marx himself has systematic ambitions more in line with a diagnostic than a purely evaluative account of alienation. Most significantly, his initial description of alienated labor in the *Manuscripts* has a diagnostic structure, first identifying a single fundamental feature—the “externality” of such labor to the worker—and then explicitly deriving various more concrete features from this common ground (EPM 274, quoted on p. 2 above).⁹ If we take this passage at face-value, Marx is not saying—as the standard account requires—that labor which is, for instance, unfulfilling and unfree counts for those reasons as alienated. Instead, he is saying that labor which is alienated—external to the worker—is for that reason unfulfilling and unfree. To revisit the health analogy once more, he is not saying that the patient who suffers from fatigue, shortness of breath, and fever counts for that reason as having influenza; he is saying that the patient who has influenza suffers for that reason from fatigue, shortness of breath, and fever.

⁹ I may seem to be putting too much weight on the details of this unpolished and unpublished passage. Most of Marx’s early discussions of alienation, however, are similarly unpolished and unpublished, and in the context of these writings, this particular passage is especially important because in it Marx makes an unusually explicit attempt to address the question of definition: “What, then, constitutes the alienation of labor?” Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on the evidential value of this passage.

In this passage and elsewhere, Marx also clearly suggests that the co-presence of the various marks of alienation is no accident. In particular, Marx goes to great lengths to insist that the worker's alienation from other people follows with necessity from the worker's alienation from her own activity: if her labor does not belong to her, it must belong to another; if it does not fulfill her, it must give satisfaction to another; if it is unfree, it must be done under the dominion of another; "only man himself can be this alien power over man" (EPM 278–79). On the essentialist reading, however, this strong modal language is difficult to justify, since that reading explains the shared evaluative significance of the various marks of alienation but gives us no reason to assume that they must occur together.

It seems to me, then, that we have both exegetical and independent philosophical reasons to want an account of the concept of alienated labor with a more robust unity than the standard reading possesses. In what follows, I develop and defend such an account. Far from being independent elements unified only by a shared evaluative significance, I will argue that the various features and upshots of alienated labor all follow from a single shared ground that explains their presence. Indeed, when properly understood, I will argue, they follow from this ground as a matter of conceptual necessity.¹⁰ To bring all of this into view, however, we must attend to a hitherto underappreciated dimension of Marx's thought about alienation.

3. The Root of Alienation: A Negative Characterization

Let us start over by asking a different question. What kind of labor is it which Marx claims to be alienated in his early writings? Consider first the *Comments*. As we have already seen, his answer there is quite explicit. The kind of labor he has in view is labor for the sake of a familiar, self-interested kind of exchange, the sort of exchange that happens on the market. Such labor, he says, amounts to labor for an income, *Erwerbsarbeit*, and it is this which he says is alienated (CJM 127–28).

We accordingly have reason to suspect that the alienation of labor is rooted somehow in this very feature of its motivational structure: that it is done for the sake of the relevant kind of exchange. And this suspicion is confirmed by a pivotal passage of the *Comments*, in which Marx describes the emergence of the relevant kind of exchange out of a more primitive system of barter:

In the crude form [*rohen Gestalt*] of alienated [*entäußerten*] private property, barter, each of the property owners has produced what his immediate need, his talents and the available raw material have impelled him to make. Each, therefore, exchanges with the other only the surplus of his own production. It is true that labour was his immediate *source of subsistence*, but it was at the same time also the manifestation [*Betätigung*] of his *individual existence* [*Existenz*]. Through exchange his *labour* has become partly a *source of income* [*Erwerbsquelle*]. Its purpose [*Zweck*] differs now from its mode of existence

¹⁰ In this respect, I will ultimately claim an even stronger unity for the various features of alienated labor than that exhibited by the symptoms of an illness such as influenza.

[*Dasein*]. The product is produced as *value*, as *exchange-value*, as an *equivalent*, and no longer because of its direct, personal relation to the producer. The more diverse production becomes, and therefore the more diverse the needs become, on the one hand, and the more one-sided the activities of the producer become, on the other hand, the more does his labour fall into the category of *labour for an income* [*Erwerbsarbeit*], until finally it has only this significance and it becomes quite *accidental* [*zufällig*] and *inessential* [*unwesentlich*] whether the relation of the producer to his product is that of immediate enjoyment and personal need, and also whether his *activity*, the act of labour itself, is for him the enjoyment of his personality and the realization of his natural abilities and spiritual aims [*Zwecke*].¹¹ (CJM 220)

Immediately following this passage, Marx characterizes *Erwerbsarbeit* as involving the four familiar forms of alienation.¹²

Marx's narrative here involves considerable simplification. There was no period of human history during which a large proportion of individual human beings were self-sufficient private property owners who directly produced the bulk of their own means of subsistence while exchanging the surplus of their production. At best, this will have been true of groups of various sizes, such as subsistence-farming households and communal societies.¹³ Nevertheless, the genealogical artifice serves as a useful expository device for Marx's concept of alienation and its relation to exchange.

The initial state, which Marx describes here as a "crude form of alienated private property" and later as a "savage and barbaric condition," is clearly not meant to be ideal in all respects (CJM 224). It is a condition in which each individual is a Robinson Crusoe who produces only for herself, so that production has a fundamentally "selfish" character—a character which it retains once exchange begins to happen (CJM 224–25). For this reason, as I will argue in section 8, such production already contains the germ of the alienation of labor; it is proto-alienated.¹⁴

However, we should resist any temptation to regard these producers' laboring activity as already alienated. First, Marx attributes to it a key feature that he characteristically associates with unalienated production. Each producer's selfish labor, he says, is not only "his immediate source of subsistence" but also "the manifestation"—the *Betätigung*, the activity or activation—"of his individual existence." In other words, for all its defects, this labor is a site for at least one important kind of self-realization. It is only once they begin to produce for the sake of exchange that "it becomes quite *accidental* and *inessential*

¹¹ This passage is relatively neglected in the literature, but there is an insightful discussion of it in Chitty 1993.

¹² This sentence is quoted on p. 4 above.

¹³ The simplified treatment of households, in particular, as "individual" producers is a recurring feature of Marx's writings. See Vogel 2013, 63–64.

¹⁴ I think this is why Marx calls the corresponding form of property a "crude form of alienated private property."

... whether [each producer's] *activity*, the act of labour itself, is for him the enjoyment of his personality and the realization of his natural abilities and spiritual aims.”

Second, when Marx goes on to speak of the “alienation” and “accidentality” of labor immediately following the historical narrative, it is specifically and explicitly to labor for an income (*Erwerbsarbeit*) that he attributes these. Whatever objections he may have to “the crude form of alienated private property,” it clearly contains no labor for an income. Rather, the passage describes the coming into being of such labor. It comes into being through a transformation of production for the sake of one’s own immediate consumption into production for the sake of exchange. Accordingly, it is with this transformation that alienated labor, too, comes into being.

