Alienation and Work

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Many people are skeptical about moral judgments. They believe no one can really show that something is good or bad, right or wrong. However, a careful look at the workplace will tell us why that skeptical view is problematic.

There is something very paradoxical about ethical skepticism in the face of what we know about our lives. We have experienced destructive wars that achieved no morally acceptable end. The life work of many is useless, frustrating, and not under their own control; still, as bad as their jobs are, given the alternatives, they are fortunate to have them, and hence cling to themthat is the depth of their alienated condition. We see pollution and the destruction of our environment and racism and sexism as pervasive features of our lives, and in the face of all this, we feel powerless.

Are there not certain conditionsthose just mentionedthat are plainly wrong and thosetheir oppositesthat are plainly right? It seems to me that we have good reasons for saying that there are some thingsthings that are a part of the very fiber of our social livesthat are plainly evil.

What are these ills that are so pervasive and so alienating in our society? I believe, if we think concretely and nonevasively about work and the conditions surrounding it, we'll see that there are deep evils in our world that are by no means inevitable or necessary. What I am saying here needs to be concretized and exemplified.

Following is an extreme case, but a true one:

When black school children in South Boston were bused into white schools, they were violently assaulted. They saw, as their buses passed through white neighborhoods, black mannequins hung in effigy, white power signs, and, on one school wall, a sign announcing in four-foot-high letters, "Hitler was Right." Inside the school, even with police protection, they were violently attacked by antibusing gangs. It was painfully clear that police sympathies lay with the whites. Even a few teachers were viciously prejudiced. Ask yourself what happens to a young child under such an assault. What must be the effect of such unprovoked hatred on the personality and self-respect

of a child? Such actions can have no justification. We know that something is happening here that is morally intolerable.

Like racism, sexism is often grossly obvious and widespread. The hiring and treatment of secretaries is sometimes a dramatic case in point. To be told: "We usually don't hire married girls. We want young, pretty, available girls around the office" is to be evaluated on qualities irrelevant to the position for which you are interviewing. If obtaining a job and advancing within a company means tolerating sexual harassment, then you are being treated merely as an object. Again we have human conditions that are morally intolerable, though often tolerated in our society.

Then there is the plight of the elderly, who because unproductive are expendable. In the extreme, although not statistically insignificant, cases, you will find elderly people living in dilapidated residential hotels with two-burner hot plates and less than minimal food, heat, and hot water. They are isolated, lonely, and fear eviction. Again, we have a widely tolerated but still morally intolerable situation.

People complain about welfare "bums," but there are people in North America and Europe who try but are not able to find work. (In 1983, 35 million people were out of work in the capitalist societies of the West.) Many of the habitually unemployed are caught in an endless cycle of poverty and ignorance. Most come from uneducated and poverty-stricken backgrounds. Deprived of a decent education, they're thrown into the work force at a very young age, with little experience and no training. Because of their lack of education, they're job prospects are very limited, and without a job that pays well, that education may never be achieved.

Such people are caught in an endless cycle of poverty that saps the will, undermines dignity, and destroys their lives and the lives of their children. In this way a relatively permanent class of unemployables is created. Again we have a situation of the morally intolerable being routinely tolerated.

Finally, let us look at consumerism and work. Eleanor Langer, in her expose of life inside the New York Telephone Company, points out one very strong, largely socially imposed, motivation for those women working within the company in alienating and emotionally exhausting circumstances. 14 Through social manipulation, they become trapped by their love of objects. Their work affords them no satisfaction or any basis for developing self-respect. A telltale showing of this was in their endless purchasing of new and different wigs. So, with incessant company encouragement, they try to find their identities in consumerism. Theirs is an endless quest for objects. We haveto make a general statementa pervasive consciousness industry, combined with frustrating conditions at work and in our families, pushing us into largely senseless patterns of consumption. We, in this example, have people being manipulated in a way that is morally unacceptable.15

