

The Philosophical Implications and Contemporary Value Insights of "Labor Creates Humanity" from Hegel's "Master-Slave Dialectic"

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Abstract

In Hegel's "Master-Slave Dialectic," labor is not only a means to achieve freedom but also a process of self-creation. Through labor, the slave negates their own nature, gradually surpassing their mere slave status to gain self-awareness and freedom. Meanwhile, the master, often reliant on the slave's labor is compelled to accept material provisions from the slave, creating a material dependency that forces the master to negate their own essence and be disciplined into a new form by the slave. This dependency of the master is not only material but also involves recognition of the slave's social status and their own value. Hegel's "Master-Slave Dialectic" provides a profound philosophical framework for contemplating the philosophical implications and contemporary value insights of "Labor Creates People." It offers a deeper understanding of issues facing contemporary society, particularly in rethinking the relationships between freedom, labor, and environment. This philosophical framework is crucial for seeking inclusive and sustainable solutions to contemporary challenges.

Keywords

Labor, Master-Slave Dialectic, Freedom, Negation.

1. Introduction

From ancient times to the present, humanity's exploration of its origins has been ongoing. Two theories that have significantly influenced history are creationism and evolutionism. Creationism posits that the origin of the universe, life, and human beings themselves were all created by God or some supernatural force. It once served as a tool for ruling classes to consolidate their authoritarian rule. Evolutionism, proposed by biologist Darwin, suggests that species can evolve, with one species transforming into another over time, including humans evolving from primates. However, both theories fail to fundamentally answer what constitutes human nature and how human essence is created. Creationism interprets humanity through the omnipotent and omniscient "God," submerging human nature in divinity. Evolutionism, while explaining humans as the product of natural selection, does not adequately address the unique essence that distinguishes humans from animals and other things.

Marx and Engels, based on historical materialism, answered the question of human origins and essence, achieving a scientific and historical response to the issue of human origins. Marx stated, "The distinguishing feature of humans from animals can be found in consciousness, religion, or anything else. Once people begin to produce their means of subsistence, they differentiate themselves from animals, a step determined by their physical organization." Engels also specifically discussed in "Dialectics of Nature" the role of labor in the transition from ape to human.

This clearly tells us that labor "creates" humans and establishes the fundamental distinction between humans and other entities. To understand "labor creates people," it is essential to first grasp what is truly labor. Often, when discussing labor, it's easy to perceive it as simple tasks

or efforts made for survival. However, in Hegel's "Master-Slave Dialectic," labor is endowed with a deeper philosophical meaning. Labor is not merely an activity performed for survival; it is also the creative force that shapes the individual's identity and freedom. It is a negation of given existence, distinguishing humans from animals. Through labor, humans assert their distinctiveness.

2. Philosophical contemplation on “Labor Creates Humanity”

To correctly understand “labor creates people”, it is essential first to distinguish human labor from the activities of animals. [1]On the surface, animals also engage in labor, such as birds building nests or bees collecting honey. However, fundamentally, these activities of animals are not true labor. They are instinctual activities governed by their physical needs. Genuine human labor is a process of self-negation. Negation implies creation—it is not replacing one given thing with another, but rather canceling the given for the sake of something that does not yet exist. It transforms the original given into something new, thereby creating human essence in the process of labor.

2.1. The negation in labor is a key factor in creating humanity

Marx, in his “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844”, revealed the fundamental difference between animal activity and human labor: "Animal production is one-sided, whereas human production is all-sided; animals produce only under the dominion of immediate physical need, while humans produce even when not under the domination of physical need, and only truly produce when not so dominated." Kojève, from an existentialist perspective, exposed the oppression and negation that humans face in labor: "Labor is always a 'forced' labor: man is compelled to work; man must use violence against his 'nature'." [2]

From the outset, labor is an activity compelled by necessity. Hegel revealed labor as a coerced activity within the structure of master-slave dialectics. Through labor, the 'slave' negates the animal nature. In Hegel's work, labor first 'appears' as the form of slave labor imposed by the first master on the first slave (who voluntarily submits to the master because he cannot escape servitude and labor, except by accepting death in battle or by suicide after defeat) in nature. In the process of labor, the slave initially did not become human, because they did not create their own humanity. However, when they created what belonged to their and did not have it before, and used force against their own nature. They created their own humanity in their labor, thus becoming human in the process.

