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Wage Slavery as Indignity: Examining How Capitalism Produces Dignity Violations

By

Alexander Petk

A Major Research Paper

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the Department of Philosophy in Partial

Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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Wage Slavery as Indignity: Examining How Capitalism Produces Dignity Violations

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Declaration of Originality

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Abstract

Both Martha Nussbaum and Karl Marx examine human dignity. Whereas Marx's account describes how the capitalist mode of production harms individual dignity, Nussbaum's account is more general. She provides both a positive account of dignity as based on her capabilities approach, while also providing an explanation as to how dignity comes to be violated. She endeavours to describe what features a dignified life ought to possess. Despite this, Nussbaum fails to identify the role that the capitalist system plays in depriving individuals of a dignified life. Chiefly, the position of 'wage slavery' is both a product of the capitalist system, and constitutes a dignity violation as the individual is unable to exercise their innate ability to self-determine as autonomous agents by leveraging the threat of material deprivation to force workers into an exploitative relationship

Table of Contents

Declaration of Originality.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Chapter 1- Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2- Marx and Labour.....	2
2.1. Humanity and The Labour Process.....	2
2.2. Labour as Consumption.....	5
2.3. Use-value.....	7
2.4. The Market and Exchange Value.....	7
2.5. Money.....	10
Chapter 3- The Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat.....	11
3.1. The Bourgeoisie, The Proletariat and The Capitalist Mode of Production.....	11
3.2. Surplus Value.....	13
3.3. The Working Day and Wages.....	15
3.4. The Threat of Deprivation.....	17
3.5. Exploitation.....	17
3.6. Wage Slavery.....	18
3.7. Marx and Dignity.....	20
3.8. The Limits of The Marxist Account of Dignity.....	24
Chapter 4- The Capabilities Approach.....	24

4.1 The Capabilities Approach as a Response to Conventional Measures.....	24
4.2. The Capabilities Approach: A Case Study.....	26
4.3. The Particular Kinds of Capabilities.....	27
4.4. Needs and Capabilities.....	29
4.5. Basic Capabilities.....	30
4.6. Doings and Beings.....	31
4.7. Nussbaum's Account of Dignity.....	32
Chapter 5- Capitalism as Antithetical to Universal Dignity.....	33
5.1. The Market as a Means to Access Capabilities.....	33
5.2. Mass Produced Dehumanization.....	35
5.3. The Expectations and Promises of Liberal Capitalism.....	37
Chapter 6- Conclusion.....	38
References.....	40
Vita Auctoris.....	41

Chapter 1: Introduction

Ch1: Introduction

The preservation of human dignity for all members of a given society should be considered paramount when deciding how we as humans engage with one another, as well as with nature. However, the capitalist system forces individuals into occupying positions that do not meet the standard of human dignity. This is not to suggest that individuals within the capitalist system are unable to live a dignified life. Rather, what I aim to argue in this paper is that the production of 'wage slaves' within the capitalist system undermines the project of ensuring all human beings are able to live a dignified life. In order to understand how the capitalist system undermines dignity, an analysis of the role humans play in the capitalist system is required. Furthermore, an account of what features a dignified life contains must also be undertaken. Here, the works of Karl Marx and Martha Nussbaum are instrumental. Marx provides an analysis of capitalism generally, but also a negative account of dignity highlighting how capitalism violates human dignity. This account by itself is insufficient, as it fails to describe what features a dignified life ought to possess, and instead focuses on examining how capitalism harms dignity. To make up for this, Nussbaum's capabilities approach provides both a positive account of what a dignified life ought to look like, while also expanding on the Marxist account of dignity. Despite this, Nussbaum's capabilities approach fails to directly address how capitalism undermines one of its chief goals: ensuring each individual is able to live a dignified life. Because the capitalist system requires the threat of deprivation to force workers into an exploitative relationship, the individual's ability to live a dignified life is hampered. This is

particularly true of ‘wage slaves’ who are emblematic of the deliberate production of dignity violations the capitalist system necessitates.