Read, then, as describing a transition from unalienated (though proto-alienated) to alienated labor, the passage seems to identify quite determinately the fundamental feature of alienated labor, which consists in the role that the product of labor plays in the motivational structure of the activity. Initially, the producer produces goods that she directly needs for her own consumption: the direct usefulness of these products is what motivates her to produce them. At this stage, she exchanges only an incidentally produced surplus. The key change—that which marks the beginning of the alienation of her labor—occurs as soon as part of the worker’s productive activity comes to be engaged in *for the purpose* of exchange. At this point, “the product is produced as *value*, as *exchange-value*, as an *equivalent*, and no longer because of its direct, personal relation to the producer.” The alienation of her labor is complete when her entire productive activity comes to have this character.

I therefore hypothesize, at a first pass, that the distinguishing feature of alienated labor for Marx is that it is not motivated by its product. Insofar as the worker’s labor is alienated, what her activity produces is a matter of indifference to her.¹⁵ For now, this remains a purely negative characterization, in the sense that it only tells us what does not motivate alienated labor. In the next section, I will develop the hypothesis further and give it a final, more positive characterization. While the bulk of my argument for the hypothesis will be based on its power to bring into view the robust unity of Marx’s concept of alienated labor, the discussion of exchange in the *Comments*, particularly the long, pivotal passage quoted above, constitutes direct textual evidence for it.

Beyond the *Comments*, there is also more indirect textual evidence that the producer’s indifference to her own product is at the heart of Marx’s concern with alienation, for he continues to emphasize the same point explicitly after 1844. In *Wage Labor and Capital* (written in 1847, published in 1849), he says that for the wage-worker,

the product of his activity is not the purpose [*Zweck*] of his activity. What he produces for himself is not the silk that he weaves, not the gold that he draws from the mine, not the palace that he builds. What he produces for himself is *wages*, and silk, gold, palace resolve themselves for him into a definite

¹⁵ Other readers of Marx have recognized at least that this is one characteristic mark of alienation among others. See, for example, Cohen 1974, 246–47; Ripstein 1989, section III; and Brudney 2018, 215.

quantity of the means of subsistence, perhaps into a cotton jacket, some copper coins and a lodging in a cellar. And the worker, who for twelve hours weaves, spins, drills, turns, builds, shovels, breaks stones, carries loads, etc.— does he consider this twelve hours’ weaving, spinning, drilling, turning, building, shovelling, stone-breaking as a manifestation of his life, as life? On the contrary, life begins for him where this activity ceases, at table, in the public house, in bed. The twelve hours’ labour, on the other hand, has no meaning for him as weaving, spinning, drilling, etc., but as *earnings*, which bring him to the table, to the public house, into bed.¹⁶ (WLC 202–3, translation modified¹⁷)

Though Marx has cooled on the word ‘alienation’ by the time he writes these lines, it is clear that he is describing the same condition which is the subject of the 1844 writings on alienated labor. There is, in particular, the telling emphasis on the old idea of a separation between the worker’s labor and her “life.” And the passage offers an explicit and unambiguous explanation of this separation. The explanation is that the labor is distinctively meaningless for the worker: it has no meaning for the worker as the concrete productive activity that it is—in other words, as the activity of producing silk, gold, palaces, or whatever. But this is precisely because “the product of [her] activity is not the purpose of [her] activity.”

4. The Root of Alienation: A Positive Characterization

We can develop this as yet purely negative characterization of alienated labor further by considering a question which Marx’s account raises but which he does not explicitly address. To say that wage-labor is not motivated by its product is to presuppose a deep distinction between the relation which labor bears to its “product” and the relation which it bears to its wage. But what is the difference?

From one point of view, it is difficult to see a principled distinction here. When someone lays bricks in order to build a wall, she does the former as a means to the latter. No bricklaying, no wall. Similarly, when someone lays bricks in order to receive wages, the former is also a means to the latter. No bricklaying, no wages. Why not say, then, that the wages are equally a “product” of the bricklaying? Marx himself seems to admit that this is true in some sense when he suggests that the worker really “produces” wages for herself. If we are to take seriously his claim that “the product of [the worker’s] activity is not the purpose of [her] activity,” the point must be that the worker “produces” wages only in a qualified sense, different from the ordinary, unqualified sense in which she “produces” a wall or a house. What does the difference consist in?

¹⁶ Note that this passage, which is specifically about wage-labor, also demonstrates that Marx takes the relevant motivational structure to be a shared feature of labor for exchange and wage-labor.

¹⁷ I have translated ‘Zweck’ as ‘purpose’ rather than ‘object’.

The most natural way to describe the difference, I think, is that the wage is extrinsic to the bricklaying in a way in which the wall is not. Of course, neither the receipt of a wage nor the production of the wall is simply identical with the laboring activity; both ends are strictly distinct from the labor. Nevertheless, the bricklaying is internally connected with the production of the wall in that the activity itself already makes a contribution to this end, whereas the activity itself makes no such contribution to the receipt of a wage.

We can make this thought more precise by considering what a wage is. Paradigmatically, a wage is a type of incentive. In general, to offer someone an incentive for doing something is a way of motivating them to do it. Incentivization differs from other forms of persuasion, however, in at least the following respect. In incentivizing an activity, one does not draw the other's attention to a good to which the desired activity would already contribute. Rather, one goes out of one's way to make the relevant activity a means to the relevant good, for the very purpose of motivating the activity (compare Grant 2012, chapter 3). More precisely, then, we can say that what relevantly distinguishes labor's product properly speaking from its wage is that the labor makes a contribution to its product independently of another's attempt to get the worker to do it, whereas it makes no such independent contribution to the worker's end of receiving a wage. It is in this sense that a wage is distinctively and radically extrinsic to the laboring activity itself.

A more positive characterization of the alienation of labor, then, is that labor is alienated insofar as it is motivated not by its product but by an incentive. This is why what Marx says about labor for exchange, his principal target in the *Comments*, applies equally to wage-labor, his target in the *Manuscripts* and in *Wage Labor and Capital*. Both labor for the sake of exchange among equals and wage-labor in the service of a capitalist are species of the genus of incentivized labor, insofar as both are motivated paradigmatically not by their product but by some form of consideration, be it a wage on the one hand or payment or some other commodity received in exchange for one's product on the other.

By the same token, the account of alienated labor applies also to labor motivated by the threat of punishment. Like the worker who works for the sake of a wage, the slave who does as she is told in order to avoid a beating is motivated not by the product of her labor but by an incentive whose connection with the labor depends essentially on another's attempt to get her to perform the labor. While there are any number of morally significant differences between sticks and carrots, both are alienating in fundamentally the same way *qua* incentives. This seems entirely in the spirit of Marx's view, given the explicit parallels he draws between slave-labor and both wage-labor and labor for exchange in his 1844 writings.¹⁸

¹⁸ For example, on the parallel between wage-labor and slave-labor: "An enforced *increase of wages* ... would therefore be nothing but better *payment for the slave*, and would not win either for the worker or for labour their human status and dignity" (EPM 280). And on the parallel between labor for exchange and slave-labor: "If then our mutual thralldom to the object at the beginning of the process [of production for exchange] is now seen to be in reality the relationship between *master* and *slave*, that is merely the *crude* and *frank* expression of our *essential* relationship" (CJM 227).