From the perspective of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, negation in labor is not a passive force but a positive one that drives individual development. The negation in labor is the key factor in creating humanity. For the “slave”, labor is coerced and therefore inevitably negates their instinctual nature, self, and the given existence. At the same time, labor not only negates the given natural existence but also the human nature itself, thereby negating the “natural position” of humans. This negation in labor inevitably creates something that did not originally exist in nature. Therefore, labor is fundamentally a form of creation. It is this creation that enables labor to create a “new authentic genuine humans”.

2.2. The logical relationship between Hegel's “master-slave dialectic” and “labor creating humanity”

In Hegel's philosophical system, the master-slave dialectic is a profound and enlightening concept, and the logical relationship between master and slave is a historical philosophical issue. In his work "Phenomenology of Spirit," Hegel put forward the master-slave dialectic, through which Hegel elaborated the phenomenon of spirit or will, and how humans manifest themselves. Hegel posits that humans can only emerge within nature, evolving from a primitive animal state through struggle for recognition, thereby shaping themselves and establishing the

relationship between free individuals and those enslaved by them, namely the master and slave relationship.

Aristotle believed that humans are inherently either masters or slaves, a view similar to Hegel's. Hegel argued that initially, humans are either masters or slaves, but unlike Aristotle, he contended that these roles are chosen outcomes rather than innate statuses. [3] According to Aristotle, individuals are born either as masters or slaves, carrying an inherent nature of servility or freedom that is unchangeable. He viewed these natures as immutable, constituting two distinct and eternal species that cannot be altered or abolished. In contrast, Hegel believed that the distinction between master and slave exists only initially and can gradually be overcome over time. He argued that the identities of master and slave are not fixed or innate attributes, and individuals are not inherently born as either free or enslaved. Instead, through conscious and free actions, they shape themselves into either free individuals or those subjected to servitude.

When two sapiens meet, neither is a master, and neither is a slave. In the relationship between people, if one has concerns, they will fail and become a slave, while the person who is fearless and is even ready to sacrifice his life, then he will become the master. [4] The master becomes the master because they are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. When the master is ready to make this sacrifice, they no longer heed the dictates of life instinct. They transcend sapiens and generate free will, causing another to obey them. The initial distinction between master and slave exists, but over time, these roles can be reversed. This is because, according to Hegel, the identities of master and slave are not predetermined or innate attributes. A master can become a slave, and a slave can become a master. At the very beginning, they distinguish themselves as master and slave. However, the continued struggle between them can transform the master into a slave and the slave into a master. There is no reason for the identities of master and slave, and they cannot be inferred or predicted from their past. Therefore, whether one becomes a slave or a master in the future cannot be predetermined, but to be created by oneself, which is the result of man's free action. This is why people can discard innate servility and become free individuals, transforming themselves into free beings. Even if man is born in slavery, he can deny his natural servility. The essence of humanity is negation, and freedom arises through negation.

Therefore, we can realize that the main logical relationship between Hegel's "master-slave dialectic" and "labor creating humanity" is primarily reflected in the interweaving of freedom, negation and individual recognition. Closely linked with Hegel's "master-slave dialectic" is a deep understanding of labor. Combined with Marxist philosophical discourse on labor, particularly Marx's explication in "Das Kapital" where labor is viewed as humanity's essential activity and a means of creating value. Labor is not merely a process of producing material wealth but also a pathway for individuals to realize their self-worth and identity. Only human labor, is the source of all value. Through labor, human subjectivity is expressed, allowing individuals to progressively understand and surpass themselves in practice.

2.3. Transformation and freedom in labor

In Hegel's "master-slave dialectic," the master-slave relationship is not a one-way domination. Hegel believed that the slave could achieve freedom through labor. The entire history of the natural world, the entire movement of human existence, is the continual negation by the slave of their slave identity. Though labor belongs to the slave, their labor can elevate them to the level of freedom, transitioning from enslavement to liberty. The slave is free in labor because through labor, they negate their own nature. In this process, the slave shapes themselves into a human being, denying their innate nature and creating their humanity. Therefore, the slave's labor is considered free. At the same time, in this process, the slave labors for the master, but

also labors for themselves. The slave forsakes their own essence in labor, violently confronting their own nature, thus making themselves human. This is the slave's labor for themselves.

