

Disclaimer

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Ladder towards Freedom

TSE Wai Yi

Biomedical Sciences, Wu Yee Sun College

Tina was wandering around the campus, feeling like everyone around was staring at her, teasing her. She sat down at a quiet corner. A stranger sat down beside her, and said, “You look tired, had you spent all night studying?”

“Yes... I need to outcompete my classmates and graduate with first honour.”

“Wow, sounds like you're really into studying. But don't you spend time doing things you enjoy? Like playing guitar... or drawing? You must have an interest, right?”

“No, interests are just a waste of time. All I want to do now is to study well, get a good grade, then enter a nice company after graduation, in which I'll be fairly paid.”

“What a meaningless life! You're giving away your species essence in return for good grades and fine payment? How is your life different from that of an animal!”

“I don't see the problem. I need money to live, and a good grade to enter a fine company where I can achieve that, it's just that simple!”

So, that man—Marx started talking about his views on labour.

“Labour, in the nature of human, should be universal and free, which is what distinguishes man from animals—animals like birds and ants produce only for survival, for their immediate needs or those of their young, such as building nests and formicaries. Men, as a conscious being, produce universally and freely even when they’re free from any physical need. (Marx 175–176) A father would build a swing in his backyard for his children; people would bake a cake for birthday celebration; a child would make a clay sculpture for fun... In such kind of productions, the nature of the producer is expressed in the product, the object produced is therefore the objectification of men’s species-life. (176)

Now look at what you’re doing! You’ve abandoned your universality and freedom, putting yourself in the production process named ‘studying’ to obtain ‘academic results’ as a reward. Studying now becomes a kind of wage labour, which you and many other people think is the only possible mode of living. But are you truly living as a free man when everything is alienated from you?

When you study for good grades and thus for entering a good company, your action is not for expressing yourself, but for the benefit of the company that you are going to serve. This makes your act of production alienated from you. (173) And as you are not doing labour freely and universally, but instead doing it in return for grades and wages, you are doing labour like an animal, making you alienated from your species-life. (176) Furthermore, by repeating machine-like labour—reading and reciting, you transform yourself from a man to an abstract activity and a stomach, which is increasingly dependent on the school as it is them who give you what you desire. When you become so highly dependent on the school for your existence, you must compete with others—other machines on the assembly line. Competition becomes the only interaction between you and your classmates, for only

the ones with better performances would get a good grade. So now, you're even alienated from other people. (176–177) I suppose you don't get along with your classmates, do you?

You turned yourself into a commodity, going through all those processes called education that make you a qualified product, then being put onto the shelf, waiting for your buyer. Alienation then goes on throughout your career as you repeatedly apply the skills you learnt for the benefit of your company in return for wages.”

Tina, “Indeed, part of your saying is correct. Maybe that's why I'm always anxious about social relations—I am too dependent on the academic grades that I consider my classmates as hostile competitors. But what about the knowledge I learnt? Just like what our teachers always say: knowledge is our only property that can't be stolen or taken away. As I am also gaining knowledge while studying, I'm not totally alienated from my action of production and species-life, am I?”

Marx, “Talking about the possession of knowledge, don't those advertisements always use slogans like “this new smartphone ‘possesses’ the latest technology”? But in fact, those technologies that they possess are not used for their own good, but enjoyed by you—the user who paid for them. You're just like a smartphone: most of the knowledge you learnt—those professional knowledge and skills, become a tool used by the company hiring you, but not by you as a human being. This is getting increasingly serious in the current career-orientated education system, with most people only valuing employment rate and salary level just like you—scholastic subjects that trigger students' thinking, like philosophy and mathematics, are less preferred by people; while ‘practical’ degrees like medicine, business, actuarial science and physiotherapy are honoured as ‘God's degree’. They guarantee future employment and salary, and mostly

emphasise on specific skills and knowledge that are deemed useful in one's professional career, instead of focusing on stimulating thinking. As you make use of the professional knowledge you learnt from these career-oriented degrees, it's your company that benefits from it. That led to the fourth alienation: alienation of product. What you produce does not belong to you, but by the one who pay you. Of course, you would obtain some beneficial knowledge in school as well, but those are, after all, just a very small proportion of what you study."