Chapter 2: Marx and Labour

Ch 2.1: Humanity and The Labour Process

This paper concerns humans and their interactions with both one another and with the world. As such, the framing of this paper is focused on understanding the relationship between humans and their labour. This requires a brief examination of both what is required for humanity to exist before understanding how humans labour. Here, Marx provides the first premise for such an explanation. Marx states “[t]he first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals.”¹ From this first premise, Marx derives that humans must have been able to reproduce. This reproduction is both of the self as well as the production of other humans. In order to reproduce oneself, an individual must be able to meet their material needs to continue living: food, water, shelter, etc. This is a prerequisite to the kind of reproduction that creates new humans. Because we humans have reproduced ourselves as a species, it must be true that humans have the ability to acquire the necessary means of subsistence. However, both humans and all other species must also be able to meet the conditions to be able to reproduce themselves. What is unique about humans is the method by which we acquire the means of our subsistence.

Humans are unique in the manner in which we labour.

Marx distinguishes ‘human labour’ from animal activity which may be seen as labour. Bees building a hive or beavers building a dam are not of the same character of human labour despite both seeming to be a process that meets the needs of the being. Marx notes two distinctions between ‘human labour’ and ‘animal labour’. i) The product of labour already

¹ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 3, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology>

existed in the mind of its creator prior to its manifestation into the world through labour.² “... [W]hat distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality.”³ When a carpenter builds a chair, they have made something real which previously only existed as a feature of the carpenter's imagination. This is not to suggest that the imagined product of labour that exists in the carpenter's mind is inert or immutable. Rather, it is the fact that humans have the ability to bridge the gap between what only exists in the mind, as informed by an individual's own mental processes, to the material manifestation of the product through labour. This production is an exercise of an individual's own body, but is also an expression of the individual's own ability to subordinate their will towards the purpose of their labour.⁴

ii) Humans produce our own means of subsistence through labour. To contrast this with ‘animal labour’ we are able to create the material conditions that we need to keep living through labour. For example, we are able to farm crops, create shelters and provide services that are required for the betterment and continued survival of humanity. The scope of human labour shapes our world in accordance with our desires. This is not the case for the animal, whose labour is always done in service of its immediate needs.

The process of labour contains three main features or sub-processes. i) The work itself. I.e the actual physical processes of labour.⁵ For example, take a carpenter who desires to make a chair. The chair exists within the imagination of the carpenter. The process of building a chair, the cutting of the wood, fastening, sanding, etc., is the work itself. It is the carpenter's physical engagement with the instruments and subject of their labour resulting in a chair being manifested

² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 127, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

through labour. ii) The subject of work. The subject of work simply refers to the objects that labour is performed on. For example, a subject of a carpenter's labour is wood. However, the subject of all labour begins with nature. Nature refers to the material resources of Earth before any labour is performed. For example, water and the fish therein are both features of nature. Nature "...is the universal subject of human labour. All those things which labour merely separates from immediate [connection] with their environment, are subjects of labour spontaneously provided by Nature."⁶ While nature is both the origin of all labour, we do not necessarily engage with nature *directly* through labour. For example, if the subject of one's labour, "...has undergone some alteration by means of labour..." then it is a raw material.⁷ Returning to the carpenter as an example, while wood is naturally occurring, the act of cutting down a tree for wood is an alteration of nature through labour. This raw material is the subject of the carpenter's labour that they will further alter through the process of labour. iii) The instruments of labour.⁸ These are the tools which allow for the worker to perform labour. They act as the intermediary of a labourer's engagement with their subject. Aside from our own physical bodies, when engaging in labour we grasp the instruments required for labour before the subject. Returning once again to our chair making carpenter, their subject, wood, must be altered so as to fit their desire. To accomplish this task, a variety of specialised instruments are employed in the work itself: saws, vices, lathes, etc. Each of these instruments allows for a greater level of dominion over the subject. Wood cannot be cut through the employment of one's body alone as well as they could with the use of a saw.

