interpretation of Marx is still, in a sense, open. But we must start somewhere, and it is the ‘Engelized’ Marx—the traditional reading—with which we shall be most concerned here.

from: Jonathan Wolff,

*Why Read Marx Today?*


The dominant theme of Marx’s Early Writings is that the capitalist society of his day is not properly fit for human consumption. It crushes the human spirit, denying the vast majority of people any chance to develop their real potential. No existing theorist, Marx thinks, has diagnosed the human malaise correctly, and thus no one had been in any position to outline a genuine cure, although this had not stopped them trying. Marx is confident that he can do better.

In tracing out Marx’s thought here we will start by looking at the criticisms of religion made by Marx’s immediate philosophical predecessors, and see how Marx transforms them into a more systematic critique of society, through the development and application of the ideas of alienation and alienated labour. Along the way, we will also come to an understanding of why labour took on the importance it did for Marx. Finally, we will see why Marx thought that granting people rights of the sort we hope to enjoy in liberal regimes is not enough to bring about a truly human society. Thus,
essentially, we can see three related aspects of Marx’s Early Writings: his diagnosis of the ills of contemporary society; his critique of the state of existing theory; and his own attempts to provide a solution to the problems he has identified.

Religion

One reason why the works of the young Marx are so hard for us, at least at first, is that they assume that the reader is thoroughly immersed in the German politics and philosophy of the early nineteenth century. No longer a safe assumption, I fear. We have seen a sketch of the German political situation in the account of Marx’s life in the previous section. But, unfortunately, the German philosophy of the day was that of Hegel and his immediate followers. Hegel has a thoroughly deserved reputation as the most difficult of the major Western philosophers, and many scholars never emerge from the thicket of his thought. So you will be as relieved as me that this is not the place to attempt to summarize his entire system.

By way of introducing the necessary background to Marx we need consider, for the moment anyway, only one aspect of Hegel’s thought, and how this was taken up in the writings of a group of philosophers, many of them friends and colleagues of Marx, known as the Young Hegelians. These thinkers took inspiration from Hegel to pursue highly radical themes, which may well have been very far from Hegel’s own intentions. In particular we need to pay attention to what has become known as the ‘Young Hegelian theology debate’.

We start with a question from traditional theology. Why did God create the world? In fact, this is better put as the impertinent question: why did God bother to create the world? The world, after all, is full of wickedness and suffering. If God is perfect, and self-sufficient, why did he go to the trouble of creating anything at all outside of himself, let alone something so imperfect as the world? Theologians had struggled with this question. Hegel proposed a novel answer. God simply would not be God without the world. This is not the trivial logical point that a ruler needs someone or something to rule over in order even to be a ruler. Rather the point is based on a general theme in Hegel’s philosophy. In many cases agents cannot come to self-understanding unless and until they encounter ‘the other’. Thus God, like other agents, needs to define himself in terms of an external object, which is not God. Only by engaging with and interacting with the world can God come to gain knowledge of himself. Accordingly the story of human history is equally the story of God coming to self-awareness. The Hegelian notion of ‘Geist’, roughly ‘the spirit of the age’, is also, broadly speaking ‘God’s current level of self-understanding’.

Part of Hegel’s story is that, as he is writing, the process is nearing its completion, for it is only this fact that allows him to understand the truth. Earlier thinkers were not in a position to think the thoughts that Hegel was having, for God’s self-consciousness was insufficiently developed. This also
means that while other religions, such as Judaism, were obso-
leter hangovers from a previous immature era, Christianity is
depicted as absolute truth (when suitably understood).
Consequently, Hegelianism seemed to imply a type of firm
religious commitment.

The Young Hegelians could not accept these claims for
Christianity. The first major move was The Life of Jesus, written
by David Strauss, published in 1835, and translated into
English, like some other works of the Young Hegelians, by
Mary Ann Evans, better known as the novelist George Eliot.
Against the Hegelian doctrine that Christianity, and hence
the gospels, represented absolute truth, Strauss shockingly
proposed that the New Testament should be read on the
model of the Old. That is, as a set of foundation myths.
Strauss’s idea was that the gospels, in their similarities and
differences, represented attempts to write down an oral
tradition. Consequently, the gospels were not historical
narratives, but folklore.

Strauss’s work sparked much debate, but the knife was
twistet farther with the publication of Bruno Bauer’s Knüpf-
der evangelischen Geschichte der Synoptiker (3 vols.: 1841–2). On
the basis of close textual scholarship Bauer concluded that
the gospels were not even folklore. Rather, he argued, the
other gospels were all derived from Mark’s. So instead of
evidence of an oral tradition, we have three attempts to
rewrite a single written story, and then the four were
later brought together. If this is true then it seems that
Christianity is simply an illusion, and those who believe it,
dupes.