Tina, "I get your point, but... I could still live happily despite the alienation, so I guess I'm okay with it."

Marx, "Let me explain it in a simpler way. In Buddhism, a person is composed by five inter-related skandhas—form, feelings, perceptions, impulses and consciousness. (一行禪師 144) For instance, we must first see an object with our eyes, which is part of our form, before determining that it is blue in colour with our perception, and thus feels that it is beautiful. Only then will we generate the impulse to touch the object, while consciousness allows us to notice the process I mentioned above. Only when the five skandhas are intact, a person exists."

Tina, "Interesting."

Marx, "Now, imagine a factory worker paid to make pins. Under division of labour, he is only asked to do one task—to cut the wire into segments of 3 cm. (Smith 136) Normally, we generate our own impulses based on our first three skandhas. But the worker himself doesn't know the full process of pin production, so he wouldn't know what to do with the wire by his self-generated impulses. So in this case, his impulse is programmed by the factory owner, who told him to cut the wire into pieces of 3 cm.

As I just said, the five skandhas are all inter-beings that compose a person, so controlling the worker's impulse would mean controlling him

as a whole—Based on the instructions of the owner, the worker sees the wire with form, determines that that is 3 cm with perception, feels that it is the right place to cut it, and then his impulses told him to cut it. The worker sold himself to the owner during his working hours. And during that time period, he is not ‘him’. The only skandha left under his control while working is his consciousness—he is aware of what he has done, but it is more like... watching a programmed printer printing out document. Just like I said, he is alienated.

I bet you won’t become a factory worker, but even if you graduate with first honour, you would still be working with your skandhas being programmed according to your past studies and the protocols given by your company—they tell you what you should do, and what you shouldn’t, so that their profit is maximised. You don’t have the right to reject, because you depend on the salary given by your company to survive. So, the longer you study or work, the less time you remain as yourself. Eventually, you spend a larger proportion of your life not being yourself. Then, is that still your life? Are we still free men?”

Tina, “Alright, I get it. But let’s be realistic, in this modern world, you need money to buy food, rent a house, pay for electricity... To survive, you must earn money by selling yourself to others. Otherwise, you won’t even get to survive, let alone living freely! By sacrificing part of your time working for others, you can at least enjoy a moment of freedom after work. I appreciate your arguments, but you are too much of an idealist.”

Marx wanted to continue arguing Tina, that was when a drunk man interrupted.

Socrates, “Dear lady, I just heard you call this man here an idealist. May I presume that you think of yourself as a realistic person?”

Tina, “Yes.”

Socrates, “Please tell me, then, what is ‘realistic’?”

Tina, “To accept things as they are in fact, and to make decisions based on them instead of on unlikely hopes.”

Socrates, “Which points do you think, from your discussion just now, are facts? And which of them are unlikely hopes?”

Tina, “The fact is that people can only survive through selling their labour and knowledge to employers, working for them in return for salary. While Marx’s ideal mode of freedom, with people producing universally and freely all day without caring about salary, is not a possible suggestion.”

Socrates, “So you think that his idea is totally unrealistic, and is totally impossible to be achieved?”

Tina thought for a moment, and replied, “Yes. After all, the society needs productivity. We can’t just free everyone from their work and ask the government to afford their living, right? As said by Adam Smith, the annual labour of every nation is the fund which originally supplies it with all the necessaries and conveniences of life which it annually consumes. (131) The things we consume must be produced by someone, so someone must take up those jobs even if that derives them from their species-life. Of course we want to produce freely and universally without being constrained by waged labour, but if none of us does those essential labour, we’ll lose everything that we’re enjoying—food, electricity, even this very bench we’re now sitting on... The current system is the best and only possible one.”

Socrates, “That’s reasonable. But isn’t that just the current situation?”

Tina, “What do you mean?”

Socrates, “You made a ‘realistic’ decision to spend time on studying, aiming to enter a good company, is that correct?”

Tina, “Yes.”

Socrates, “And you are not going to work in a company today or tomorrow, you’re only going to start your career after graduation, which is in the future. You are also likely to continue working for decades until retirement, which is pretty far from now. So your decision-making is to prepare for a pretty far future, right?”

