

the most dissimilar geniuses are of use to one another; the different produces of their respective talents, by the general disposition to truck, barter, and exchange, being brought, as it were, into a common stock, where every man may purchase whatever part of the produce of other men's talents he has occasion for.

## QUESTIONS

1. Why does Smith believe that self-love is a good thing?
2. Why does Smith discuss the differences in people's talents? Why is it important that the difference in talents is not so large as we often suppose?

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## Exploitation of Need

The fact that a person can choose his or her work does not necessarily justify ill-treatment by an employer. Part of the question is how many options a person really does have. A common myth is that all people really have a wide range of choices when it

comes to making a living. The most important part of the American dream was that anyone could become anything. This was a land not only of opportunity but of options. But what about the destitute person whose only options are degrading ones?

To: You  
From: The Philosopher  
Subject: "Marx on Alienated Labor"

Many people feel alienated from their jobs and don't want to be identified with their work. The guy who serves you fries at McDonald's probably does not want his work to identify who he is. His job is to make food exactly the way he is told and wait on you fast. This isn't rocket science. Some people are much bigger than their jobs. Karl Marx understood this. He might have been misguided in his economics, but he was a keen observer of what happens to people when they are alienated from their work:

he does not confirm himself in his work, he denies himself, feels miserable instead of happy, deploys no free physical and intellectual energy, but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. Thus the worker only feels a stranger. He is at home when he is not working and when he works he is not at home.

The result we arrive at then is that man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions of eating, drinking, and procreating, at most also in his dwelling and dress, and feels himself in his animal functions. Eating, drinking, procreating, etc. are indeed truly human functions. But in the abstraction that separates them from the other round of human activity and makes them into final and exclusive ends they become animal.\*

\* From Karl Marx, *Capital*, Penguin Classics, 1992.

The practice of self-enslavement had been around for a long time. It was common among the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon peoples in the Middle Ages. A person in need of support and/or protection would sell himself to another. This choice, though more or less freely made, was grounded in the same fears of starvation and violence found in other forms of slavery. Self-enslavement raises some interesting questions. Does a frightened and starving person *freely* choose to enter into a contract with someone who can provide him or her with food and safety? This is a question that lies beneath the way Americans think about employment. Is any kind of work or any set of working conditions okay as long as a person freely chooses it? We may be quicker to defend people's right to do any job they want to do, but what about the right of employers to hire people for physically dangerous or personally demeaning work?

The philosopher John Locke offers some insight into these questions. The desire to be free from the yoke of one's master or employer is at the heart of some of our most treasured political ideals. In the first of his two treatises on government, Locke asks, "And how is it that property in land gives a man power over another?" Here Locke is disputing the natural right of kings over property and their subjects. Locke argues that people own the work of their hands and the labor of their bodies. He also notes that we have a moral obligation to help those in need and not take advantage of them: "Charity gives every man a title to so much out of another's plenty, as will keep him from extreme want, where he has no means to subsist otherwise; and a man can no more justly make use of another's necessity, to force him to become his vassal, by withholding that relief."

Locke then goes on to raise one of the biggest tensions of the employer–employee relationship. He writes that "the subjugation of the needy does not begin with the consent of the Lord, but with the consent of the poor man, who preferred being his [another person's] subject to starving." So, it's wrong to force a needy person to be your slave, but it's not wrong for the needy person to choose to be your slave or indentured servant. Are the two really that different? This is like the employer who says to a single mother of four, "If you don't like working here you are free to leave" or "If you didn't like the working

conditions here, then you shouldn't have taken the job in the first place." A single mother who lives in a small town and has four children to support has the freedom to choose where to work, but little to choose from. When it comes to work, everyone has freedom of choice, but not everyone has viable options.

The actual difference between the indentured servant and the slave rests on his or her consent, even if a person really has only one viable choice. The indentured servant's bondage may be short-term and tempered by the voluntary contractual arrangements between the two people. The slave's bondage is involuntary and long-term, and there is no restriction on the master's power over the slave. In theory at least, it is not wrong to take away a person's freedom as long as he or she consents to the arrangement. This begs the larger question of exploitation. How much freedom and human dignity can an employer morally justify buying because someone is willing to sell it? The fourteen-year-old runaway on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles is willing to sell his body to buy the drugs he desperately needs. To what extent does he "freely" enter into the transaction? The answer to a question like this has always been hotly contested. Some would argue that the boy could choose otherwise, others that given his physical and psychological condition, he is not free.

