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HEGEL'S CRITIQUE OF ABSTRACT LABOR

1. Introduction

This paper is part of a larger one. In the larger paper, I develop two related arguments. First, I argue that Hegel's concept of abstract labor denotes the specific kind of repetitive and mechanical labor undertaken in the nineteenth-century factory. For Hegel, the abstract character of labor is distinct from many other aspects of modern labor with which it is often associated: the division of labor, the alienation of labor, the intellectualization of labor, and the orientation of labor towards the production of a surplus for exchange in a market. While these understandings of abstract labor indeed capture essential elements of factory labor, none of them lead to the blockages of the development of worker's ethical subjectivity that Hegel understands to be the necessary result of abstract labor. This brings me to my second argument: that Hegel criticizes abstract factory labor *because* it leads to the deadening (*Abstumpfung*) of the worker through the deforming of her ethical subjectivity or *Bildung*, the central locus of civil society's claim to rationality. By understanding Hegel in this way, we can, I suggest, render more intelligible why Hegel believes machine automation to be the proper solution to the problems posed by abstract labor.

In this shorter paper, I will focus only on first part of the argument: what is Hegel's concept of labor and how does it differ from the other characteristics of the modern labor process?

2. Hegel's Concept of Abstract Labor

The concept of labor (*Arbeit*) takes on several meanings in Hegel's philosophy. We can sort these roles into three categories: (1) the *activity* or general form of labor; (2) the objectivity and sociality of labor in modern economic life; (3) and the conceptuality of labor or labor in thought—the labor of the negative, the concept, spirit, and so on. While these three meanings of labor in Hegel's writings bear a family resemblance with one another and undoubtedly contain some degree of unity and interconnectedness, I will limit my analysis exclusively to Hegel's treatment of the directly economic type of labor found in his mature social theory.

Let us now turn to the central focus of my argument: Hegel's concept of abstract labor (*abstrakte Arbeit*). Hegel devotes an entire paragraph to this concept in both *Philosophy of Right* and the *Encyclopedia*, which I quote in full:

> The universal and objective aspect of work consists, however, in that process of *abstraction* which confers a specific character on means and needs and hence also on production, so giving rise to the *division of labour*. Through this division, the work of the individual becomes *simpler*, so that his skill at his abstract work becomes greater, as does the volume of his output. At the same time, this abstraction of skill and means makes the *dependence* and *reciprocity* of human beings in the satisfaction of their other needs complete and entirely necessary. Furthermore, the abstraction of production makes work increasingly *mechanical*, so that the human being is eventually able to step aside and let a *machine* take his place. (PR §198)

> Labour too thus becomes more abstract, and leads on the one hand by its uniformity to ease of labour and to increased production, on the other hand to restriction to *one* skill, and thus to a more unconditional dependence on the social system. The skill itself becomes in this way mechanical, and develops to the point where the machine can take the place of human labour. (EM §526)

For Hegel, abstract labor is the structure of labor typical of needs-satisfaction in a modern market-driven economy. Abstract labor it characterizes, for Hegel, the "universal and objective" aspect of modern labor processes, characterized in effect by a sophisticated division of labor, wide-scale interdependency, and an increasing mechanization of the labor process. Thus, with the concept of abstract labor Hegel designates something more specific than just the social division of labor or the particularization and specialization required for success and competitive productivity in the marketplace, a kind of labor we may call *divided labor*. Divided forms of labor are something akin to a subset of abstract labor: they engender a highly adaptive labor process in which each element tends towards its full discretization and independence, separating both the raw material and the laborer from the unified final product. So understood, divided labor stands in contrast to many other kinds of labor such as the artisan's craftsmanship, the peasant's agricultural labor, and the bureaucrat's intellectual labor. However, the notion of divided labor does not capture the subject-forming aspects of abstract labor that Hegel wishes to highlight.

While I cannot defend the claim here, Hegel's reconstruction of the market economy gives priority to the processes of ethical subject-formation that it engenders. This priority of subject-

formation in Hegel's problematization of modern labor is evident in his distinction between mere poverty and the dehumanized rabble: "Poverty in itself does not reduce people to a rabble; a rabble is created only by the *disposition* associated with poverty, by inward rebellion against the rich, against society, the government, etc." (PR §244A, emphasis mine). In the case of the rabble, the heart of the problem lies in the specific kind of *subjectivity* produced by their position within the social structure. It is for this reason that Hegel equally problematizes the luxurious rich rabble alongside the indignant poor one.[1] Likewise, the educational aspect of labor takes precedence over its economic functions in Hegel's account, making it no surprise when Hegel emphasizes the subject-deadening effects of abstract labor over the many other social problems this labor generates.[2]