But if an illusion, why did it catch on so well? Ludwig
Feuerbach, in The Essence of Christianity (1841) (also trans-
lated by George Eliot), delivered the explanation and the
killer blow. Reviving a well-worked theme, Feuerbach argued that
the reason why human beings resemble God is not that
God created us in his image, but that we created him in ours.
Although an argument known to the Ancient Greeks, it
was pleasingly developed by the French Enlightenment
philosopher and legal theorist Montesquieu, in his satirical
Persian Letters (1721), which is a fanciful account of conversa-
tions between Persian travelers and their French hosts. In
a memorable passage one Frenchman recounts a story of trav-
eling through Africa, and being shocked to see that African
art and sculpture depicted God as female, fat, and—heaven
forbid—black. The implication is that the Africans should
surely have known that God is an elderly white Frenchman,
in flowing robes with a white beard. (But didn’t
Montesquieu know that God is an Englishman?) His friend
reminds that ‘it has been well said that if triangles had a God it
would have three sides’. This, essentially, is Feuerbach’s point.

In Feuerbach’s view we human beings have taken the
powers that belong to human beings, raised them in thought
to an infinite level, and then invented a being outside of us
who embodies all these perfections. This God, then, is all-
knowing, all-powerful, and all good (as distinct from human
beings who are a little bit knowing, a little bit powerful, and
a little bit good). But we bow down before this figment of our
imagination rather than appreciating our qualities for what
they are, and attempting to enjoy them for ourselves. This, in
Feuerbach’s view, by diverting our attention and creative powers, prevented us from leading a truly human life, or creating a truly human society. Thus, according to Feuerbach, going beyond previous thinkers, we should abandon religion and replace it with a radical humanism: an understanding, enjoyment and celebration of our truly human powers, which will allow us for the first time to create a genuine community on earth.

This was the point the debate had reached as Marx was writing, and is the reason why, in 1843, he was able to open his work *Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Introduction* with the words ‘the critique of religion is essentially complete’ (M. 70). All this, of course, was common knowledge to the readers of the young Marx, who saw no point in going into the details, merely saying ‘Man has found in the imaginary reality of heaven where he looked for a superman only the reflection of his own self.’ Without knowledge of Strauss, Bauer, and Feuerbach, though, we cannot make sense of that claim.

Marx, then, accepted without question Feuerbach’s contention that man has invented God in his own image. This is one of those claims that seems obviously true, and a dazzling, liberating, insight to those disposed to believe it, but a crude, insulting and subversive misrepresentation to those who do not. But we can be clear that Marx’s sympathies are with those who wish to ‘debunk’ religion. And we should note that the significance of this debate extends far beyond academic theology. For to attack religion was also to attack the contemporary political authority which took itself to be founded on religion. This is why the atheism of the Young Hegelians posed such a threat, and why, as individuals, they could not be tolerated.

However, Marx was not content with Feuerbach’s position. Once the truth was revealed, and religion exposed for the sham it is, Feuerbach felt that largely his work was done. The truth would be passed from person to person, and religion could not survive this intellectual assault. It would disappear, and human beings would be able fully to enjoy their ‘species-essence’—their truly human qualities—without the distraction, and indeed the barrier, of God.

Marx believed this to be a superficial analysis. Although Feuerbach had understood the phenomenon of religion, he had not addressed its causes. But without knowing why religion had come into existence, how can we know how it can be made to disappear? Marx argues, essentially, that human beings invented religion only because their life on earth was so appalling, so poverty-striken. This is the context of his notorious remark that ‘religion is the opium of the people’ (M. 72). Now for certain modern readers, this may make religion sound not too bad at all. But we have to remember that in the nineteenth century opium was a painkiller. Though, no doubt, it also had its recreational uses, its prime function was as a solace.

For example, in the later work, *Capital*, Marx comments a number of times that nursing mothers coped with their early return to the production line by stultifying their hungry babies with opiates. In one particularly disturbing footnote, Marx describes the visit of a Dr Edward Smith to Lancashire.
to report on the health of the cotton operatives, who were unemployed owing to a cotton crisis caused by the American Civil War. Dr Smith reported to the government that 'the crisis had several advantages. The women now had the leisure to give their infants the breast, instead of poisoning them with “Godfrey’s Cordial” (an opiate) (Capital 5:18). In another footnote, a couple of pages later, Marx quotes a Public Health Report of 1864, which says that infants who received opiates 'shrank up into little old men', or 'wizened like little monkeys' (Capital 5:22).

In sum, then, to understand this metaphor we have to understand three features of opium. First, it produces some feeling of euphoria in those that take it. Second, its common use is as a solace or relief from illness, pain, hunger or other forms of distress. Third, its regular use is very destructive; at the least it prevents the user from flourishing or thriving in a normal human way. To understand the application of the metaphor we also need to understand the ills from which religion is to bring relief. This is the torment of everyday life; consequent on industrialization which promises so much but extracts from the worker such a terrible price (as we shall soon see, in detail).