5. Not the Worker's Own Activity and Not Her Own Product

In what follows, I argue that this distinctive motivational structure is the principle of unity of Marx's concept of alienation, explaining the manifold features and consequences which Marx attributes to alienated labor. Consider, to begin with, the most abstract and fundamental of Marx's characterizations: that alienated labor is an activity which does not belong to its own agent, which is to say that it is not actually without qualification her own activity and she not without qualification its own agent. This is true of labor motivated by an incentive, I suggest, because such labor is not without qualification a process of realizing the worker's own ends.

When a worker is motivated by the product of her work, her laboring activity is unproblematically a process of realizing her own end. This is true even if she cares only about the product and does not value the activity intrinsically. If her labor is, for instance, unpleasant and uninteresting, it may not be an end in itself for her, but insofar as she is motivated by its product, it nonetheless makes an independent productive contribution to her ends. By contrast, if the worker is motivated not by her product but merely by an incentive, not only are her ends not realized within her laboring activity itself; this activity does not even make an independent productive contribution to her ends. In fact, it really has nothing to do with her ends at all. When Marx speaks of the "externality" and "accidentality" of alienated labor to the worker, then, we can understand this as fundamentally a matter of its externality or accidentality not to her human nature but to her ends.

Another way to put the point is that alienated labor involves a distinctive and especially profound kind of indifference on the part of the worker to her own work. When a worker is engaged in any kind of purely instrumental activity—cleaning a toilet, say—there is a sense in which she is indifferent to her activity. She gets nothing out of the activity itself; all she cares about is its product. In the case of alienated—that is, incentivized—labor, however, her indifference takes a uniquely extreme form. If she is cleaning the toilet only to get paid, not only does she not care about the activity itself as distinct from its product; she does not even care about the product. In other words, not only does she not value the work intrinsically; there is a sense in which she does not even value it instrumentally. As a result, her work is from her point of view distinctively fungible: its concrete character or identity is distinctively irrelevant, utterly accidental from the point of view of her ends. Insofar as what she is after is not a clean toilet but payment, she might just as well be flipping burgers or walking dogs, neither of which has any less to do with her end than cleaning the toilet does.¹⁹

To the extent that someone's activity is not a process of realizing her own ends, however, it is not without qualification her own activity—which is Marx's most fundamental criterion of alienation. Indeed, in the case of labor for an incentive, we can go further and say that there is a sense in which the activity belongs not to her but to another, namely to the one who gives her the incentive—for it is this other person's ends, instead of the worker's own, which are realized through the worker's labor.

¹⁹ Of course, she might happen to prefer to toilet-cleaning for other reasons—but from the point of view of her end of money-making, the activities are fungible.

Notwithstanding its Hegelian aura, this is actually a familiar and intuitive idea. For example, consider that according to the Wikipedia entry for the Chrysler Building in New York City, “the building was constructed by Walter Chrysler, the head of the Chrysler Corporation” (“Chrysler Building” n.d.). From one point of view, this is an absurd statement. The Chrysler Building was constructed not by Walter Chrysler but by the combined efforts of many other human beings working under his direction. From another point of view, however, the statement is true. For the person whose will and whose ends were being realized through the construction of the Chrysler Building was precisely Walter Chrysler. And insofar as the workers under his command were motivated not by the product of their labor—the Chrysler Building in all its splendor—but by the extrinsic incentive of wages, it was precisely not their ends which were realized through this activity.

On the same basis, we can explain why the worker who is alienated from her labor will also be alienated from the product of that labor. “The product of labour,” Marx says, “is labour which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labour. Labour’s realisation is its objectification” (EPM 272). When the worker’s product is the objectification of a laboring activity that was not without qualification her own, however, there is equally a sense in which the product is not without qualification her own. In particular, it is the objectification, the realization, not of her own ends—as it would have been if her labor had been unalienated—but of another’s. Rather than being able to gaze upon her product as her own issue, so to speak, she is confronted by it as the material embodiment of an agency alien to hers. It is in this sense that the “realisation of labour appears as *loss of realisation* for the worker[],” and that “the life which [she] has conferred on the object confronts [her] as something hostile and alien” (EPM 272).

We can thus explain the sense in which neither alienated labor nor its product belongs to the worker and why, by the same token, they belong to someone else instead: “Just as [the worker] creates his own production as the loss of his reality, as a product not belonging to him; so he creates the domination of the person who does not produce over production and the product. Just as he estranges his activity from himself, so he confers upon the stranger an activity which is not his own” (EPM 279). As it turns out, we can explain all of this entirely formally, that is, without presupposing a substantive conception of human nature. All we need is an understanding of the distinctive relations which incentivized labor bears to the ends, and hence to the wills, of the worker on the one hand and the person who incentivizes her labor on the other.

6. The Unfulfillingness of Alienated Labor

My formal explanation of the sense in which alienated labor does not belong to the worker also holds the key to an explanation of the unfulfillingness of such labor.

Traditional readings of Marx tend to attribute the unfulfillingness of alienated labor specifically to its impoverished content, such as its deskilled and monotonous character. I suggest that we look instead to a more formal aspect of Marx’s concern with self-realization. Self-realization, for Marx, is not only about the development and exercise of complex skills. It is in the first instance about a far more basic agential capacity: the capacity self-

consciously to realize one's own individual ends in the world through one's productive activity. What sets human labor apart from merely animal labor, Marx says in *Capital*, is that the human being “not only effects a change of form in the material of nature [*im Natürlichen*] on which he works, but he also realises in that material [*im Natürlichen*] a purpose of his own which gives the law to his *modus operandi*, and to which he must subordinate his will” (C 188, translation modified²⁰).

For Marx, then, we can say that (unalienated) labor is distinctively a site for self-realization in a quite literal sense, inasmuch as it is the process by which the worker makes her own ends—and thereby her own will or agency—real in the world, turning them into something actual rather than merely potential.²¹ This is why, to the human being whose labor is unalienated, “nature appears as *his* work and his reality,” so that “he sees himself in a world that he has created” (EPM 277).²² The relevant achievement here is essentially practical. It matters not merely that the worker's ends are in fact realized in the world, but that she herself is the agent of their realization. Moreover, it matters that she realizes them non-accidentally, by directing her agency toward the relevant ends.

Labor which is a site for self-realization thus understood is personally fulfilling for the worker in a distinctive sense. Contemporary discussions of “meaningful work,” like many interpretations of Marx's concept of alienation, tend to focus on the content of the laboring activity itself: whether it is skilled, interesting, or pleasant to perform. Yet no matter how unskilled, uninteresting, or unpleasant the work may be, insofar as the worker engages in it because it makes a productive contribution to something she cares about, there is one important way in which it will be meaningful or fulfilling to her.²³ Conversely, insofar as it makes no productive contribution to something the worker cares about, or is not chosen for this reason, it will lack this source of meaning or fulfillment.

By the same token, this interpretation reveals one sense in which unalienated labor is not “merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it” but is itself “the satisfaction of a need” (EPM 274). For aside from creating products that are useful for satisfying our needs, unalienated labor functions also to give reality to our own wills—a distinctive, essentially

²⁰ I have inserted ‘of nature’ and ‘in that material’ to reflect the German ‘im Natürlichen’.