These social implications of abstract labor have been helpfully laid out by Norbert Waszek. In his study of the Scottish Enlightenment's influence on Hegel's social theory, Waszek argues that Hegel understands the tension between abstract labor's potential for damaging subjectivity, on the one hand, and the efficiencies gained through divided labor, on the other, as a "two-edged weapon."[3] The spread of abstract labor in society brings many benefits to its members, both for their material well-being and for their intersubjective freedom. The division of labor, a consequence of abstract labor in Hegel's eyes, simplifies the tasks of labor and thereby increases the skill of each laborer at their limited task, and thus ultimately increases the overall productive output. Moreover, economic-productive interdependency becomes "complete and entirely necessary," solidifying the grounds for mutual recognition among workers in civil society. Finally, by simplifying labor tasks and demanding continual increases in productivity, abstract labor also furnishes the possibility that deadening living labor may be replaced by machines in the future. These are the beneficial promises of abstract labor.

However, abstract labor also poses several threats to the realization of social freedom. In particular, Hegel identifies three fundamental and wide-reaching social problems associated with the prevalence of abstract labor, which reappear throughout Hegel's writings on political economy: (1) "short-term economic disruptions" resulting in unemployment and poverty; (2) the

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[1] For a discussion of these two forms of rabble see Frank Ruda, *Hegel's Rabble*, chapters 4–6.
[2] Waszek, "The Division of Labor," 71f, Bartonek, "Labour Against Capitalism?," 115ff, and Cesarale, "Hegel's Notion of Abstract Labor," 93ff.
[3] Norbert Waszek, "The Division of Labor: From the Scottish Enlightenment to Hegel," *The Owl of Minerva* 15, no. 1 (1983): 72. See also Norbert Waszek, *The Scottish Enlightenment and Hegel's Account of 'Civil Society'* (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), chapters 4 and 6. See also Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, 240.

furthering of social inequality; and (3) the deadening (*Abstumpfung*) of the worker's subjectivity as well as that of her community.[4] Importantly, Hegel understands these problems to be structural, systematic, and necessary results of the modern labor process; following the English economists whom he read closely, Hegel knew that such problems ought not to be a mere accidental effects of the productive system but their as necessary results. Taken together, these issues demonstrate that Hegel was aware of many of the problems immanent to the nascent civil society emerging in the Western Europe at the beginning of the acutely nineteenth century.[5] As we have said, however, only the issue of *Abstumpfung* pertains to the subject-forming effects of the changing labor process, and so it is this issue which remains ethically central in Hegel's rational reconstruction of modern society.

3. Misunderstandings of Abstract Labor

An adequate treatment of the abstract labor's *Abstumpfung* requires that we have understand what Hegel means by abstract labor in the first place. In the prior section, we began such a characterization from a positive direction. We can now further this characterization from a negative direction, that is to say, by rectify the host of misunderstandings to which the concept of abstract labor gives rise. Perhaps the most common misinterpretation of Hegel's notion of abstract labor is the Marxist one, which attempts to discover in it one of Marx's concepts: (analytically) abstract labor, complex labor, and alienated labor, all of which are decidedly *not* Hegel's concept of abstract labor.

For Marx, abstract labor refers to the labor process conceived from the perspective of its production of exchange-value as opposed to its production of use-value. Thus, Marx writes that abstract labor is "the general character as expenditure of human labor-power in the abstract"[6] or the "common quality of being human labour in general."[7] Abstract labor is, in Marx's sense, the common element that unifies all the different kinds of particularized concrete labor. Thus, while Marx and Hegel agree that abstract labor is characteristic of the capitalist mode of production insofar as it orients labor around the production of exchange-value, Hegel's abstract labor differs from Marx's for two principle reasons. First, Hegel's concept of abstract labor cannot be

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[4] Ibid., 72. On the continuity of these problems in Hegel's economic thinking see Waszek, "The Division of Labor," 56 and Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, 98f.
[5] Cf. Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, ix, 94.
[6] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (Penguin, 1992), 308.
[7] Ibid., 142. See also Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Penguin, 1993), 296f.

separated from the formation of ethical subjectivity, understood as encompassing the needs and social relations of individuals. Abstract labor both constitutes and challenges these aspects of subject-formation through its influence on the laborer's *Bildung*. Second, Hegel's concept of abstract labor refers to a particular kind of production process—modern industrial manufacturing and, the trade labor of the petite bourgeoisie, and all else that belongs to the "*estate of trade and industry*"—and *not* simply the quality of being labor in general, modern or otherwise, as in Marx (PR §204).