Instruments are themselves indicators of human development. Marx notes that as the requirements for labour change, humans develop instruments to meet these needs. "No sooner

⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 284.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

does labour undergo the least development, than it requires specially prepared instruments.”⁹

This reveals the level of development a society has achieved. The distinction in development is not what products are produced, but rather how they are produced. “It is not the articles made, but how they are made, and by what instruments, that enables us to distinguish different economic epochs. Instruments of labour not only supply a standard of the degree of development to which human labour has attained, but they are also indicators of the social conditions under which that labour is carried on.”¹⁰

The labour process itself also plays a role in defining what feature or sub-process something occupies. For example, “...the fattening of cattle, where the animal is the raw material, and at the same time an instrument for the production of manure.”¹¹ Here, the cow serves a dual function within the labour process. However, whether the cow is subject or instrument “...is determined entirely by its function in the labour-process...”¹² How an object is used during the labour process determines its place within said process. Because of this, when an object is entered into the labour process, it ceases to become a product, and becomes merely a part of the labour process to be consumed within another product.¹³

Ch 2.2: Labour as Consumption

During the labour process the subject and the instruments are consumed and turned “...into means of production for another set.”¹⁴ For example in the production of a jacket, the cloth, buttons, thread, sewing machines, etc, are consumed in order to create the finished product. Finished products are both necessary for, and the consequences of the process of productive consumption. Productive consumption is distinct from how an individual reproduces

⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 288.

¹⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 128

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 130.

themselves. When I eat, I am not producing anything through this consumption aside from my own ability to stay alive. However, as mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the ability to reproduce oneself is a prerequisite to one's ability to labour. Rather, productive consumption creates a product which is distinct from the reproduction of the individual.¹⁵

The nature of labour is cyclical and self-reproducing. Labour reproduces itself through the continued production of humans: both individually and as a species. As Marx notes "[t]he first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals."¹⁶ History forms the pre-conditions of our current existence. In order to have living human individuals the needs for a human to live must be met. While edible plants, water, fish, and other game exist independently of humans, they do not find nor prepare themselves for individual consumption or use. Rather, it is through labour, which entails gaining dominion over nature, that the needs of human life are met. As Marx notes "[labour] is the necessary condition for effecting exchange of matter between man and Nature; it is the everlasting Nature-imposed condition of human existence".¹⁷ Labour exists as a fundamental human activity which provides both the world that we are thrown into, as well as the means for our continued subsistence both as an individual and as a collective species. The products of labour, called commodities, are produced in service of satisfying some need or desire. Marx defines a commodity "...an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference."¹⁸ In essence, the labour process is the production of use-values.¹⁹

Ch 2.3: Use-value

¹⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 130.

¹⁶ Marx, *German Ideology*, 3.

¹⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 130.

¹⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 127.

¹⁹ Ibid.

A commodity's ability to satisfy our desires gives a commodity its use-value.²⁰ Use-value is “...limited by the physical properties of the commodity...”, and “has no existence apart from that commodity.”²¹ The use-value of a commodity is simply a collection of the physical properties of said commodity. Because of this, the uses for commodities are plural. For example, a hammer may be used to strike a nail, or to open a beer bottle, or tenderise meat. In any instance, the use-value of the commodity, in this case a hammer, is only manifested through its consumption.²² Should I use the hammer to strike a nail I manifest the use-value of the commodity through its use. In all instances, the use-value of the object is informed by what utility is gained through the physical properties of the commodity. There is no foundation of use-value outside of the physical properties of the hammer. The use-value of a commodity is the part of the commodity that concerns its ability to satisfy needs because of its physical features rather than some other value or feature. While the use of a hammer to tenderise meat or strike a nail are different uses, the use-value of the object is defined by the object's physical properties. While the utility of an object is defined by its use-value, within a capitalist system the use-value of an object is dominated by the exchange-value of an object.

Ch 2.4: The Market and Exchange-Value

As the name suggests, the exchange-value of a commodity relates to the value of a commodity in relation to another commodity. However, this requires that commodities can be exchanged. In order to facilitate the exchange of commodities, commodities are brought to market. The market is a place, though not necessarily a physical place, where commodities are exchanged. Commodities, including the basic necessities for human life like food and water, are generally acquired through the market. However, commodities are not all equivalent to one

²⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 27.

²¹ Marx, *Capital*, 47.