²¹ Admittedly, he speaks here of the worker's will being “subordinated”—but what it is subordinated to is just the purpose of the labor process, which, in the case of unalienated labor, is the worker's own purpose and hence internal to her will.

²² Marx sounds a similar theme in the *Comments* when he declares that in properly human production, “I would have objectified my *individuality*, its *specific character*, and therefore enjoyed not only an individual *manifestation of my life* during the activity, but also when looking at the object I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be *objective, visible to the senses* and hence a power *beyond all doubt*” (CJM 227). The provenance of this idea is unmistakably Hegelian. Compare, in particular, Hegel's discussion of external property and its significance for the actualization of the will. For instance: “A person has the right to place his will in any thing. The thing thereby becomes mine and acquires my will as its substantial end I, as free will, am an object to myself in what I possess and only become an actual will by this means” (PR §§44, 45).

²³ Harry Frankfurt (1992) makes a similar point about instrumental action in general.

practical need which we can be said to have *qua* agents, and which would remain unsatisfied if, instead of having to produce what we consume, consumption goods simply rained down on us like manna from heaven.²⁴

But this very basic kind of fulfillment which we are capable of deriving from our labor is necessarily missing insofar as we work for the sake of incentives. For insofar as a worker is motivated by an incentive rather than by her product, what she realizes through her productive activity is not her own end, so it is not her own will which she realizes through her labor. And in that respect, her labor is fundamentally personally unfulfilling.

It might be objected that even labor for an incentive helps the worker realize at least one end of her own: the end of obtaining the relevant incentive—her wage, say, and whatever she can use that wage to buy. This radically extrinsic kind of end, however, is not enough to make her work itself fulfilling. To see this clearly, consider the special case in which the worker not only fails to be motivated by her product but finds that product completely without value. Imagine, in other words, that her work is a “bullshit job,” in David Graeber’s (2013; 2018) sense—a job which is such that even the person doing it considers it pointless. Now, if the worker does a bullshit job intentionally, it is true that she takes herself to get something out of it, and thus that the realization of some end of hers depends on her performance of the labor. Nevertheless, this kind of job is a paradigm case of unfulfilling work. It is unfulfilling because the work itself makes no productive contribution to anything that the worker values (compare Gorz 1973, 69). As the concrete kind of productive activity that it is, the worker finds her own work worthless.

To be sure, many paid jobs are not bullshit jobs. After all, it is possible to get paid to perform labor whose product one finds valuable. But the point is that insofar as a worker is motivated not by the value she finds in her product but by the incentive of payment, the fact that she produces something she happens to find valuable is an accident. Insofar as her labor is motivated by an incentive, it does not give her the distinctive fulfillment characteristic of ordinary, unalienated labor: the fulfillment which consists in non-accidentally realizing one’s own ends in the world by self-consciously directing one’s agency toward those very ends.²⁵

By the same token, we can now make sense of Marx’s puzzling assertion that if the worker’s labor is not personally fulfilling to her, then to another it must be his *Lebensfreude*, his *joie de vivre* (EPM 278–79). As we saw, insofar as the worker is motivated by an incentive, the ends to which her activity makes a productive contribution are not her own but someone else’s. In particular, they belong to the person who gives her the incentive. But

²⁴ Compare, again, Hegel’s discussion of property. For example: “In relation to needs – if these are taken as primary – the possession of property appears as a means; but the true position is that, from the point of view of freedom, property, as the first existence of freedom, is an essential end for itself” (PR §45R).

²⁵ This is not to say that alienated labor cannot be fulfilling in any way at all. It could involve the development and exercise of complex skills, for example: see section 10 below. The point is that alienated labor is necessarily unfulfilling in at least one basic respect: it is not constitutively the process of realizing the worker’s own ends in the world.

then we can also say that it is to this person (Walter Chrysler, for instance) that the satisfaction of seeing his ends realized in the world will belong.

7. The Unfreedom of Alienated Labor

We can make sense of the unfreedom of alienated labor along very similar lines.

On standard essentialist readings, alienated labor is unfree insofar as it is motivated by immediate physical need—a compulsion which gives it a merely animal as opposed to fully human character. As I see it, on the other hand, the kind of unfreedom which necessarily characterizes alienated labor is related instead to the unfulfillingness of such labor, in the formal sense of its failure to be constitutively the realization of the worker's own will in the world.

On one traditional and attractive understanding, freedom is autonomy, where an activity is (fully) autonomous if and only if it is an unqualified expression of its agent's will.²⁶ In particular, it is autonomous only if it is an expression of her will rather than someone else's. As we have seen, however, the worker who acts for the sake of an incentive, and is to that extent indifferent to the product of her labor, constitutively realizes not her own ends but someone else's through that labor. But then it is natural to conclude that her labor is not an unqualified expression of her own will, and therefore not free. This is why it seems so natural to say, for instance, not only that the construction of the Chrysler Building was the realization of Walter Chrysler's hopes and dreams, but—as Wikipedia has it—that he constructed it. Insofar as the end of the activity of constructing it was his and not that of the workers under his command, their activity was in some sense an expression of his will rather than theirs.

Of course, to express someone else's will is not always to fail to express one's own will. If you persuade me to cook you a meal on the grounds that you are hungry—where what motivates me to cook for you is my concern for your nourishment—then there is a sense in which I realize your end in cooking the meal. But insofar as what motivates me is precisely the prospect of nourishing you, I have made your end my end. By contrast, insofar as I cook for you not for the sake of your nourishment but for the sake of receiving something from you in return, I still realize your end, but I have not made that end my own any more than I make a mugger's end my own when I give him my money at gunpoint.²⁷

It might be objected once more that even in labor for an incentive, the worker does realize at least one end of her own, namely the end of obtaining the relevant incentive. To the extent that it furthers this end of hers, it might be argued, her labor is a genuine expression of her will and therefore genuinely free after all. And there is clearly something right about this thought. There is some sense in which labor for an incentive is done for the sake of the agent's own end, and it is therefore to some extent a genuine expression of its

²⁶ For conceptions of freedom similar to the one to which I appeal in this section, see Julius 2013; n.d.; and Vrousalis 2021, 41.

²⁷ Of course, coercion has morally significant features that distinguish it from other forms of incentivization.

agent's will. This makes it a genuine case of intentional action rather than mere movement. Plausibly, however, a genuinely free activity must be more than this: it must be a wholehearted, unqualified expression of the agent's own will. Action for an incentive as such falls short of this more demanding standard.

Again, this is particularly easy to see in the case of bullshit jobs. When someone performs a job which they themselves consider to be pointless considered on its own merits, there is a clear sense in which they do not wholeheartedly endorse their own activity. And again, though bullshit jobs are a special case, they illustrate something of more general significance. In general, insofar as what motivates a worker is not the product of her labor but a mere incentive, her activity does not proceed from a wholehearted endorsement of it. Her endorsement of what she is doing remains at best qualified; she is not motivated by the value she sees in the activity considered on its own merits. But to that extent, her activity is only a qualified expression of her will, and not fully free.

