

A Symposium in an Alienated Space—Where Karl Marx Met Plato

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You could not have found anyone better than me to recount the outer-space talk, as I participated in it myself. It all started with outer-space aliens abducting Karl Marx, saying they needed him. My boss therefore sent me to deal with the issue, and I chose to assist him, helping these outer-space friends lead good lives, with the aid of Plato.

The talk took place in a small room inside a huge factory. Mr. Xavier, who claimed to represent the workers' unions of his planet, broke the ice.

XAVIER (through the interpreter): As you can see, here on our planet we are having lots and lots of factories in which thousands of workers participate in the assembly line. For three months we have been asking for better wages and welfare and going on strikes, holding our economy up, but none of our employers has taken any action, which is why we need someone with bold arguments to help us. We asked for Marx's help, and thus he's here. Karl, would you please explain to them how you have helped us?

MARX: My pleasure. As you know, Smithian economics was a good attempt in raising the living standards of a planet through division of labour.

But surely his followers have not made thorough enough consideration of what consequences this would bring on the workers. Here is what I mean. Workmen nowadays are reduced to the condition of a commodity (464). They depend on wages for a living, making them subordinate to the wealthy capitalists (460–464). These “buyers” base such “price” purely on market supply and demand, implying that an excessive supply would render workers unemployed, ending up in misery (460). To make matters worse, under extensive division of labour, these highly specialised workers have to suffer most. When the country is getting poorer, their employers, earning less profits, would deduct their wages, while in the case of increasing wealth, they have to overwork in order to have a gain in wages (464), with freedom deprived (460). Frankly, these men’s fates are hardly in their own hands.

We therefore would ask for an explanation for all this turmoil. The answer I came up with is the alienation of labour under capitalism (467). Without this mode of production, humans, unlike machines, lead *species-lives*, which are different from those of animals. We treat ourselves as universal beings (468). We do not produce in one direction but universally (469). Not only do we produce for physical needs, but we produce in order to enhance productivity (such as machines to produce machines), and more importantly works in natural sciences and arts, as we can utilise our reasoning and beauty-detecting eyes, the characteristic that distinguishes our life activities from other animals’. Even more than that, a new, psychologically subjective world is produced, differing from the objective world. Labouring is only our means to objectify the production process (465), through which we understand the importance and necessity of our existence, and thus see ourselves not only mentally but also in the real, sensuous world.

Nevertheless, with Adam Smith's philosophy, labour is alienated. Goods produced from the workers' labour, for example, no longer belong to them (467) but belong to the rich boss of the bosses that hires them (471). Nature is also alienated from us the workers, as it no longer constitutes a part of human life and activity in our pursuit of knowledge (468). *Species-lives* are also alienated, because our production life, originally involving consciousness, is turned into only a means of satisfying our needs (469), since thinking becomes redundant while doing repetitive, barbarous work. This therefore alienates the *species-life* from humans, making it merely our private, individual life (Marx 469), when we are not at work. Moreover, workers are also alienated from each other, because the process of production for, say, a shirt, is divided into stages that are completely unrelated to each other. In a watch factory, say, those working on the minute hand need not communicate with those inserting the hour hand. Together with the fact that wages depend on productivity, workers are forced to concentrate on their own little part. These consequences that follow from the alienated labour is exactly the reason why factory workers are barely alive or they do not even exist.

XAVIER: You are right, Mr. Marx. Your teaching has allowed us to rethink what we, as humans, ought to be. Detesting our bosses that look only for higher profits and treat us like dead capital, we captivated the manager of this factory three days ago, making him work in factories like every of us. It was not until Karl's lecturing that he eventually was willing to agree on the maximum work hours and pegging the wages and profits, as well as establishing a bargaining mechanism for the wage rise, so that union leaders like us can change the miserable fate of workers.

ME: Thank you, Mr. Marx, for allowing me to rethink human nature, and I see why you have abducted him, Mr. Xavier, although I do not quite approve of your resorting to violence. Much have you talked about how workers do not exist as humans, I do not see you have addressed on how they can be transformed back to humans, so that workers become less alienated. Believing that Plato can inspire us how to do so, I have brought him here.

PLATO: Mr. Marx, I cannot agree more on your claim that humans behave in rational motives, and humans can exist through reasoning. Nonetheless, have you thought that humans have various means through which they exist, beside production?