Essentially, Marx tells us that while Feuerbach has noted the symptoms of a deeper malaise, he has done nothing to understand that malaise itself. The invention of religion was not simply an unfortunate mistake, but a response to the miseries of life on earth. Removing the opium leaves us only with undisguised pain. We still need to understand and remove the defects in the world, the 'secular base'. Marx himself, in his hastily scribbled 'Theses on Feuerbach', puts the point I have just explained thus:

Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-alienation, of the duplication of the world into a religious world and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. But that the secular basis detaches itself from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the clearings and self-contradictions within this secular basis. The latter must, therefore, in itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionized in practice. (M. 172)

We will never rid ourselves of religion, and religious alienation, until we first understand, and then remove, the condition on earth that gave rise to it. Once the cause is removed, and the disease is cured, the symptom religion will wither of its own accord. This is a vital point. Religion is not to be suppressed or abolished as such. Under the right conditions it disappears on its own. The cause, the disease, Marx argues, is alienation of a different sort, primarily alienated labour. But before we can sufficiently understand this we need to uncover a little more of Marx’s philosophical background.

The philosophy of historical materialism

To understand the philosophical view that Marx adopted in his Early Writings we need to take a long run up, and through territory that might at first seem quite unconnected. But indulge me. We will cover the ground very quickly.
To begin with we need to ask a very general, even vague, question. What is the basis of the relation between the human subject and the world? One famous answer to this is Descartes's: the human mind is characterized by thought, while the essence of the world of matter is 'extension': location in space. Thus, there is a radical division between the mind and the world, for you can be assured of your own existence as a thinking thing even when in doubt of the existence of everything else. But on this view how can you know anything, beyond the contents of your own mind? If the external world might not even exist, how can I gain any further knowledge? Notoriously Descartes could make progress only by invoking a non-deceiving God. But if his proofs of God are rejected, as they commonly are, we seem trapped in a world of pure subjectivity.

At what appears to be the opposite pole is the materialism of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes takes human beings to be simply part of the material world. On such a conception thoughts are simply 'internal motions'. Human beings are regulated by the laws of nature, like all else, and philosophical problems become, at bottom, scientific problems. Now our topic is not whether this constitutes an answer to Cartesian scepticism, but the difficulties that arise within the Hobbesian picture itself. For once we have accepted a scientific world of nothing but molecules in motion it is very unclear what room is left for ideas of rationality, morality, and, if we want it, human freedom. Consider Hobbes's explanation of morality. Men call 'good' those things they desire, and desire is an internal movement. Hence, morality appears to be reduced to motion.

A consistent materialist might be prepared to give up ideals of rationality, morality, and freedom, but this places the materialist social critic in considerable difficulty. Consider Marx's criticism of the English utopian socialist Robert Owen, also very briefly discussed (although not by name) in the extraordinarily rich 'Theses on Feuerbach'. Owen argued that human beings are simply products of their circumstances, and so a change in circumstances is all that is necessary to change human behaviour. This view is often thought to be Marx's view too, but as we shall soon see, this is not so. Now Owen, perhaps unique among nineteenth-century socialists, had the chance to put some of his ideas in practice. Though not a politician, he was the manager of the New Lanark cotton mill, and so had the perfect opportunity to change his workers' circumstances, which he did to great effect. His workers enjoyed far superior conditions of work to those elsewhere, and productivity greatly increased too. His methods involved such things as decent housing, the first infant schools, and a reduced working day (just ten and a half hours). Just as important were innovations within the factory. Here is the example of the 'silent monitor' (relics of which are sometimes available in the gift shop of the New Lanark Mill, which is now a museum):

This consisted of a four-sided piece of wood, about two inches long, and one broad, each side coloured—one side black, another blue, the third yellow and the fourth white, tapered at the top, and finished with wire eyes, to hang upon a hook with either side to the front. One of these was suspended in a conspicuous place near to each of the persons employed, and
the colour at the front told the conduct of the individual
during the preceding day, to four degrees by comparison.
head, denoted by black, indifferent by blue, good by yellow,
and excellent by white.

Instead of punishing his employees for a black or blue per-
formance, Owen had his supervisors monitor their work, and
each day Owen made a point of walking through the
mill, respecting the silent monitors, but saying nothing to
anyone. Sure enough the workers' greatly improved their
performance. Owen comments:

Never perhaps in the history of the human race has so simple
a device created in so short a period so much order, virtue,
goodness and happiness, out of such ignorance, error and

Owen's modern editor remarks 'It is often said that in this,
and other ways, Owen treated his workpeople as children.
There is some truth in this, but it must be remembered that a
large proportion of them were children.'

Nevertheless, the criticism that Owen treated his workers
as some sort of lesser beings seems spot on, even if his
methods did create virtue out of misery. This leads us to
Marx's own criticism. Owen wanted to change his workers by
changing their circumstances, for, according to materialism,
people are wholly determined by their circumstances. But
how, then, do we account for Owen's own behaviour? Surely
as a creature of his circumstances—much the same as anyone
else of his class—he should have shamelessly exploited his
workers just as any other self-respecting manager would have
done. So how was he, uniquely, able to break out of the
shackles of determinism? Owen himself recognized the prob-
lem and supposed that there was, luckily, a small class of
individual geniuses, who are not subject to the same level of
determinism. Yet this cannot be so, if determinism is true.
Marx's penetrating analysis is that Owen's doctrine must
divide society into two classes, one of which is superior to
society, and able to change the circumstances of the masses.
So Owen's materialism is not only inconsistent, it is also, in a
sense, elitist.