Like my interpretation of the unfulfillingness of alienated labor, my interpretation of its unfreedom vindicates Marx's view of alienation as an essentially interpersonal problem. As the case of bullshit jobs illustrates especially clearly, alienated labor, as labor which is not motivated by its product, is really a rather mysterious thing. In the purest case, it amounts to someone's deliberately choosing to engage in productive activity even though she does not value its product. In an important sense, to act in this way is intentionally to do something which one does not consider worth doing. But why would anyone choose to do such a thing? The explanation is that another person has incentivized the action. Alienated labor would not exist but for this other person's intervention.

8. The Egoism of Alienated Labor

As we saw, Marx stresses yet another distinctively interpersonal dimension of alienated labor in the *Comments*, namely the egoistic motivation of such labor. My reading also sheds new light on this feature.

On the standard reading, the egoism in question consists in the absence of a fully human, distinctively robust kind of community. It consists, in particular, in not being non-instrumentally motivated by the end of directly satisfying another's need through one's labor. Let us call labor which fails to be so motivated "passively" egoistic, since merely to fail to be motivated by a certain kind of other-regarding concern is to be egoistic merely by omission, so to speak. My interpretation of alienated labor does explain why alienated labor is indeed egoistic in this sense. But as I will show, it also suggests a narrower—and independently more plausible—interpretation of the special egoism of alienated labor, according to which this egoism is a matter not merely of failing to care about others in the right way but of actively taking advantage of them.

If another incentivizes me to produce something for them, this will presumably be because they take my product to satisfy some need of theirs (in the broadest sense of 'need'), or a third person's need.²⁸ Insofar as my labor is alienated, however, I am indifferent to my

²⁸ Marx implicitly affirms this thought in *Capital* when he says that "nothing can have value, without being an object of utility" (C 51).

product, being motivated instead by the incentive. To that extent, I will likewise be indifferent to the fact that my product happens to satisfy another's need: the satisfaction of another's need is not what motivates me. Alienated labor, accordingly, is indeed passively egoistic.²⁹

I suspect, however, that this is not the full story about alienated labor's egoism. To motivate this suspicion, notice that egoism of the merely passive kind does not always seem objectionable, even from a Marxian point of view. When the product of one's labor satisfies one's own need alone, it does not always seem objectionable to perform such labor, and to perform it purely for one's own sake. For example, think of ordinary labors of personal care such as washing, or labor required to enable one to pursue valuable hobbies of a kind that do not involve satisfying others' needs. Though purely self-regarding, labor of these kinds seems unobjectionable in itself, and it is hard to believe that there would be no place for such labor in a communist society. For this reason, I wonder if we have not underdescribed the kind of egoism which is characteristic of alienated labor and which Marx appears to find so objectionable.

In order to bring into view a more plausible interpretation of the relevant kind of egoism, I think it is helpful to turn to Kant. In the *Groundwork*, Kant famously argues that all human beings have an absolute value, and that there are two aspects to fully respecting this value. Most basically, one must not use human beings as mere means to one's ends, as one does in coercion or deception (GMM 4:429–30). This is not enough, however, for the full recognition of the absolute value of human beings as ends in themselves. Full recognition of this value requires, more demandingly, that we go out of our way to make their ends our own: "The ends of a subject who is an end in himself must as far as possible be also *my* ends, if that representation is to have its *full* effect in me" (GMM 4:430). Kant does not argue that we are morally obliged to make every end of every other person our own, which would be impossible—but he does think we are under a moral obligation to make some others' ends our own some of the time.

Labor which is passively egoistic is arguably not a way of treating others as ends in themselves in the fullest sense. When I perform purely self-regarding labor from a purely self-regarding motive, I do not make another's ends my own. Alienated labor, however, goes beyond this. For when I produce something that will satisfy your need, but do so only for the sake of an incentive, I do not merely ignore your need; I take advantage of it in order to get what I am after. For example, if I cook you a meal, but only for the money you will give me in return, I do not merely ignore your need for nourishment. I deliberately leverage this need, and my ability to satisfy it, in order to get what I want from you in return. In this sense, I not only fail to treat you as an end in yourself, but I use you as a mere means to my own ends.

²⁹ This also explains why it will characteristically not be "appreciated" by the consumer of its product in the way emphasized by Brudney (1997; 2018) and Kandiyali (2020) in their readings of Marx. After all, it makes little sense to appreciate someone's contribution to your good if they made this contribution not for your sake but for their own benefit.

It is quite clear that Marx thinks of alienated labor as not merely passively but actively egoistic in this way. He even uses strikingly Kantian language to make the point. Describing labor for the sake of exchange, he writes:

Although in your eyes your product is an *instrument*, a *means*, for taking possession of my product and thus for satisfying your need; yet in my eyes it is the *purpose* of our exchange. For me, you are rather the means and instrument for producing this object that is my aim, just as conversely you stand in the same relationship to my object. . . . Our *mutual* value is for us the *value* of our mutual objects. Hence for us man himself is mutually of *no value*. (CJM 227)

Marx's complaint about the egoism of alienated labor, then, appears to be an attempt to reinterpret and radicalize the strict Kantian injunction against using others as mere means. If we take this injunction seriously, Marx is suggesting, we have reason to object not only to the traditional bugbears of coercion (by means of force or the threat of force) and deception, but also to incentivization and its shadow, alienated labor.

On the one hand, this Kantian reading avoids committing Marx to the implausible claim that the merely passive egoism of self-regarding labor is always objectionable. The imperative to treat others as ends in themselves, after all, is somewhat flexible. We need not devote our entire lives to pursuing the ends of others, and in particular, we need not devote the entirety of our productive capacities to producing for others. On the other hand, my reading clarifies why Marx nonetheless has a categorical objection to the distinctively active egoism of alienated labor, which involves not just failing to treat others as ends in themselves but using them as mere means.

Incidentally, we can use the same conceptual scheme to make better sense of the nature of the transition from what I called proto-alienated to alienated labor—the transition Marx describes in the genealogical passage from the *Comments* quoted in section 3 above. Recall the Robinson Crusoes in the condition of “crude alienated private property,” who produce only in order to consume their own product, and who exchange merely the incidental surplus of this production with one another. As we observed earlier, their social relations are non-ideal to begin with. We can now be more precise. Arguably, the problem is that these producers fail to make others' ends their own not just on this or that isolated occasion but in the entire sphere of their productive activity.

At the same time, we can now see that when they come not merely to exchange an incidentally produced surplus but to produce for the sake of exchange—that is, when their labor becomes alienated—their already non-ideal social relations take a turn for the worse. For while failing, as before, to treat one another as ends in themselves, they now go further and also use one another as mere means. Their production becomes not merely passively but actively egoistic. This explains Marx's striking suggestion that the *more* interdependent the producers become, the more they are alienated from one another and from their communal nature: “the greater and the more developed the social power appears to be within the private property relationship, the more *egoistic*, asocial and estranged from his

own nature does man become” (CJM 220).³⁰ The social relations characteristic of alienated labor, as Marx sees it, are not merely an absence of true human community but essentially a “caricature” of it (CJM 217).