Related to Marx's concept of abstract labor is the infamous 'reduction problem' found at the beginning of *Capital*: the operation of reducing, for the purpose of analysis, all complex labor to its social average or to the amount of socially necessary simple labor.[8] This, too, however, is not Hegel's concept of abstract labor. As Hegel's discussions of political economy demonstrate, he certainly agrees with Marx that abstract labor is open to analysis (especially the discovery of universal laws working behind the backs of its undertakers) in a way unprecedented by previous organizations of labor and social need (PR §189R). However, this view of abstract labor fails to recognize that, for Hegel, not all labor in civil society is abstract in the social and ethical sense that he is concerned with; for Hegel, there exists labor which is not abstract labor, not so for Marx. The concrete labor of the peasantry and other agricultural laborers represented by Hegel's "*substantial* or immediate estate," despite holding an important role in civil society and being subject to discoverable economic laws and even to capitalistic industrial practices, *opposes* the abstract labor processes of the second "*formal* estate" that Hegel sees as more essential to modern civil society (PR §201). Thus, in his theory of the estates Hegel carves out a sphere of modern civil society that, while not appearing as this sphere's distinguishing mark, is nonetheless uncolored by abstract labor as far as the ethicality of its way of living is concerned:

> In our times, the [agricultural] economy, too, is run in a reflective manner, like a factory, and it accordingly takes on a character like that of the second estate and opposed to its own character of naturalness. Nevertheless, this first estate will always retain the patriarchal way of life and the substantial disposition associated with it. The human being reacts here with immediate feeling as he accepts what he receives; he thanks God for it and lives in faith and confidence that this goodness will continue. What he receives is enough for him; he uses it up, for it

[8] Ibid., 135.

> will be replenished. This is a simple disposition which is not concerned with the acquisition of wealth; it may also be described as that of the *old nobility*, which consumed whatever it had. In this estate, the main part is played by nature, and human industry is subordinate to it. In the second estate, however, it is the understanding itself which is essential, and the products of nature can be regarded only as raw materials. (PR §203A)

Since through the estates labor becomes correlated with a way of living and a particular subjective disposition, i.e., a certain kind of education and habit, the differences in disposition found among members of the three estates ultimately represent the ethical and educational differences among the three corresponding labor processes. Thus, for Hegel, the existence of the agricultural and universal estates indicates that abstract labor is just one out of many ways of laboring in the *ethical* and *educative* sense, despite Hegel's admittance that at least the former sphere "takes on a character like that of the second estate" and thus begins to incorporate aspects of abstract labor in a *descriptive* sense. It is for this reason why Hegel's concept of abstract labor can neither be the commonality in which all forms of labor participate in (i.e., Marx's concept of abstract labor oriented around the production of surplus-value in the capitalist mode of production) or the analytic prerogative to qualitatively reduce all labor to some quantity of a unified and simple labor process (i.e., Marx's reduction to simple socially necessary labor).

Finally, Hegel's forthright depiction of the negative ethical consequences of abstract labor (its dire working conditions, its inevitable poverty and social inequality, its separation of the laborer from the final product, its deadening of the laborer's subjectivity and physical well-being, and so on) has led some interpreters to read his concept of abstract labor as a prototype of the young Marx's concept of alienated labor.[9] While this interpretation has the benefit of correctly conceiving of Hegel's concept of abstract labor as referring to a specific kind of labor process and its normative consequences, it fails to recognize that the ethical problems Hegel associates with abstract labor are decidedly *not* those of alienation critique. In a modernity in which "self-consciousness [has become] infinitely reflected into itself," alienation, understood by Hegel as self-externalization, is *constitutive* of ethical subjectivity as opposed to the source of its deficiency. Quite simply and as our discussion of social need has made clear, for the mature

[9] Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Penguin, 1992), 326–30.

Hegel of the *Philosophy of Right* there simply is no authentic subject from which the laboring subject could be estranged from. The 'mineness' of all social need and desire, even that of the most sinister origin (e.g., profitability for the few), excludes the possibility of ever discovering a true desire lying beneath the surface of social appearance as Marx's alienation critique demands. Moreover, while we have not discussed the meaning of labor as spiritual activity as developed in the *Phenomenology of Spirt*, it is worth noting that labor's significance at that level is precisely that of a spiritual self-externalization and alienation that is constitutive of *Bildung* and subjective freedom. Following Avineri, we can say that while for Marx the split between economic and political aspects of subjectivity produced by modern industrial labor is "the measure of the laborer's alienation in modern society," for Hegel this alienation "is the basis of his integration into it."[10] Abstract labor for Hegel cannot be a means of Marxian alienation critique, as his view of modern human subjectivity excludes even the possibility of an unalienated subjectivity, a presupposition upon which Marx's alienation critique depends.