Thus Marx rejected the crude materialism of Owen and
others. Yet in fundamental philosophical terms its prime dif-

culty is something it shares with the picture of mind and
world we saw was held by Descartes. These views have in
common a theory of perception: that the mind is like a
camera, recording data it receives from the external world.
This we might call a representative or correspondence theory
of perception.

Now it might seem that there is not much wrong with this.
Isn't this what the mind does? For Marx the problem is that it
is essentially a passive account. It leaves out the fact that
human beings are active in the world, changing nature and
what they see. The vast majority of things that one sees in
the world are not simply 'there', for us to observe. Rather
they are objects which have been created, or, at least,
transformed, by human endeavour in one way or another.

So human beings are active in the world, not merely pas-
sive receivers of the world around them. Marx congratulates
the philosophical idealists, notably Kant, for being the first to
recognize this truth and to develop it in a systematic, albeit mystified, way. We can see what Marx means by considering some central elements of Kant's theory of knowledge. Kant's most innovative idea is that the human mind structures the world through categories and forms of intuition which it imposes on reality. Thus, for Kant, space and time do not exist in the world outside of us, but are 'forms of sense' which we impose on reality in perception, in order to organize and conceptualize it. We see things as related in time and space only because the human mind is constructed to see them that way. So in this sense the human mind is active. It creates the main aspects of the world around it. To some important degree the world is a human construction.

The basic insight—'mystified' by Kant, according to Marx—is that human beings at least in part create the world which they perceive. Yet Marx rejected Kant's position, endorsing some important criticisms made by Hegel, and then, in turn, criticizing Hegel. Of Hegel's various criticisms of Kant, two are most relevant here. First, for Kant, the mind has a universal, ahistoric character. The basic structure of the mind is the same in all ages and in all places. By contrast Hegel argued that the human mind developed over time, and, in different cultures existing at the same time, may have reached different levels of development. But second, and more important, the mind develops by interacting with the world. This is a 'dialectical' process. As the mind apprehends and tries to make sense of the world, it develops ever richer and more sophisticated concepts. And as it produces such higher-level concepts it changes itself. But Hegel's view is also a form of idealism in which the mind makes up the world. As the mind changes, so does the world.

Marx thinks that Hegel has got near to the truth. The mind and the world do indeed change together. But Marx also thinks that like Kant, Hegel has mystified the real situation. For Hegel everything takes place abstractly, only on the level of thought, as the history of the development of our concepts. And this is Marx's objection.

In sum, Marx has identified and criticized two dominant philosophical traditions. Materialism, from Hobbes to Feuerbach, is flawed because of its unreflective, ahistoric character, failing to understand the role human beings play in creating the world they perceive. But it is to be praised for understanding man's continuity with the natural world. Idealism, in its final, Hegelian, form, understands the importance of historical development, but restricts this to the development of thought.

This contrast allows us to posit a rather stylized opposition between ahistoric materialism and historical idealism. Put like this, it is not difficult to see what Marx is going to take from each in order to develop a philosophy of historical materialism. Like Hegel, he accepts that man changes himself and the world through activity in the world. But unlike Hegel this transformation takes place in the practical world, as practical activity, and not merely in thought.

One key aspect of such practical activity is productive activity: labour, in other words. Kantian, and especially Hegelian, idealism is a mystified expression of the real relation between human beings and the world. Human
being find self-realization, in nature. They change the world not merely by changing the way they conceptualize it but by physically transforming it: with picks and shovels, with ploughs and mechanical diggers, with booms and lathes. In changing the world they change themselves, by developing new skills, but also new needs. And this, in turn, gives rise to new forms of interaction, another aspect of our practical activity.

The idea that Marx finds missing in all previous philosophical work is that human beings have individual and collective material needs, and it is need, not individual contemplation or thought that provides human beings with their primary form of interaction with the world. In order to satisfy their needs, human beings must labour together on the world, yet in doing so they evolve evermore complex forms of production and social interaction. This engenders new needs, in a never-ending process. So a philosophical view about the interaction of human beings and nature has turned into the rudiments of a historical theory of society. And with this thought, Marx seems to believe, philosophy has finally arrived at the truth it has been striving for: its work is done.

**Labour and alienation**

We can now begin to understand why labour is so important in Marx's analysis, and also why it labour is alleviated this is especially disturbing. For this would mean that there is something wrong with our ability to enjoy what it is that makes us most distinctively human.

First, a quick word about the idea of alienation. In common use alienation refers to a feeling, perhaps of extreme dissatisfaction with one's situation. This subjective idea is a part of Marx's notion of alienation, but only a small part. More fundamentally alienation is an objective fact about our lives, and we can be alienated without even realizing it. The basic idea is that two things which belong together come apart. In religious alienation, the human essence becomes 'detached' from human existence. We do not exercise our most essential features; rather we worship them, in an alien form. Overcoming alienation is a matter of bringing the two elements back into some sort of proper relation. This is the foundation of Feuerbach's radical humanism.