Of course, the two forms of egoism, though importantly distinct, are not merely contingently related. On the one hand, active egoism obviously entails a form of passive egoism: to use another as a mere means is necessarily to fail to treat them as an end in themselves. On the other hand, more interestingly, passive egoism non-accidentally leads to active egoism, given a combination of two facts. First, as I observed in section 3, the idea of an original condition in which non-trivial numbers of individual human beings were self-sufficient producers who traded only an incidentally produced surplus with one another is a fiction. Human beings are and have always been deeply social creatures, dependent on other people’s labor not just throughout their lengthy childhoods but for their whole lives. It is no accident, therefore, that those fictional Robinson Crusoes, being human, come to find themselves dependent on the productive activity of other people after all.

Second, given such material interdependence, passive egoism inevitably becomes active egoism. For if one depends on others to produce the objects of one’s needs, but these others lack other-regarding motives, then the only way to obtain the relevant objects will be to appeal to these others’ self-interest, that is, to give them incentives to engage in the relevant productive activity. But insofar as productive activity is done for the sake of an incentive, it is alienated and actively egoistic. Thus, passive egoism in the context of human interdependence leads inevitably to active egoism and the alienation of labor, if we hold fixed the producers’ ends. This is why I said in section 3 that the labor of Marx’s Robinson Crusoes, though not yet strictly alienated, is already proto-alienated.

9. The Worker’s Alienation from Her Human Nature

The final consequence which Marx attributes to the alienation of labor is the worker’s alienation from her own nature, her human nature. As on more traditional readings, we can explain this in terms of the failure of alienated labor to realize various distinctively human potentials.

I have argued that, for Marx, we can find both a kind of fulfillment and a kind of freedom in unalienated labor on account of its being the realization of our individual ends in the world. As we saw, it is for this reason that unalienated labor is not merely a means to further ends, such as the consumption of its products, but is itself “the satisfaction of a need”: an agent’s need to actualize her will. Marx takes this achievement to be a distinctively human possibility. The ability to subordinate one’s activity to ends in the relevant sense, he thinks, is “what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees” (C 188). It follows that when labor fails to be the realization of the worker’s will, it thereby fails to live up to a distinctively human destiny. It becomes instead a merely animal form of labor done purely as a means to further ends: “In degrading spontaneous, free activity to a

³⁰ This sentence immediately follows Marx’s already quoted description of the four forms of alienation involved in labor for an income.

means, estranged labour makes man's species-life a means to his physical existence" (EPM 277). In this way, the worker can be said to be alienated from her human nature.

A similar account can be given of Marx's treatment of human nature in the *Comments*. Supposing "that we had carried out production as human beings," Marx says, our labor would have been done for the sake of satisfying one another's needs (CJM 227–28). But since alienated labor as such is motivated instead by an incentive, we can conclude that it will fail properly to express the social nature of human beings. Instead, as we have seen, it will express that nature only in the guise of a "caricature." This is another way in which alienated labor can be said to alienate us from our human nature.

To a large extent, this part of my reading overlaps with the standard reading. As on the standard reading, my claim is that the worker is alienated from her human nature because her work fails to be done in a properly human way. The difference is that on my view, the worker's alienation from her human nature does not explain the alienation of her laboring activity itself. On the contrary, it follows from the alienation of her labor, given a certain conception of human nature.

In this respect, my proposal matches Marx's own explicitly stated view. In the *Manuscripts*, he prefaces the discussion of the worker's alienation from her human nature with the announcement that "we have still a third aspect of *estranged labour* to deduce from the two already considered" (EPM 275). Immediately following this announcement, he explains the sense in which "man is a species-being" and describes how alienated labor turns this species-being "into a being *alien* to [the worker]" (EPM 275–77). Since "the two [aspects of alienated labor] already considered" are the worker's alienation from her laboring activity and from her product, the latter of which is in turn supposed to be merely the "summary" of the former, it appears that Marx takes the worker's alienation from her laboring activity to be the fundamental element of this entire conceptual scheme. Her alienation from her human nature is merely a consequence of this prior alienation.³¹

Although alienation and human nature are indeed closely connected in Marx's thought, then, I maintain that we can understand his fundamental idea of what it is for

³¹ It might be objected that Marx does initially derive the various concrete features of alienated labor from their externality to the worker's "*Wesen*," which one could hear specifically as "*Gattungswesen*," that is, species-being or species-essence (EPM 274). But the term Marx actually uses, 'Wesen', also admits of less metaphysically committal readings, such as the standard translation 'intrinsic nature' or the still more generic 'being'. The fact that Marx does not directly discuss "species-being" until later in the text lends plausibility to these less committal readings. It would make little sense for him to lean so heavily on a conception of human nature, and even to derive various consequences from it, when that conception is only introduced and discussed in its own right later on. Moreover, when Marx summarizes the result of his initial discussion of alienated labor's "externality," he makes no reference at all to the worker's *Wesen*, human or otherwise: he reiterates only that such labor is an "alien" activity which does not "belong" to the individual worker herself (EPM 275). Thanks to Andrew Chitty for pressing me on this point.

labor to be alienated without adverting to any conception of human nature. In this sense, the concept of alienated labor is, on my reading, an entirely formal concept.³²

10. The Content of Alienated Labor

On my view, the concept is also formal in another sense: it makes no reference to the content of alienated labor. This may seem implausible as a reading of Marx, who frequently complains about the impoverished content of labor under capitalism.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels lament that, “owing to the extensive use of machinery and to division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him” (CM 490–91). The standard essentialist reading, by stipulating that properly human work must be skilled and interesting rather than unskilled and boring, can capture this type of complaint. My reinterpretation, on the other hand, by focusing entirely on the formal motivational structure of alienated labor, seems to sideline it.

While I do not doubt that Marx was in fact deeply troubled by the impoverished content of work under capitalism, however, there is good exegetical reason to separate this problem from that of alienation. As we have already observed on multiple occasions, Marx takes alienation, including the unfulfillingness of alienated labor, necessarily to involve a social relation: “If the worker’s activity is a torment to him, to another it must give *satisfaction* and pleasure. Not the gods, not nature, but only man himself can be this alien power over man” (EPM 278–79). The impoverished content of labor *per se*, however, is not necessarily a distinctively social problem. In principle, we could be compelled by natural necessity—by nature—to engage in unskilled and boring labor. Indeed, for all we know, there might be some need for such labor in all possible forms of human society. The degradation of the content of labor, then, while no doubt objectionable in its own right, must be conceptually distinct from its alienation.³³

³² To be clear, I do not take the formal character of my reading to count in favor of it as a reading of Marx—though it does potentially render the concept of alienated labor more interesting to contemporary philosophers who are more suspicious than Marx was of appeals to human nature in social and political thought (assuming that the normative account of why alienation matters can also be detached from any appeal to human nature or human flourishing—see section 12 below).