Outside of a narrowly Marxist framework, another common misinterpretation of abstract labor takes it as a synonym for what is today called intellectual labor, immaterial labor, or cultural labor.[11] It should be clear, however, that this too cannot be Hegel's concept of abstract labor. For one, the very possibility of machine automation demonstrates that abstract labor cannot be another name for intellectual labor, since the latter is by its very nature the kind of labor that resists automation so far as its genesis is concerned. Second, Hegel explicitly contrasts the labor of the culturally educated and intellectual class, i.e., the universal labor of the third estate, from the abstract labor of the second estate of trade and industry. Finally, while certain kinds of immaterial labor have their place in civil society such as trade and the exchange of commodities in the estate of commerce, Hegel sees abstract labor as being chiefly constituted by mass manufacturing and craftsmanship (PR §204). It could only be anachronistic to equate Hegel's concept of abstract labor with that of immaterial labor which predominates in our contemporary economies.

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[10] Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, 104n62.

[11] The notion of *immaterial labor* has been popularized in large part by the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, most notably in *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2003) and *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

The final misunderstanding of abstract labor that we will consider is that of Frederick Neuhouser.[12] Neuhouser argues that we ought to interpret Hegel's concept of abstract labor as primarily referring to the specific *social relations* that laborers have with each other in modern civil society.[13] Furthermore, Neuhouser correctly argues that the social relations of production are abstract because they are determined from in principle by the exchange of goods and money in the marketplace; abstract labor is undertaken for the satisfaction of the abstract social needs of others or need in general as opposed to, say, my own immediate purposes or the commodity's use-value. Thus, in summarizing his view on abstract labor, Neuhouser writes that "the point here is not simply that the fruits of one's labor can in fact be exchanged for the products of others but rather that production is carried out with, and determined from the very beginning by, the conscious intention to do so."[14] In other words, labor is abstract when it is undertaken primarily for the purposes of exchange, i.e., undertaken for the production of surplus-value instead of use-value.

By understanding abstract labor as describing a particular set of social relations in which members see each other exclusively in terms of their abilities as need-satisfiers instead of understanding it as describing industrial labor processes, Neuhouser unsurprisingly finds nothing ethically objectionable about abstract labor. That labor is oriented in the first instance towards the valorization process and the satisfaction of market-mediated needs does not, on its own, raise any ethical issues, such as the deadening of the laborer. However, it is precisely the ethical neutrality of Neuhouser's conception of abstract labor which proves that it cannot be Hegel's. First, while Hegel's use of the term "abstract" indeed intends to capture the structural influence of exchange on the labor process and consequently on the *Bildung* of the laborers, it cannot be reduced to or even summarized by this meaning. The issues arising from abstract labor of concern to Hegel are not merely the result of wide-scale exchange. Hegel understands abstract labor as instead essentially involving a machine-like work process undertaken in atomistic isolation from any kind of intelligible or rational end. The individualistic ends realized within the marketplace are only "*abstractly*" universal (PR §208) and without "actual universality" (PR §207A) in part because they lack a rational teleology. And, as we have seen, these abstract ends

[12] Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory,* 155–65.
[13] Ibid., 161f.
[14] Ibid., 163.

and social needs around which production is oriented primarily serve to reproduce these very conditions of exchange and to benefit the few who are to profit the most. Abstract labor therefore threatens the *Bildung* of its undertaker both insofar as it forces the laborer to take up physically and spiritually damaging processes and insofar as it excludes the possibility of achieving one's genuinely universal ends, two threats to the laborer's *Bildung* to which Neuhouser's view of abstract labor is blind. Second, Neuhouser's interpretation is ultimately inconsistent, or at least in tension, with the problematic nature Hegel ascribes to abstract labor. If Hegel really understood abstract labor as posing no ethical threats, as principally characterizing the structuring role of exchange without the intrusion of any serious ethical concerns, then his insistent concerns over its potential to generate wide-spread social pathologies through worker deadening would be unintelligible. For Hegel, the deadening of the laborer is not a contingent flaw in the application of abstract labor, but inherent within the very logic of abstract labor itself. Thus, just as in the case of poverty, the issues arising from abstract labor cannot be mitigated by restrictions and checks imposed externally by other social institutions, leaving Hegel with a less pleasant view of abstract labor than Neuhouser's interpretation suggests. For these reasons, we ought to reject Neuhouser's neutral and exchange-based view of abstract labor and adopt a labor-substantial view in its place. Only by attributing to Hegel a substantial conception of abstract labor, one which is grounded in the subject-debilitating conditions of factory work, can we do justice to his critical attitude towards it.

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