The idea of religious alienation, and the associated notions of 'self-alienation', and even 'alienation from species-essence' (more on this later) were well known in the advanced Young Hegelian circles. However, through his reading of political economy Marx became convinced that the alienation also applied to labour. And, as we have seen, alienated labour is a primary cause of the misery on earth that leads us to create religion, as Marx believes.

Marx's study of accounts and translations of the Scottish economist Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (first published 1776) led him to recognize several 'truths of political economy' which highlight the plight of the worker under capitalism. I should emphasize that they are derived directly from Marx's understanding of Smith, even though Smith is
often thought to have been one of the leading champions of
capitalism. And so he was, in a way, yet we see that he also
was not blind to its deficiencies.

From Marx’s writings, we can draw out the following points
that Marx claimed to have found in his reading of Smith.

1. Under capitalism, the wages of the workers are literally minimal.
   This is a consequence of the fact that the capitalist is in by
   far the better bargaining position, and to avoid starving
   the worker must be prepared to accept the very low-wage
   that will be on offer: a wage just sufficient to keep the
   worker and family alive.

2. Work is punishing. For the same reason, the worker must
   accept appalling conditions, leading to overwork and
   early death.

3. Labour is degraded and one-sided. As the division of labour
   becomes more advanced, labour becomes more machine-
   like, and ‘from a man [the worker] becomes an abstract
   activity and a stomach’ (Colloq. 285).

4. Labour has become a commodity. It is bought and sold on the
   market ‘like any other commodity.

5. The worker’s life has become subject to alien form. The demand
   on which the worker’s life depends is founded on the
   desires of the wealthy and the capitalists.

Marx’s innovation was to combine Smith and Feuerbach to
derive an account of alienated labour. That is, the plight of
the worker under capitalism is an instance of the way in
which a person’s essence becomes detached from him or her
existence; i.e. that workers live in a way that does not express

their essence. Human beings are essentially productive crea-
tures, but Marx argues, under capitalism they produce in an
inhuman way. Now, to recall, the 1844 Manuscripts, in which
this discussion occurs, is an unpolished draft, and so is
bound to contain some incoherences and can be read in more
than one way. But I shall follow what is now the standard
interpretation in which, according to Marx, there are four
chief forms of alienated labour.

The first aspect of alienated labour is alienation from the
product. There is, initially, a very straightforward under-
standing of this. The worker produces an object, yet has no
say or control over the future use or possession of that
object. In this sense, then, the worker, individually, is separ-
ated from, or alienated from, that product. This observa-
tion, of course, is rather banal and obvious. Things become
rather more interesting when we start to think about the
way that we collectively can become alienated from the
products we create. Two key notions are mystification and
domination.

As we have already noted, Marx makes the point that virtu-
ally everything we encounter is either created or somehow
transformed by ‘zaman endeavour. This includes not only
obvious human artefacts—the pen with which I write, the
chair on which I sit—but even the ‘natural’ landscape
around us. As Marx remarks:

The sensuous world ... is not a given thing direct from all
eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry
and the state of society ... the result of the activity of a whole
succession of generations, each standing on the shoulders of
Consider, by way of contemporary example, the Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, USA. A good proportion of this is now officially designated "wilderness", as if human beings barely even know what it is. Yet earlier this century much of the area was farmland. It was converted to a national park in the 1930s and 1940s by Franklin Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps, as one of a number of public works designed to tackle unemployment in the aftermath of the depression.

Now the first point is that although so much of the world is largely a human creation, we rarely think of it as such, and, in this sense, we are alienated from our product. Furthermore, we often tend to take them for granted. Think of the history of engineering that was needed to make it the case that clean hot and cold water comes out of your bath taps. Yet we only take any notice when the supply has the audacity to fail. The mystification is complete when we come to reflect that so few of us really have any idea how common household objects even work. Who among us can honestly say that they understand how their refrigerator works, even when it has been explained to them? We humans beings have created a world that we simply do not understand; we are strangers in our own world.

But not only are we mystified by these products, we come to be dominated by them too. Soon we will learn about Marx's theory that we are alienated in production.
we experience the 'complete domination of dead matter over men' (Colletti 319).

Alienation from our product, then, is a rich idea with many strands. The next category is alienation in productive activity. This stems, we saw, from the elaborate division of labour. Now, to be clear, the problem with the division of labour is not that it splits one job into several, more specialized, tasks. Highly specialized tasks can be immensely challenging and rewarding. And whether challenging in itself or not, a task within a division of labour may also form part of joint production or teamwork, which can offer another form of fulfilment. Rather, the problem Marx discerns is that capitalist division of labour typically leads to a de-skilling of the worker, where each individual is reduced to performing a highly repetitive, mindless task, with little understanding of their place in the total process. We become little more than machines, programmed to make the same movements over and over again.