MARX: Like how? Can you explain what you mean, great philosopher?

PLATO: Love! The alienation of things you mentioned from workers can be ultimately regained and returned to workers through love.

MARX: That's an interesting point. But why do we need love?

PLATO: Good question. You said workers pursue their existence through production, but don't you think that the existence of humans does not last forever?

MARX: Of course not, as only so-called gods are immortal, but these creatures are only results of the confusion of human reason (472).

PLATO: Well, we as Athenians do not condemn all gods, but let's leave this issue to be dealt with later, as this certainly does not affect our conclusion.

Will you agree that all mortal creatures chase after immortality? Animals reproduce even if they have to suffer a lot, and certainly treasure their offsprings, so do us (134; pt. 207b).

MARX: Certainly. We create life with life, and we are conscious in why we do that (469).

PLATO: And it is through love that we pursue immortality. As everything can change, nothing is immortal except the ultimate good and beauty, and hence in love, we chase after ultimate beauty (137–138; pt. 210–212b).

MARX: That's agreeable.

PLATO: This is why I'd advise workers as well as capitalists to pursue love and beauty, through climbing up the ladder of love, an idea my teacher Socrates proposed in a symposium with his friends (138; pt. 211c). To start with, love, like most of us imagine, always starts with that towards one person. We as Athenians advocate the love between a man and a boy, as they are willing to die for each other (105; pt. 180a). If these lovers are allowed to work together inside the factory, then certainly they will be less alienated from each other.

XAVIER: I see your point, but this would require homosexual love to be promoted on this planet, which is something the convention here does not permit.

PLATO: Should you not want your society be reformed, allow women to work in your factories! As I see, you have not done so, leaving many women at home

to take care of their children. I would suggest that they work together with their husbands. That being said, this is still love in the least sense. As one man falls in love with a woman for a longer time, he will climb up the ladder and sense that what he loves is the two of them staying together. When the lover soon finds that the existence of either his or her beloved is not permanent, he will then turn to something that lasts longer, the physical beauty. He will then sense that the beauty of his beloved is actually shared by many things else, and therefore will fall in love with the physical beauty of all.

MARX: You are right. In our *species-life*, we can see what is beautiful out of the entire sensuous aspect of life, and we reproduce it in our drawings, sculptures and photographs—I mean, the arts.

PLATO: You are right, Karl, and the act of producing artworks is a human behaviour that the lover would ultimately love, as this is the mental beauty of human, which lasts even longer. If the workers start to love the idea of contributing to the production of certain commodity, do you think they will be proud of themselves and less alienated from the process of labour? If capitalists love the workers' participation in work as a human act, don't you think they will start to care about them?

MARX: Yes, for both questions. If the workers and capitalists see the beauty in the human behaviour of production, these would certainly be invincible conclusions. Your point is surely worth thinking about, as this can solve the problem of income disparity problem as well.

PLATO: The more he falls in love, the more the lover would see that what he in fact pursues in love is the beauty in subjects of study.

MARX: I see what you mean. Pursuing knowledge in, for example, the sciences of the plants and animals, is the most beautiful human act.

PLATO: You are absolutely right. Don't you think a worker will regain his individual life even at work if he reaches this step in the ladder of love? With such knowledge, he or she will be able to search for ways to improve production skills and increase production speed at work.

MARX: And he will definitely be less alienated from his *species-life*.

PLATO: Exactly. And ultimately, one will study the subject in search of truth, the ultimate beauty.

XAVIER: Yes, the love of wisdom. I am really inspired today with Plato's ideas. Could you stay and help us?

PLATO: Of course, but with Karl's help, as I have to be familiarised with factory operation, which he is more learned at.

ME: And together you will produce a better society.

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Teacher’s comment:

Yiu Shing’s paper demonstrates purposeful reflection and independence of thinking.

In the debate Yiu Shing sets up, there is evidence that Yiu Shing is able to deal with not only the strengths but the limitations of the texts to shed light on a broader inquiry in the idea of “human” and “humanity.” While one or two interpretations and points of comparison may be debatable because of ambiguous contextualisation, Yiu Shing has made a conscious effort to offer reasons for his case, which is exemplary of honest and responsible thinking. Yiu Shing also makes consistent use of vivid scenarios that adds persuasive power to his writing. I wish Yiu Shing well in his future intellectual interests and endeavours. (Yeung Yang)