Tina, “That’s correct.”

Socrates, “But don’t you agree that things change over time?”

Tina, “Yes, changes are inevitable.”

Socrates, “As there are changes over time, the ‘facts’ that you take into consideration today might not be applicable to the future that you’re planning for. If you are to make a realistic decision for your future, shouldn’t you also consider the possible situations in the future?”

Tina, “Alright, I admit that my definition on ‘realistic’ isn’t perfect. But regarding this matter on economic system, I don’t think it will ever change.”

Marx, “That might not be true. Isn’t there news talking about how factory workers are losing jobs to machines? The necessary productions you mentioned may eventually be solely replaced by machines, freeing all human beings from their waged labour, allowing them to return to their species essence!”

Tina, “But that’s still not feasible! There are too many irreplaceable jobs like political leaders, doctors... As long as there’re some essential jobs remaining irreplaceable, some people will have to sacrifice themselves in doing those essential work while others can get what they need even if they don’t do any waged labour. But if people can fulfil their material demands even without working, who would take up those essential jobs? No! People

would choose to stay at home, making a swing or baking a cake instead. In this case, the society will collapse eventually as no one takes up those essential yet irreplaceable jobs.”

Marx, “Some people might do those work out of interest—”

Tina, “Would people still spend so much money buying private housing if everyone can apply for public housing? No. That’s the same logic.”

Socrates, “Oh Tina, you remind me of my friends. Last night, we discussed about ‘love’. They differentiated love into either ‘heavenly love’ or ‘common love’, but I disagreed. According to my teacher Diotima, wise people won’t search for wisdom as they already possess it, yet the foolish would neither do so as they aren’t wise enough to notice the importance of wisdom. Then tell me, who would desire and search for wisdom? (203c–204b)”

Tina, “The intermediate ones?”

Socrates, “Exactly! Both you and my friends had missed out the intermediate classes, that’s why you only differentiate economic systems into purely capitalism and purely communism, while my friends differentiated love into heavenly and common love. From my perspective, love is a ladder—you can’t integrate immediately from the love of physical beauty to the ultimate love of beauty itself. But naturally, one would go up step by step, moving from the love of physical beauty to that of mental beauty and thus that of customs... (210a–d) The same applies to the ideal freedom as suggested by Marx—the society needs to proceed towards that goal step by step. The situation you described is just an intermediate in that process, not the final dead end.

You are now presuming that the ladder won’t lead you to your destination without even trying the first step. You know what? When climbing up the ladder of love, people may not know that there was a more

superior level either, they just eventually realise them. So try taking the first step! Then you will possibly find a superior level for you to climb onto. As you said, things change over time! Who knows whether a new and better upper level will appear before you!”

Tina, “Indeed... I guess I should accept the possibility that I may get to enjoy genuine freedom one day in the future, and better prepare myself for that day. Otherwise, when the time comes, I won’t even know what to do!”

Marx, “Great! Maybe you could start with developing an interest?”

Tina smiled, with the anxiety that she had been suffering from finally being eased.

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Teacher's comment:

In the person of Tina, Wai Yi provides a vivid glimpse into the life of university students, a life not only of fun and hope, but also of pressure and anxiety. It is indeed a bold attempt to have Marx comfort Tina. Marx focuses on the alienation of factory workers. Wai Yi moves further to have Marx briefly explain the Buddhist concept of emptiness. The explanation is nonetheless *Marxist* because of its relation to tedious, monotonous tasks of factory workers. Wai Yi certainly knows it is very unlikely that Tina would become a manual worker, she makes clear that even professionals can be subject to similar alienation. Tina, as many of us, is too concerned with the brutal reality of life. Socrates enters the scene and engages Tina to an enlightening Socratic Q&A. Wai Yi's adaptation of the Socratic method is impressive; what is inspiring is the message of Socrates: We should not be trapped by the reality. Ideal is not just an empty expression; it is a driving force to motivate us to look beyond the harsh reality. After all, upon climbing the ladder of love, one has to look *upward*. (HO Wai Ming)