The master utilizes the labor of the slave, consuming the artificial products brought about by the slave's labor. Therefore, although the master does not labor themselves, they also undergo changes alongside the transformations in the world caused by the slave's labor. These changes in the world are not creations of the master, because they merely consume as recipients. They do not transform the world, but in the world they had what he needed. Unintentionally and under compulsion, they consume these surplus products created by the slave's labor. Consequently, from the slave, they receive a kind of training and education. If the master must use violence against their nature to consume these things provided by the slave, it means they are disciplined by the slave. Within the world created by the slave, the slave transforms themselves through the denial of their own nature. In this world, the master is thus transformed by the slave.

Hegel believed that the slave fundamentally transforms the natural world in which they live, creating a genuine technical world of humanity. [5]The master is thus transformed in this way, but this transformation is not of their own making. They are merely an enjoyer within the world that has been created. Their transformation is not active but passive, and they do not actively negate their essential existence. The environment is provided by people and is shaped by people. The slave transforms the world, so in this world transformed by the slave, the master was forced to transform. The transformation of the master is a kind of external force on him, not his internal force on him. The master is disciplined by the slave. If they must use violence against their nature to consume the products of the slave, they must change themselves. Otherwise, even if they are the master, they cannot adapt to this world. So, from this perspective, the master endures history but does not create history. The true creators of history are the masses of people. This is why Marx said that the people creates history, the people creates the world. Because the master merely passively accepts transformation, while the slave consciously, actively, and freely transforms the world. In other words, the labor of the slave is the realization of their conception, and their conception is something that has never existed. The free master is already unified, and they no longer actively negate themselves. The slave can actively negate themselves. When the masters are killed by slaves and the slaves become universal and uniform free citizens. The history comes to what Hegel called it "the end", because all people become citizens of the state, the wise, and no longer deny themselves.

3. The contemporary value revelation of "Labor Creates Humanity"

In Hegel's dialectic of "master and slave" and the concept of "labor creates humanity," we witness a profound and rich philosophical system.[6] The logical relationship between these two concepts intersects deeply on the levels of negation, freedom, and individual recognition. Labor is not only a means to create social wealth but also a path to improve individual self-awareness and continual liberation. Through an intertwined analysis of these concepts, we can better understand the dynamic evolution of individual and societal relationships in human history, as well as how labor has become a crucial element driving human progress.

In labor, humans continually negate their own nature, creating a humanity that did not previously exist. Simultaneously, through labor, humans create the world and fundamentally transform the natural environment in which they live. Human labor is not only for his survival needs, but also for things beyond his survival needs, that is, pure honorary labor, the desire of desire, and other abstract things. Only through such human labor can true innovation in a meaningful sense be achieved. Thus, only humans can transcend their natural essence, drive technological development, and propel societal progress.

"Labor Creates Humanity" reveals the role of labor in the origin of human beings, which is of great significance for respecting labor. Workers have contributed a lot to the development of the society. In the new era, we should vigorously carry forward the spirit of labor, carry out labor education, give full play to people's subjective initiative, constantly innovate theories, and respect labor.

In Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach," he discussed the transformation of humans and their environment, as well as the reciprocal transformation between environment and humans. [7]Marx identified a problem that old materialism couldn't resolve: humans create their environment, which in turn educates humans, forming a closed loop that fundamentally prevents development and progress. This dilemma was insurmountable for old materialism. Marxist dialectics broke through this by asserting that humans first transcend the humanity they create, then proceed to create the world. The revolutionary practice in the middle link between environmental transformation and human development breaks this closed loop, overcoming the old materialist impasse. From this, we understand that labor creates society, and the labor process is a concentrated expression of people's active transformation of the external environment in the process of historical development. Marx stated, "Man creates environment, and in turn, environment creates man." Engels, in "The Part played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man" used the example of inhabitants in regions like Mesopotamia, describing their deforestation of their forests for resources led to catastrophic rain and flooding, resulting in the destruction of their homes. From this, he concluded that humanity cannot blindly destroy nature but must approach it with the correct attitude, understand the laws of its development, and properly handle the mutual relationship between humans and nature. On this basis, we can realize that natural resources are the indispensable premise and guarantee of human labor creation. Only by combining labor with nature can we create rich wealth. Human society evolves continuously from lower to higher stages through the ongoing promotion of labor and harmonious coexistence with nature. Therefore, deeply understanding the dialectical connection between human development and the natural environment, and to establish the concept of ecological civilization development of respecting and protecting nature in labor, which holds profound practical significance.

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