This leads us swiftly to the next category: alienation from our species-being. Now the term ‘species-being’ was taken from Feuerbach, but Marx gives it a new twist. The core idea stems from the question: what is it that is essential to human beings? What is it that makes them a distinctive kind of creature? Now Marx is not interested in biological features of human beings at this point. Rather he divides the species-essence of human beings into two aspects. First, as we have already seen, the distinctive human activity is labour, or, more precisely, social productive activity. Now, of course, other animals produce too. Beavers make dams; bees make hives. But Marx points out that human beings are capable of free production in the sense that they can produce in accordance with their will and consciousness in elaborate and unpredicted ways. There is no limit to the range of things human beings may produce. Under capitalism very few people can enjoy this aspect of their species-essence. Rather than expressing our essence in our production, we produce in a mechanical, repetitive way. It is not an enjoyment but a torment:

The worker who for twelve hours weaves, spins, drills, cuts, builds, shovels, breaks stones, carries loads, etc.—does he consider this twelve hours spinning, drilling, turning, building, shovelling, stone breaking as a manifestation of his life as life? On the contrary life begins for him when this activity ceases, at table, in the public house, in bed. (M. 476)

The second aspect of our species-being, according to Marx, comes out in another of those 'Theses on Feuerbach', this time the sixth thesis, which contains the words: 'the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations' (M. 172). I understand this to mean that human beings are engaged in an enormous and hugely complex division of labour, that goes beyond the sphere of production narrowly so called. Our artistic and cultural achievements, our material advancement, depend on co-operation that encompasses the globe and the whole of human history. In a familiar example, it is said that there is probably not a single
person on earth who could make a simple pencil. It involves so many different technologies and knowledge of diverse materials that its production is beyond the ability of any one of us, taken alone.

Consequently, although we rarely think this for ourselves, a visitor from another planet would observe that human beings are involved in an immense scheme of cooperation, making goods that will be used the world over, building on shared knowledge that has been accumulated over the ages. In any one day, a given individual may use or consume objects the production of which may have required, in the end, millions of others. This, then, reveals the social aspect of our species-essence.

Now Marx argues that we are alienated from both aspects of our species-essence under capitalism. We already briefly noted the first: that we are alienated in productive activity. We can now see that this is also a way of being alienated from our species-essence. Under capitalism the vast majority of the workforce work in a way that does not engage their distinctly human properties. Rather than exercising their creativity, their ingenuity, their ability to respond to many varying challenges and situations, they produce in a dumb, repetitive, single-track fashion. They produce as animals do, rather than as humans should. It has been said that for many workers the part of the day in which their abilities are most engaged is the drive to and from work. Thus, as we saw, Marx says many of us feel human only when we are not working.

The second way in which we are alienated from our species-essence merges into the final category: alienation from other human beings. Here the essential point is simply that we do not appreciate our 'species-life' for what it is. Rather than conceiving of ourselves as members of the vast scheme of cooperation just described, we think of ourselves as people who go to work to earn money, and then go to shop to spend it. We are people with tunnel vision. As Marx somewhat obscurely puts it: we use our species-life as a means to individual life. In other words, the way in which we pursue our self-interest would not even be possible if we did not have a communal species-essence. Yet we utterly disregard this communal aspect of our lives. We barely give a thought to the question of who will use the things we make, and even less to how the objects we purchase came into existence. We screen everything off except our immediate consumption decision.

These are the four ways, Marx argues, in which we are alienated in our labour under capitalism: alienation from the product, in productive activity; from our species-essence; and from other people. But it doesn’t stop there.

Money and credit

Money is the central part of the explanation of how alienation from other people is possible. It acts as a screen which we rarely look behind. But this is not the only adverse effect that money has. In the 1844 Manuscripts Marx also indulges in some literary criticism, reflecting upon an extended passage from Shakespeare’s Hamlet and a shorter passage from Goethe’s Faust. Marx quotes Shakespeare
telling us that gold ‘will make black, white; foul, fair; wrong, right; base, noble; old, young, coward, valiant’ (Colerid 376).

Mars here makes a number of distinct but related points. First, there is a claim that money subverts and changes everything it touches. Money commodifies, transforms, and degrades human relations. People should be loved, for instance, because they are loveable, or, perhaps, because of their family relations with others. Yet in a capitalist society, people may be loved because they are rich and others need them because they are poor. We should admire those who command respect through their actions, their vision, or their concern for others. But, once more, we tend to admire those who are wealthy, irrespective of how they became so. Second, money is corrosive, and everything, sooner or later, has its price. Things that were once done out of a sense that this is what people should do, each other—look after our children and our elderly parents for example—we now pay others to do. The capitalist economy is full of people paying each other to do things that were once done without thought of payment. Money, say Marx and Shakespeare, is the ‘universal whore’ (M. 118).

A third claim, and the one most directly derived from the Shakespeare quotation is that ‘money turns all human natural qualities into their opposite’ (M. 118). Now clearly this is a huge exaggeration. But underlying it is the powerful thought that in a society like ours about anything is possible for those with enough money, but for those without it life will be a frustrating struggle. In an example of enduring relevance Marx considers education. The greater, educational resources—we all agree in theory—should be given to those most able to benefit. Yet in a pure capitalist society those with talent but no money will have no access, whereas those with money but no talent can have whatever education they wish. Needs without money will go unsatisfied, while those backed with money will be indulged.