²² Ibid.

another on a one-to-one basis. My bicycle is not equivalent in exchange-value to a paper clip. Despite this, commodities can be understood in relation to one another thus allowing for exchange. For example, suppose “a quarter of wheat is exchanged for x blacking, y silk, or z gold.”²³ So, a quarter of wheat being equal to x blacking is the exchange-value of a quarter of wheat relative to blacking. Because a quarter of wheat may be exchanged for a number of other commodities, the quarter of wheat has a number of different exchange values: i.e. x blacking, y silk, and z gold.²⁴ Moreover, x blacking, y silk, or z gold, are equal to a quarter of wheat so too must they be equal to each other or replaceable with one another.²⁵ x blacking must also be equal to y silk and so on.

In order for this exchange to occur, there must be some common value. Some calculation must occur so that x blacking is equal to a quarter of wheat. This value cannot be a commodity's use-value, as exchange values are simply the different quantities of other commodities that equal another. Because use-value is informed by the physical properties of a given commodity, it tells us little about the exchange-value of a commodity.²⁶ Instead, exchange value must be derived from something common amongst all commodities, yet distinct from the physical features of the commodity itself.

If “...we leave out of consideration the use-value of commodities, they have only one common property left, that of being products of labour.”²⁷ Because all commodities are the products of labour this meets the criterion of being applicable to all commodities. Marx goes so far as to say that commodities only have exchange-value “...only because human labour in the abstract has been embodied or materialised in it.”²⁸ Labour gives value to a commodity. The

²³ Marx, *Capital*, 27.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 28.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 29.

amount of labour contained within a commodity, the greater its exchange-value. Therefore, if the amount of labour contained within a commodity can be determined, then so too can its exchange-value.

To this end, Marx asserts that a commodity's exchange-value is determined by the amount of socially necessary amount of labour time that is required to produce said commodity.²⁹ This amount is in turn measured in hours, days, weeks, months, etc.³⁰ For example, suppose that it took a total of three months of socially necessary labour time to produce my bicycle, but only three days of socially necessary labour time to produce a paperclip. Because my bicycle took a greater amount of socially necessary labour time, my bike has a higher exchange value than that of a paperclip. This does not mean that commodities produced by an idle or unskilled labourer would have a higher exchange-value than those produced by an active worker who produces a greater amount of commodities in a shorter period of time.³¹ Marx is not concerned with the labourer on an individual scale. Instead, Marx understands socially necessary labour as "...one homogeneous mass of human labour power".³² Labour power refers to an individual or society's ability to engage in labour. In turn a given society's labour power is embodied in the sum total of their commodities.³³ This mass of labour power consists of any number of individual workers with varying labour speeds and skills. But, from this the *average* time socially necessary to produce a given commodity can be derived.³⁴ This average is what informs the exchange value of a given commodity rather than the time any one worker takes to produce a given commodity. Furthermore, exchange values are responsive and change based on developments in skills, technology, climate, etc. For example, suppose that it takes one hour to produce two units of

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 73.

wheat during a favourable season, but only one unit during an unfavourable season.³⁵ During favourable seasons one hour of labour is embodied in two units of wheat and one unit during the unfavourable seasons. While the amount of labour time remains constant, one hour, the productivity of labour has been halved during the unfavourable seasons. As a consequence, we would expect the exchange value of one unit of wheat to increase due to the amount of labour time necessary to produce one unit increasing. However, modern capitalist systems rarely operate through the direct exchange of commodities. Rather, capitalist systems use money as a means to facilitate the exchange of commodities.

Ch 2.5: Money

Money, however a given society wishes to denote it, is used as the medium to facilitate the exchange of commodities. Returning to the previous example, “...a quarter of wheat is exchanged for x blacking, y silk, or z gold”, the exchange-value of each commodity is understood in relation to other commodities directly.³⁶ A quarter of wheat is understood in terms of amounts of blacking, silk, or gold. However, money allows for each commodity to be represented as a money amount. For example, a quarter of wheat = 1 shilling rather than being represented in reference to other commodities. Money “...monopolises this position in the expression of value for the world of commodities...”³⁷ Money becomes the expression of the exchange-value of all commodities. The exchange-value of commodities becomes represented in the money form. Moreover, money becomes the medium through which other commodities are acquired.

The form of money also lends itself to hoarding by those in society who can generate value. “The desire after hoarding is in its very nature unsatiable. In its qualitative aspect, or

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 29.

³⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 46.

formally considered, money has no bounds to its efficacy, i.e., it is the universal representative of material wealth, because it is directly convertible into any other commodity.”³⁸ Because it has the ability to acquire all other commodities, money becomes the commodity most worth acquiring. However, the value of money rests in its ability to be exchanged. The value of money is only manifested through its exchange for a given commodity. Inherently, money has little to no value outside of the social constructs of the system that recognizes the value of money. While the physical properties of money may contain some use-value, that value being higher than the exchange value being represented is dubious at best. When money is exchanged for a commodity, the value of the money is realised through the transformation of money to commodity. This directly connects one’s ability to engage with the market and purchase commodities with an individual's spending power. An individual with little money may be unable to purchase enough food to feed themselves. Because the market is the primary means of acquiring commodities within a capitalist system, a lack of money can result in an individual not being able to acquire sufficient use-values to reproduce themselves resulting in their death. Because of this, it is of paramount importance that an individual acquire enough money to be able to meet their basic needs. The amount of money an individual has access to directly relates to an individual’s ability to engage with the market, and thus their ability to satisfy their needs and desires. However, within the capitalist system, money does not primarily go to those producing the commodities being exchanged. Rather, money disproportionally goes to those who produce nothing and exploit labour for their own benefit.

Chapter 3: The Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat.

Ch 3.1: The Bourgeoisie, The Proletariat and The Capitalist Mode of Production

³⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 86.

The capitalist system as a whole is interdependent on ‘the capitalist mode of production’.

The ‘capitalist mode of production’ refers to how a capitalist society organises and divides labour. Capitalist societies divide labour on the basis of two classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie, or capitalist, class form the minority within capitalist society. Conversely, the proletariat, or worker class, form the majority within capitalist society. What distinguishes these classes from one another is ownership of ‘the means of production’.³⁹ ‘The means of production’ refers to the instruments and subjects of labour required to produce commodities.⁴⁰ For example, a carpenter requires wood, the subject of labour, and any necessary tools, saws, nails, wood glue, etc, the instruments of labour, in order to produce commodities. Capitalists own the factories, raw materials, land, machines, etc, required for labour. However, subjects and instruments alone are insufficient for the production of commodities. Labour power is required in order to make use of these means of production. Simply owning a factory with the raw materials and machinery required to produce a given commodity produces none of said commodity. The division of labour within capitalist societies requires workers to produce the commodities needed or desired by a given society.

In contrast to the capitalist, the worker does not own the means of production. Because of this, they are unable to produce enough commodities to reproduce themselves. This poses a problem, as if an individual is unable to produce or otherwise acquire sufficient use-values to continue reproducing oneself they will die. However, within a capitalist system, the market is the chief method of commodity acquisition. This shifts the dilemma facing the worker. The question is no longer one of how to produce sufficient commodities to reproduce oneself, but how to acquire sufficient commodities from the market? Because money acts as the main method of

³⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 131.

⁴⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 128.

engagement with the market, this can be reframed as ‘how can a worker acquire enough money to acquire sufficient commodities to reproduce themselves’?⁴¹ While workers do not own the means of production, they do own their own labour power which they can sell to a capitalist who possesses both enough money to pay the labourer’s wages, *and* desires labour power.

This seemingly resolves the problems of both the worker and the capitalist. In exchange for their labour power, the worker is paid a wage in the form of money. This allows for the worker to acquire commodities from the market so they may reproduce themselves. On its face, it appears that both the capitalist and the worker have their needs satisfied. The worker gains access to the commodities they require to reproduce themselves via their wages, and the capitalist gains access to sufficient labour power to make use of the means of production. However, this relationship necessarily benefits the capitalist, not the worker. This is because the capitalist exercises far greater power in this relationship than the worker. The capitalist leverages both the unique character of labour to produce value greater than itself, as well as an implicit threat of material deprivation to ensure their dominance in this relationship.

Ch 3.2: Surplus Value

When a worker labours during the working day, the commodities produced during that time belong not to the worker, but to the capitalist. Through the purchase of labour power in exchange for a wage, the capitalist lays claim to the products of labour produced during the working day. Yet simply claiming ownership over the commodities produced during the working day does not advance the capitalist’s interests.