Let us turn to our reflection on work. Work is something in our societies that is for many of us deeply unsatisfying, debilitating, dehumanizing, or, as the catch phrase has it, alienatingthough still usually preferable to welfare. As Albert Camus put it, "Without work all life goes rotten." But it is equally plain, as he knew, that when work is soullessas in an assembly line, a typing pool"life stifles and dies." To make our lives satisfying, we must have meaningful work. Again we have something that is plainly evil. 16

Why are these things I have mentioned so deeply embedded and pervasive in our social and working lives, and why are they evil? They are evil because they cause people to suffer needlessly; they undermine our self-respect and autonomy. People are simply used, treated as a means, manipulated, and deceived; their hopes for themselves and their children are destroyed. Their health (both physical and mental) is damaged, and they are exploited by their employers. They have nothing even remotely like equal chances in life.

As study after study shows, there is considerable dissatisfaction of workers with the work in our societies.17 It is not that people do not want to work at all; it is the particular work they do under conditions of supervision and control, that is so dissatisfying. Yet even when work affords them little satisfaction, most people would prefer to work, as a lesser evil, rather than retirement. They want to continue working not because they enjoy it but, as one worker put it, "only to fill time."18 A task force report to the secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, *Work in America,* summarized a central conclusion of over a hundred studies done over a period of twenty years: "Workers want most . . . to become masters of their

immediate environment and to feel that their work and they themselves are important. . . ."[19] These feelings are crucial elements in self-respect. Yet modern working conditions militate against their fulfillment. Work is very often authoritarian. The very idea of democracy in the workplace is often thought an outrage. Yet the fact is that work typically rakes place under dose supervision and dictation in an authoritarian atmosphere not unlike the military.[20]

People learn to do routine and fragmented tasks, often having little conception of the overall process. However, when management introduces labor-saving machinesmachines that under socioeconomic circumstances could be liberating to workersthe workers must resist their adoption in order to keep their wretched jobs. As Adam Smith recognized before Karl Marx, work under such conditions is a thoroughly dehumanizing experience that "so stunts our understanding and our sensibilities that we generally, if we are formed under such employment, become as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. "[21] Our very human capacities are stunted, and we suffer self-estrangement and alienation.

Our alienation is deepened because we feel powerless to change our situation, to alter the fact that we must sell ourselves in order to work at all. (Recall

that while in the middle of the nineteenth century, less than half of all employed people were wage and salary workers. By 1970 only 9 percent were not salaried employeesa drop from 18 percent in 1950. The idea that most of us, if we chose to take the risk, could work for ourselves is pure illusion. [22]

Work is often perceived as meaningless because it contributes very little to our well-being. It certainly does not give us a sense of pride to make products designed to become obsolete. Often workers know they are making junk, sometimes needlessly polluting junk, yet they must continue to make it anyway. They also very frequently make things that are a waste of our natural resources and energy and may even be harmful, for example, electric toothbrushes, snowmobiles (except for very limited purposes), food additives, and valium (in many instances).

Suppose a salesperson sells insurance to someone who doesn't need it or persuades someone to buy a product they don't need to replace a product that is good for them. Or suppose you are a secretary who types documents that teach companies how to avoid taxation or pollution controls. Suppose you are an accountant paid to "doctor" a firm's books. How can such pursuits be considered meaningful work and how could it not undermine your self-respect?

In our societies, workers have very little input into decisions about what is to be produced and how it is to be produced; therefore, a genuine work community never develops, where workers "come together to determine through their social interaction the important decisions governing production. "[23] Under such circumstances work becomes drudgery, an instrument for gaining money and material security.

To work under such conditions is alienating and self-estranging. This state is often masked in various forms of self-deception: dissatisfaction with ourselves and with the world. And with this dissatisfaction come feelings of powerlessness, senselessness, and isolation. But alienation has an objective sense as well. Alienation occurs, as Herbert Gintis puts it, "when the structure of society denies you access to life-giving and personally rewarding activities and relationships."24 When elements in your personal and social life become meaningless, fragmented, out of reach, you begin to feel, as existentialists have stressed, the absurdity and the pointlessness of your life. When this is your situation, you are alienated, though such alienation can take more disguised, less self-conscious forms.