Indeed, Marx says as a fourth point, this alienation even infects our language. Need is natural to human beings, and the human world depends entirely on people taking steps to satisfy each other’s needs. Yet, Marx says, under capitalism the language of needs is delisted. It becomes humiliating to ask for something on the basis that you need it; it becomes impolite, or whining.

And if this wasn’t bad enough, consider the credit system, which is the money system developed perhaps to its highest level of abstraction. Here, Marx says, the decision of whether to extend credit to an individual can even be a matter of life or death for them. (One wonders whether Marx speaks from personal experience.) And in this system of finance without physical money the individual becomes the unit of currency. Consequently to obtain credit it is often necessary to be ‘economical with the truth’ about one’s past and future. One has to counterfeit oneself. This, in turn, breeds an industry of spies and snoops, devoted to record keeping and investigation to see who is credit ‘worthy’. And here we see human language debased in another way. ‘What is your net worth?’ and ‘How much do you need for?’ are questions about wealth and credit rating, not about moral assessment of character.
The final summit is the tanker's system and stock market. And we have already noted what that can do to us: it can crash around our cars.

Liberation

Marx was not the only one of his contemporaries to criticize the contemporary system in Germany. According to Marx it was backward both politically and economically. Only in philosophy was it ahead of the game. So the need was for both great political and economic change, with political reform the more urgent. For in addition to the woes it suffered in common with other advanced nations, it had its own particular difficulties too. Germany, and Prussia in particular, had discriminatory laws that many of us even find hard to comprehend today. Much of the debate centered around the 'Jewish question', as Marx observed. Judaism was the subject of legal discrimination, and not able to enter certain professions without renouncing their religion, as we saw in the case of Marx's father.

As the young Marx was writing, the Prussian parliament had proposed reform to end anti-Semitic discrimination. Yet the reform had been vetoed by the King, and so discrimination continued. Prussian liberals were understandably critical, continuing to call for legal equality. Yet Marx's friend and fellow Hegelian, Bruno Bauer, wrote two articles arguing against Jewish emancipation. Now this needs to be understood carefully, Bauer did not favor discrimination.

However, he argued that in asking for the same rights as the Christians, the Jews were asking to join in the servility that the Christians experienced. Until both Jews and Christians gave up their religion, proper emancipation for either was impossible. It was impossible to have a private life as a member of a religion—as the 'chosen' people for example—and a public life as a citizen. This, clearly, bears comparison with Feuerbach's argument that religion is a barrier to the enjoyment of our species-essence and must be transcended.

Marx's reply to Bauer in 'On the Jewish Question' is, I have already remarked, one of the great works of political philosophy, despite its apparently rather parochial concern. For Marx used the occasion to raise some fundamental issues, and this gives us the opportunity to see the depth and richness of his thought.

Many of the details of Marx's article need not concern us here. One important argument, though, is that it is paternal nonsense to think that one cannot enjoy equal political rights unless religion is transcended. Marx notes that the United States gives a perfect example where religious difference does not prevent equal political participation, yet religion flourishes to a degree where 'people in the US do not believe that a man without religion can be an honest man' (M. 51). (True in some circles even today.) But Marx's real contribution begins with the distinction between political emancipation and something new: human emancipation.

Political emancipation is a matter of enjoying the 'rights of the citizens' and the 'rights of man'. Of the rights of the
citizens are focused on the process of political participation: freedom of speech, assembly, and the right to vote and to stand for public office. Other rights of the citizen include freedom of thought and of worship. The rights of man, by contrast, are considered more universal and are stated by Marx to include equality, liberty, security, and property. Thus to be politically emancipated is, essentially, to possess the literal rights of the citizen and of man.

What, then, is human emancipation? Interestingly, Marx is nothing like as explicit about this as one would like. But one thing is for sure: political emancipation is not enough. We can see this by reflecting on the point that however pure and equal in its treatment of people the law may be, discrimination can nevertheless remain deep rooted in everyday life.

To take an example from today, for more than thirty years it has been illegal in the UK to pay a woman less for doing the same job as a man. Yet statistics show that women are paid less than men in virtually every sphere of employment. As Marx puts it, "the state can liberate itself from a limitation without man himself being truly free of it" (M. 51). This seems to hold for every liberal law. No law can encompass all possibilities. Without breaking the letter of the law people will find ways of employing people of their own social class, religion or race, or indulging their other prejudices.

To drive his point home, Marx makes use of a distinction between the state and civil society. The state is the realm of the citizen. In the politically emancipated state we are all equal citizens, equal before the law, proud possessors of a rich catalogue of rights, viewing each other as fellow free and equal members of the state. Yet at the level of civil society—the level of everyday economic activity—things look very different. We seek our own advantage, competing and exploiting as necessary; jealous of the success of others and determined to hold on to what we think of as ours. Thus we each live a double life: equal public citizens and atomistic private individuals. The sad truth, according to Marx, is that atomistic civil society is the level of our real existence, while the noble level of the state is merely a collective fantasy.