Suppose that it takes a spinner half of a working day to turn cotton into 10 lbs. of yarn. “Two and a half days’ labour has been embodied in [10 lbs. of yarn.], of which two days were contained in the cotton and in the substance of the spindle worn away, *and half a day was*

⁴¹ This question could also be framed to include those who rely upon the worker such as children.

*absorbed during the process of spinning.*⁴² This two and a half days' labour is also represented by a piece of gold of the value of fifteen shillings. Hence, fifteen shillings is an adequate price for the 10 lbs. of yarn⁴³ Indeed, this is unsurprising, as socially necessary labour time is what dictates exchange value. Moreover, the spinner is able to reproduce themselves thanks to the money earned through their wages. The worker's needs are satisfied as they are able to reproduce themselves, yet the capitalist remains unsatisfied. To remedy this, instead of being provided with the means to produce 10 lbs. of yarn, half a day's labour, suppose that the spinner is provided with the means to produce 20 lbs. of yarn. While the worker only needs to work half a day to reproduce themselves, nothing prevents them from working the whole day.⁴⁴ The consequence of this extended labour process is a product whose value is greater than the value put into its production.⁴⁵

Suppose now that "...in 20 lbs. of yarn the labour of five days [is expressed], of which four days are due to the cotton and the lost steel of the spindle, the remaining day having been absorbed by the cotton during the spinning process. Expressed in gold, the labour of five days is thirty shillings. This is therefore the price of the 20 lbs. of yarn"⁴⁶ Despite thirty shillings worth of labour being embodied in the yarn, the capitalist has only expended 27 shillings worth. Now, when the capitalist takes this yarn to market, they sell the yarn for a total of thirty shillings. Here the capitalist has advanced their own wealth by having the spinner work the full day rather than a half day.

The capitalist does not care about the useful qualities of labour power, its use-value in the production of commodities, but rather views this as a necessary condition in order to generate

⁴² Italics added for emphasis as the labour time is the main focus of this quote.

⁴³ Marx, *Capital*, 134.

⁴⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 135.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Marx, 136.

value.⁴⁷ “[I]n order to create value, labour must be expended in a useful manner.” Labour must produce something useful in order for the capitalist to have something to take to market and sell thus realising the surplus value of labour. Rather than concerning themselves with the productive qualities of capitalism, the capitalist is “...the specific use-value [that labour] possesses of being a source not only of value, but of more value than it has itself.”⁴⁸ This is the quality of labour that capitalists are chiefly concerned with. When the worker sells their labour-power to a capitalist, the capitalist is not purchasing their labour for its ability to produce commodities per se. Rather, the capitalist is purchasing labour power on the basis that it is a commodity that can exceed its own value. When purchasing labour-power, the capitalist is concerned with maximising the amount of surplus value generated rather than the ability of the labourer to produce use-values. Because of this, capitalist production is less about the production of commodities as use-values and becomes the production of surplus-value.⁴⁹ Because of this, both the working day and wages are structured to maximise surplus value generated.

Ch 3.3: The Working Day and Wages

The stipulated time that a worker must labour for is determined by the capitalist who purchases the workers labour-power. Because this can vary for a number of reasons, laws, the nature of the work itself, social conditions, etc ...“the working day is thus not a constant, but a variable quantity”.⁵⁰ However, there are limitations on the working day itself. There are purely physical limitations on labour. A labourer has a finite amount of energy they can expend in a given day. We need time to eat, clothe ourselves, sleep, as well as make time for intellectual and social wants.⁵¹ Therefore, there is a maximum threshold for the working day, but this too is

⁴⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 135.

⁴⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 136.

⁴⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 357.

⁵⁰ Karl Marx, *Economic and Political Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959) 162, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/.htm>

⁵¹ Ibid.

variable. Some workers may be able to work far greater hours than others due to age or health for example. While there is a minimum, the amount that a worker would have to work to reproduce themselves and no further, this is not realised in the capitalist system as this can ever only form part of the working day, not its totality.⁵² This is because surplus value is only created when a worker produces more than what is required for their own reproduction. It is in the best interest of the capitalist to extend the working day as long as possible to ensure more surplus value being generated.