## MONKEY LABOR

It is easy to slip into a logic of exploitation that says that those in need who are exploited are better off than they would be if they weren't exploited. *The Economist* ran a tongue-in-cheek report on working monkeys that illustrates this logic. In southern Thailand several thousand monkeys are "employed" every year to pick the 1.5 million-ton crop of coconuts. Village families train the monkeys and rent them out to plantation owners. The monkeys "earn" about twelve dollars per month in "monkey wages" of eggs, rice, and fruit from the plantation owner. Working monkeys are given names; they are groomed, bathed, and fed three times a day. Sometimes their owners even give them a ride to work, on the back of their motor scooters. When a monkey is ill, it gets the day off. When it is too old to work, it

“retires,” either back into the wild or as a family pet. The downside of the monkeys’ work is that they are kept on chains and not allowed to breed at will. However, the article points out, this practice of “employment” keeps some species such as the crab-eating macaque from becoming extinct because their habitat is being destroyed by humans.

There is a striking parallel between this case and the way that colonists—and some people today—have justified their treatment of indigenous or tribal people in Africa, the Americas, and Australia. They would argue that although the farmers take away the monkeys’ freedom, the monkeys are “better off” than they would be on their own in the wild, especially since their habitat has been largely taken over by the farmers. We don’t know what the monkeys think. Would they prefer to give up their monkey wages, their names, their daily baths and motor scooter rides to take their chances in the wild? The justification for this arrangement is simple. It’s okay for farmers to take away the monkey’s freedom because they supply the monkey with what *they* think the monkey needs, even if it is not what the monkey wants.

This extreme (and, to some, frivolous) case illustrates how the logic of exploitation justifies taking advantage of those in need by arguing that one is taking care of people’s needs. Exploitation is also about using one’s power over others to determine what people need and what they *should* be willing to trade to have their needs filled. Similarly, the farmer decides that the monkey *needs* three meals a day and assumes that the monkey is willing to give up its freedom for them. As we’ll see later, sometimes employers fill “needs” that employees do not have or want.

## WAGES FOR TIME AND FREEDOM

We own our labor and we own our freedom. Freedom, like labor, is something that we can barter. Most paid employment involves some loss of freedom for the employee. All of us must sell, in varying degrees, our work and our time to earn a living. Both John Locke and Adam Smith realized that employees are not really paid for what they produce. Smith said workers receive compensation for their loss of freedom

at work, not for the product they make. Here loss of freedom means a restriction of their liberty to do and say or not to do and say certain things during the time that they are working. Usually when we take a job we implicitly or explicitly agree to do it when, where, and how our employer wants it done. For instance, think about a receptionist’s job. She has to sit at the front desk all day, greet people, and answer the phone. She is not totally free to come and go when she pleases. Someone has to cover for her when she goes to the rest room, or takes a break for coffee or lunch. *Being there* is a fundamental part of her job. She is paid for her time as well as for what she does. She can’t say what she wants when she answers the phone, she has to be polite and say the name of the company. Today managers would argue that she is paid for the value she adds to the organization—her “value added.”

The idea that wages are compensation for loss of freedom also leads to some absurd possibilities. Would this mean that the less freedom a person has on the job the more he or she should get paid? Quite the contrary: jobs with more surface freedom tend to signal higher status and pay more money. In his book *Class*, Paul Fussell argues that the amount of freedom one has on the job is a better indicator of class than salary. The idea of selling freedom often goes hand-in-hand with selling labor, especially when a person is in desperate need of a job and has little choice.

## QUESTIONS

1. Tom desperately needs a job. Tom will work for \$1 an hour because he cannot find a job that pays more. Although some of my workers (who perform comparable work) are paid \$7 an hour or more, I offer Tom the job at \$1 an hour. I do not force Tom to take the job. He happily accepts the job. Have I done something wrong in offering Tom a job he was grateful to accept? Why or why not, according to Ciulla?
2. What does Ciulla mean by *self-enslavement*? Can you give examples from your own experience of self-enslavement?
3. What does it mean to make a free choice about where you work and the working conditions?
4. Most people must work to make a living. How do you draw the line between the need to work and exploitation of workers?