The dibilitating effects of many workers jobs carry over into their personal lives. Alcoholism and drug addiction are very high among many workers. Also, work in which one has little control or responsibility engenders a general passivity. "The worker who is denied participation and control over the work situation is unlikely to be able to participate effectively in community or

national derision making, even if there are formal opportunities to do so. " 25 Without democracy in the workplace, we are unlikely to achieve meaningful democracy in community affairs.26 What we too often see are alienated, passive human beings who feel utterly powerless before forces they can neither control nor understand.

Their nonpassivity, like the return of the repressed, comes out in authoritarian behavior at home, a preoccupation with sexfor males a preoccupation with how many women they can seduceand as is seen on television, a preoccupation with sex and violence. The politically impotent, the supervised and drilled male, can at least be boss in his own bed and home if not at work. In the extreme cases, this often leads to spouse and child abuse. Alienation at work creates deep alienation throughout one's life, destroying the possibility for healthy emotional development.27 "To be alienated is to be separated in concrete and specific ways from 'things' important to well-being," principally social roles that involve respectful collaboration with others.28 Whether there are these social roles that are essential for giving sense to one's life depends on the social structures in which one lives. "Alienation arises when the social criteria determining the structure and development of important social roles are *essentially* independent of individual needs.29 Work relationships are social relationships, and in our society their authoritarian structures dull our sensibilities, intellectual capacities, initiative, creativity, and autonomy.

I have discussed conditions of life in the workplace that, contrary to moral skepticism, are obvious moral evils. Indeed, if any theory were to imply that these conditions were not evil, I would believe the theory to be plainly mistaken.

Notes

1. *Work in America: Report of a Special Task Force to the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1973), XV-XVI.

2. This example is taken from David Noble, "Social Choice in Machine Design: The Case of Automatically Controlled Machine Tools and a Challenge for Labor," *Politics and Society,* vol. 8, nos. 3-4 (1978), 313-49.

3. For examples of such democratic decision making in the workplace, see Daniel Zwerdling, *Workplace Democracy* (New York: Harper Row, 1980).

4. *Work In America,* 93-121.

5. This example is taken from Richard Edwards, "Social Relations of Production at the Point of Production," *Work and Labor: A Special Issue of the Insurgent Sociologist,* vol. 7, nos. 2 & 3 (Fall 1978), 114-15.

6. *Work in America,* 76-93. The authors develop a conception of "social efficiency" to replace the narrower concept of "industrial efficiency" in our society (pp. 23-28).

7. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 440 (parenthetical material mine).

8. For a related view, see Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 243.

9. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* 440-42.

10. The right to employment raises important questions about the activities of homemaking and parenting. Many women perform these services on a full-time unpaid basis; however, it is neither dear that their decisions to assume this role are free nor that their economic dependence on their husbands is desirable. One solution that has been proposed would respect the right to employment by paying these domestic workers. Another solution would be to divide household responsibilities equally and to widen part-time and flexitime employment opportunities.

11. In this essay, I focus on the conflict between employees' rights and business owners' rights; however, government employees and workers in nonprofit institutions are equally entitled to the benefits of this right.

12. *New York Times,* 15 January 1984, 1 and 20.

13. For a helpful related treatment of self-respect, see Thomas E. Hill, Jr., "Servility and Self-respect," *Today's Moral Problems,* ed. Richard A. Wasserstrom (New York: Macmillian Co., 1979), 133-47.

14. Eleanor Langer, "Inside the New York Telephone Company," *The Capitalist System,* 2d ed., ed. Richard C. Edwards et al. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall), 4-11.

15. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *The Consciousness Industry* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974).

16. See Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974); Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

17. *Work in America.*

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Langer, *The Capitalist System,* 4-11; Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital.*

21. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 1937), 734.

22. Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America,* 293-317.

23. Ibid., 275.

24. Ibid., 276.

25. Langer, *The Capitalist System,* 267.

26. Ibid., 267.

27. Ibid., Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America,* 277.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.