³³ Kandiyali (2020) has recently defended the same view, arguing that not all “drudgery”—“labor that does not involve self-realization, the exercise, development, and manifestation of one’s powers and capacities”—is alienated, because such labor can still score highly on the dimensions of freedom and sociality (562–63, 571–72). This seems reasonable. Someone who volunteers to perform unskilled and unpleasant care work in a nursing home, say, does not seem alienated from her labor. That said, the view is difficult to square with the structure of Kandiyali’s reading more generally, since he explicitly regards self-realization in the relevant sense as an independently necessary condition of fully

Separating these two issues does not mean abandoning Marx's view that alienated labor is inherently unfulfilling. The point is rather that its inherent unfulfillingness must be a function of its formal motivational structure rather than its substantive content. I suggested one way of making sense of this idea in section 6. And of course nothing stops us from adding that, once labor becomes alienated—that is, motivated no longer by its product but by an incentive—it is likely, for any number of reasons, also to become impoverished in content. But that will be a contingent matter.

11. Too Subjective?

Scholars commonly distinguish “objective” aspects of alienation, such as the failure of work to enable the development and exercise of the worker's powers, from “subjective” aspects, such as the worker's failure to “feel at home” in her work (Wood 2004 [1981], 14, 23–24; Elster 1985, 75–77; Hardimon 1994, 120–22; Brighthouse 1996, 150; Brudney 1998, 193; Leopold 2022, section 3; Gilabert 2020, section 2.2). The dominant view is that Marx's primary concern lies with objective alienation. My reading, on the other hand, reduces the alienation of labor entirely to a certain motivational structure, and this reduction may seem implausibly subjectivist as a reading of Marx.³⁴

It is worth emphasizing that in one straightforward and important sense, alienation as I understand it is not subjective, for while it is a function of an agent's motivational structure, it is not a function of her feelings about that motivational structure. For example, on my view, someone who works merely for an incentive is thereby engaged in alienated labor—her labor is not without qualification her own activity—even if she does not mind being motivated in this way. This clarification is important because when scholars invoke the distinction between objective and subjective alienation, what is often at stake is roughly whether a person can be alienated from their work without feeling discontented. On my view, this is perfectly possible, and in that sense alienation as I understand it is “objective.”

Still, there is undoubtedly another sense in which the alienation of labor, on my view, is indeed a subjective condition. I have not argued, for instance, that labor is alienated when it takes place in the context of economic institutions that attach certain incentives to it. Rather, I have argued that labor becomes alienated insofar as the worker actually performs it for the sake of such an incentive.

Even this relatively attenuated subjectivism may seem to fly in the face of Marx's critique of capitalism. For if alienation consists merely in a certain motivational structure, then it seems that overcoming alienation would require a transformation merely of the worker's psychology and not of the material conditions and social relations in which her labor takes place. In particular, if the worker merely came to care more deeply about the

unalienated labor. Perhaps the idea is that the volunteer's labor is only partly alienated—but this still seems implausible. Or perhaps the idea is that her labor is not sufficiently defective along a sufficiently large number of dimensions to count as alienated—but this strikes me as somewhat arbitrary.

³⁴ Thanks to Lucas Johnston, Jan Kandiyali, participants of the 2022 Joint Session and the 2023 Pacific APA, and an anonymous reviewer for this objection.

product of her work, she might come to be motivated by this product rather than by an incentive and thus cease to be alienated from her labor—all perhaps within the context of the capitalist mode of production. Surely this cannot be Marx’s view!

My reading does entail that if it is possible to eliminate the relevant motivational structure without overcoming capitalism, then alienated labor can be eliminated without overcoming capitalism. I do not think this is a problem, however, since Marx would reject the antecedent of the conditional. To be sure, some work in a capitalist society might lack the relevant motivational structure some of the time—but Marx’s social theory (not unreasonably) deals in generalizations and archetypes.³⁵ He would not have thought it possible relevantly to transform the motivational structure of labor on a large scale without overcoming capitalism.

It is worth recalling here that in the 1844 manuscripts Marx takes himself to be developing an internal critique of political economy: “We have proceeded from the premises of political economy. We have accepted its language and its laws” (EPM 270). The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political economists, however, generally took it for granted that labor in the context of a market economy has the very motivational structure that Marx identifies as the root of alienation. Most famously: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages” (WN I.ii.26–27). What Adam Smith is describing here is a situation in which the butcher, the brewer, and the baker are presumed to be motivated not by the usefulness of their concrete products but by the prospect of receiving some consideration in exchange. In other words, he is describing the subjective motivational structure which I have argued is definitive of Marxian alienated labor. Similarly, consider the following remark by James Mill, which Marx quotes in the *Comments*: “When a man produces a greater quantity of any commodity than he desires for himself, it can only be on one account; namely, that he desires some other commodity which he can obtain in exchange for the surplus of what he himself has produced” (EPE IV.iii.228). Once again, this is the problematic extrinsic motivational structure which I have identified as the root of Marxian alienation.

The political economists’ assumption that labor in a market economy is extrinsically motivated is not arbitrary but plays an important explanatory role. Consider, in particular, the case of labor markets and the category of wage-labor. If there is anything distinctive about such labor, the existence and size of the wage must be capable of making a systematic difference to what the worker does and how she does it. For instance, it must be the case, as a general rule, that the worker would stop working for a particular employer if she stopped getting paid or if another employer offered her a sufficiently higher wage. Without such counterfactual dependencies, it is impossible to explain how labor markets function—and in particular, how they could have the distinctive efficiency advantages they are commonly thought to possess. But one highly parsimonious explanation of how wages

³⁵ Many traditional readings of Marx are equally committed to this claim. For instance, not all labor under capitalism is done from “immediate physical need”; nor is all of it unskilled and boring.

could play such a role—how they could make the relevant systematic difference to the worker’s behavior—is surely that they actually motivate workers’ labor, that is, that they actually function subjectively as incentives.³⁶

One complication here is that neither Smith nor Mill takes the prevalence of extrinsic motivation to be historically specific to capitalism (because neither takes the relevant form of exchange to be a historically specific phenomenon). Both believe that it is rooted in an ahistorical feature of human nature. Smith suggests that the desire for self-interested exchange stems from nothing less than the human capacity for reason and speech (WN I.ii.25), while Mill confidently asserts that “it would be inconsistent with the known laws of human nature to suppose, that man would take the trouble to produce any thing without desiring to have any thing. If he desires one thing, and produces another, it is only because the thing which he desires can be obtained by means of the thing which he produces, and better obtained, than if he had endeavoured to produce it himself” (EPE IV.iii.228–29). Needless to say, Marx rejects these ahistorical generalizations. Indeed, it is largely in response to this very quote from Mill that Marx analyzes the peculiar selfishness of alienated labor and contrasts it with a very different alternative (supposing “we had carried out production as human beings”) (CJM 223ff.). Nowhere, however, does he suggest that Mill’s description is false as a description of labor under capitalism. On the contrary, he accepts the description under this historically restricted guise and even praises Mill (somewhat back-handedly) for his truthfulness: “With his customary cynical acumen and clarity, Mill here analyses exchange on the basis of private property” (CJM 224). The point is that given this very analysis, labor under capitalism turns out to be alienated. As Brudney (1998) observes, “it seems that Marx believes that the alienation of labor is an inevitable concomitant of a society for which the presuppositions of political economy are true” (208).