We are now in a position to understand Marx's difficult view that the state is a form of alienation. Essentially the point is this. As we have seen, we are essentially communal beings, producing for each other in an immensely complex division of labour. However, under capitalism we cannot live in a properly communal way; and, typically, we do not understand or appreciate our communal essence for what it is. Nevertheless Marx seems to believe that our communal nature must express itself in some way or other: some alienated way or other.

Once religion was able to play this role. Prior to the Protestant Reformation all members of a community would be members of the same Church, praying together, and reciting phrases about everyone being equal in the eyes of the Lord. Yet with the Reformation, and the consequent fragmentation of the Church into sects, often with deep contempt for each other, religion can no longer play the role of (fake) community. But at this point the politically emancipated state comes on to the scene. Liberalism is precisely the
response to religious difference. Though of different religions, we can all be equal citizens together, and thus can express our communal essence in a new, though still alienated, fashion. But the fact is that this equality is, in many contexts, merely a form of words.

Now we are ready for Marx's killer blow. Not only does political emancipation fall short of human emancipation, it is a grave obstacle. Consider again the rights of man: liberty, equality, security, and property. Liberty is the right to do as you wish as long as you don't harm others. Equality is the right to be treated by the law in the same way as everyone else. Security is the right to be protected from others, and finally, property is the right to extend this security to the enjoyment of your legitimate possessions. To be a citizen is to enjoy these rights. They are fought for and prised. Yet each of these rights, argues Marx, encourage us to view our fellow human beings as threats to us. They are rights which preclude limits, separating each of us from others. The rights of man and the citizen are rights to preserve our atomistic existence. Accordingly they first presuppose and then reinforce our alienation from each other.

In a properly human society we would find our freedom through our relations with other human beings. A proper human life is one which is lived, at least in part, for the sake of others. Yet in the politically emancipated state the most we are offered is protection from each other. While Marx is quick to concede that this, at least, is preferable to the situation then current in Germany, when certainly not everyone received sufficient protection, nevertheless a politically emancipated state is still suffused with alienation. We can hope for a great deal more.

Emancipation

But what, precisely, can we hope for? This is one of the most disappointing and frustrating aspects of Marx's Early Writings. We know that an emancipated world will be a world without alienation, and, furthermore, it will be organized on communist lines. But this tells us very little, in itself.

Now we should not underestimate Marx's originality and depth of analysis, even so. Marx does make some vital moves. He was not, of course, the first communist, and many such ideas had been ventured before. Typically communists would propose highly elaborate schemes, planned out in fantastic detail. Presenting themselves as the great benefactors of human kind, these Utopians would commend their ideas for general approval, yet as the same time they would typically be utterly clueless about how they might be implemented on anything above the smallest scale. It is said that the Utopian sociologist Charles Fourier advertised that he would be available in a certain café every day, should any wealthy philanthropist be interested in discussing how they might plan out and fund an experimental version of his particular fantasy of communist society. And indeed Fourier-based communities were tried out in the United States, although they did not survive for long.

We saw that another Utopian, Robert Owen, at least had
the opportunity to put his ideas into action, at the mill he managed in New Lanark. But even he became disillusioned. The workers may have had better working and living conditions, but it would have been stretching the imagination beyond breaking point to suppose they were liberated in any real sense. Owen himself admitted this, realizing that he had failed to do very much more than raise productivity. His workers remained exploited, little more than servants at his command.

Against this background, Marx argues that communism is not to be achieved by the intellectuals, visionaries, and dreamers, but by the workers themselves. Revolution, not philanthropy and experiment, was the way ahead. Of course it had to be guided by ideas, but ideas are not enough. Inscribed on Marx’s gravestone in Highgate cemetery is the final, and most famous, ‘Thesis on Feuerbach’, which reads: ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it’ (M. 158).

Marx further argues that the workers would not be fit to receive emancipation unless they were part of the struggle that brought it about.

(Revolution) on a mass scale is necessary... not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew. (M. 195)

Marx was the first major theorist to propose that the workers must make their own revolution. The workers will be

fashioned in its fire. They will come to understand their true needs and interests, yet also their real powers and their mutual reliance. If they were to remain in the sheep-like state of workers under capitalism, communism would be a disaster. Knowledge, self-knowledge, and motivation must all change. It can change, thinks Marx, through active revolutionary struggle. Only by making the revolution will people be ready to receive it. And what will the revolution achieve? We will gather together the threads of Marx’s thoughts about this later in the book once we have explored some of his other ideas.

Conclusion

For the young Marx capitalism is a regime of alienation through and through; spreading from religion, to the state, labour, money, human relations, and even language. Liberal political emancipation, in the end, makes things even worse in some respects, even though it does represent progress in many ways. Eventually existing society will be replaced by a communist system which ‘transcends’ our alienated state, and this will be achieved by proletariat revolution. How much of this should, and can, we believe? We will return to this in Chapter 3.