While it is not simply a conceptual truth that labor under capitalism is alienated, then, Marx took the connection between “objective” capitalist social institutions and the “subjective” motivational structure characteristic of alienation to be very tight, for the best theories of the former in his day presupposed the latter. Whether Marx and the classical political economists were right about this is ultimately an empirical question and beyond

³⁶ This leaves open the possibility that workers could be motivated both by their wage and by ends intrinsic to their labor. Without speculating about how widespread this mixed motivational structure is or could become within a capitalist society, I think the thing to say here is that labor motivated both by an intrinsic end and by an extrinsic incentive, while unalienated under one aspect, remains alienated under another. The special case of coerced labor makes this especially vivid. Perhaps I can do something both to avoid a threatened punishment and for the sake of an end intrinsic to the activity at the same time—but assuming this is possible, surely the mere addition of an intrinsic motive does not render the activity completely unalienated. My activity remains alienated insofar as it is done for the sake of avoiding punishment. Thanks to Jan Kandiyali, Mathis Koschel, Kyle Scott, and participants of the 2022 Joint Session and the 2023 Pacific APA for pressing me on this point.

the scope of this paper.³⁷ Perhaps they were wrong. Perhaps something that would still recognizably be capitalism could operate without incentivization after all. This would, however, be a substantive objection to Marx's claim that capitalism as such is alienating, and not an exegetical objection to my interpretation of that claim. In fact, I take it to be a strength of my interpretation that it brings clearly into focus what exactly would have to be shown about capitalism in order to show that it is inevitably alienating.

12. Why Does Alienation Matter?

The concept of alienation contributes to a critique of capitalism but it does not constitute the entirety of that critique. On the one hand, as I have just suggested, the concept must be situated in an empirical social theory that explains how capitalism produces alienation. On the other hand, it must be situated in a normative theory that explains why alienation matters. Like the empirical question, this normative question is really beyond the scope of the present paper. Nevertheless, my account does tentatively suggest a distinctive approach to the normative issue. In particular, it suggests that just as we can understand what alienated labor is and why it has the features Marx attributes to it without adverting to substantive conception of human nature, we might be able to explain why it matters without adverting to a conception of specifically human flourishing.³⁸

The standard reading of the early Marx suggests a natural explanation of the problem with alienation: it undermines human flourishing. To flourish, we need self-realization, freedom, and community, but alienated labor is characteristically unfulfilling, unfree, and egoistically motivated. Evidently, this approach depends on a fairly rich conception of the human good.

There can be little doubt that Marx himself holds such a conception of human flourishing and that he takes it to be an important part of the explanation of what is wrong with alienated labor.³⁹ However, there is also another strand to his normative thought in the 1844 writings. In the *Comments*, for example, he invokes a basically Kantian ideal of respecting others as ends in themselves and not using them as mere means, and in both the *Comments* and the *Manuscripts* he invokes a basically Hegelian ideal of actualizing one's will in a world external to it.⁴⁰ While it is possible to insert these ideals into a more comprehensive conception of human flourishing, as Marx sometimes does, they do not depend on this framework. Indeed, in both Kant and Hegel, their immediate context is a much more abstract framework resting on the concept of a will, not on the more substantive concept of a human being.

³⁷ For a closely related discussion, see Maguire 2022.

³⁸ Thanks to Andrew Chitty, Jan Kandiyali, and an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this issue.

³⁹ For accounts of the early Marx's conception of human flourishing, see Brudney 1998, especially chapters 4–6; and Leopold 2007, chapter 4.

⁴⁰ See section 8 for the Kantian connection and section 6, particularly footnotes 22 and 24, for the Hegelian connection.

My interpretation of alienated labor suggests an account of what is wrong with alienation that emphasizes this distinctively “German” strand of Marx’s normative thought. Here is what it might look like, in outline. As agents—as beings endowed with a will, the power to set and pursue our own ends in the world—we have a deep and irreducible interest in the unqualified exercise of this power. In particular, we have an interest in our activity being in the fullest sense our own, by being an unqualified expression of our own ends. This is what is at stake, in particular, in our desire for at least one important kind of self-realization (actualizing our ends in the world) and one important kind of freedom (having our activity be an expression of our own ends). I have argued, however, that when we work for the sake of sticks or carrots—that is, when we perform alienated labor—our activity is not fully our own in the relevant sense. It is not the unqualified realization of our own ends. Alienated labor therefore thwarts an interest we have not specifically as human beings but more generally as agents.

While this is only a sketch of an argument whose full development is beyond the scope of this paper, it seems to me no less promising than the traditional, essentialist line of thought. Even if Marx’s own reasons for caring about alienation were to a large extent rooted in his conception of human flourishing, then, his concept of alienated labor seems compatible with an alternative, more austere normative framework. In that sense, it seems more ecumenical than Marx’s own use of it might lead us to believe.

13. Conclusion

Labor is alienated, I have argued, when it is motivated not by its product but by an incentive. Because of its radical accidentality to the worker’s ends, labor thus motivated is not without qualification the worker’s own activity, and its product not without qualification the objectification of her own activity either. Both her labor and its product belong instead to another person, namely the one who incentivizes her labor and whose ends are realized in its product. By the same token, alienated labor is unfulfilling and unfree, for through it the worker constitutively realizes not her own will but someone else’s. It is also distinctively egoistic, for in producing what another needs merely in order to obtain an incentive in return, the worker not only fails to be motivated by the satisfaction of another’s need but actively takes advantage of this need for her own benefit. And it alienates the worker from her human nature because labor which is not the realization of the worker’s own will and which is egoistically motivated loses its distinctively human character.

This reading, I have argued, has concrete textual support. It also makes progress of a more systematic kind, on four counts. First, it reveals the robust unity of the concept of alienated labor, shedding new light on the relations between its numerous seemingly unrelated aspects. Second, it suggests new and independently plausible interpretations of these aspects severally. Third, it clarifies the relation between Marx’s concept of alienated labor and his conception of human nature, showing that the former does not depend for its content on the latter. Finally, it indicates new directions for further inquiry, by clarifying what must be shown empirically in order to show that capitalism is necessarily alienating and by suggesting the possibility of a normative critique of alienation based on an interest we have not specifically as human beings but more generally as agents. By illuminating

seemingly disparate social problems and their unity on the basis of relatively austere foundations, the concept of alienated labor thus turns out to be surprisingly analytically powerful. My hope is that this reveals the concept to be of interest not just to historians of ideas but to contemporary theorists of our social world.⁴¹

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⁴¹ Thanks to participants of the 2021 Annual Conference of the Marx and Philosophy Society, the Spring 2022 Workshop of the Indiana Philosophical Association, the 2022 Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association, and the 2023 Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association for valuable discussions of earlier versions of this paper. For extended comments and conversations, I am grateful to Brookes Brown, Anton Ford, Quinn Gibson, Tim Juvshik, Rob Miner, Kory Schaff, Lisa Thomas-Smith, several anonymous readers, and especially Andrew Chitty, Jan Kandiyali, and, as always, Claire Kirwin.

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