Wages, like the working day, are variable. However, unlike the working day the limitations of wages are chiefly defined by their minimums. For instance, “[t]he lowest and the only necessary wage rate is that providing for the subsistence of the worker...”⁵³ A capitalist only needs to pay a worker as much as is necessary to reproduce themselves. However, not all workers are employed by a capitalist concurrently. Demand determines the production of workers. Should the supply of workers outstrip demand, those who do not have the good fortune to be employed by a capitalist find themselves in a position where they may be unable to acquire the commodities necessary to reproduce themselves.⁵⁴ Within the capitalist system the worker is placed under the same condition as any other commodity, as demand determines their production.⁵⁵ The worker, being dependent on the capitalist for wages, is dependent on the whims of capitalists. Capitalists understand this, and leverage the implicit threat of deprivation against the worker.

Ch 3.4: The Threat of Deprivation

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, 3

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Underpinning the relationship between the worker and the capitalist is the implicit threat of deprivation. The capitalist has the ability to deprive the worker with the means of reproducing themselves by taking away a worker's wages. While the capitalist will likely lose the labour power of said worker, such things are relatively easy to replace. However, the worker is not able to exercise the same power over the capitalist. The worker has no method to deprive the capitalist of anything, as their labour power is replaceable. Because of this, "...victory necessarily goes to the capitalist."⁵⁶ Victory goes to the capitalist because "[t]he capitalist can live longer without the worker than can the worker without the capitalist."⁵⁷ Because the capitalists can exercise control over a worker's wages, they exercise power over a worker's ability to engage with the market. Therefore, the capitalists also exercise control over the worker's ability to acquire the commodities they need to reproduce themselves. The threat of deprivation is wielded by capitalists to remain dominant over workers while ensuring that they still have sufficient labour power to produce commodities.

Ch 3.5: Exploitation

The exploitation of the worker by the capitalists is typified by which party benefits from the products of labour-power. When a worker produces surplus-value, they do so for the benefit of the capitalists rather than themselves. When a worker creates surplus labour, they do so for the benefit of the capitalist rather than the satisfaction of their own needs and desires. While the worker's needs may be met through their wages, it is not them who benefits the most from their labour. Rather, it is the capitalist, who themselves produce nothing, extracting the worker's surplus value that benefits the most. Marx is clear that this is exploitative of the worker stating "[t]he rate of surplus-value is therefore an exact expression for the degree of exploitation of

⁵⁶ Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

labour power by capital, or of the labourer by the capitalist.”⁵⁸ The capitalist acquires their wealth through the theft of the surplus value of the worker. The worker produces value for the capitalist in order to not fall into a position of deprivation.

The worker, under the implicit threat of deprivation, themselves becomes a commodity. Much like anything else purchased on the market, “[t]he worker’s existence is thus brought under the same condition as the existence of every other commodity. The worker has become a commodity, and it is a bit of luck for him if he can find a buyer. And the demand on which the life of the worker depends, depends on the whim of the rich and the capitalists.”⁵⁹ Should the worker be unable to find work, and subsequently be unable to afford their needs, they will suffer. The worker understood as commodity extends into the production of workers as well. “The demand for men necessarily governs the production of men, as of every other commodity. Should supply greatly exceed demand, a section of the workers sinks into beggary or starvation.”⁶⁰ Within the capitalist system, workers are forced into an imbalanced relationship wherein their labour-power is exploited for the enrichment of capitalists who produce nothing themselves. Should a worker find themselves in a position wherein they are unable to find a buyer for their labour, then the material deprivation suffered is not because they do not possess the ability to labour or produce. Rather, it is because no capitalist finds value in their labour.

Ch 3.6: Wage Slavery

While all labour is exploitative under the capitalist mode of production, wages vary greatly within a society. Because of this, an individual's ability to acquire commodities from the market is highly variable. However, what is of special interest for the purpose of this paper are those in the position of ‘wage slavery’. Within this paper, when I speak of ‘wage slave’ or ‘wage

⁵⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 153.

⁵⁹ Marx, Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, 3.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

slavery' I am referring to a particular kind of existence within the capitalist system. While all wage-labour under capitalism may be viewed as some kind of wage slavery, as the worker is required to sell their labour in exchange for wages, it would be disingenuous to conflate all wage-labour under this term. The worker who is able to regularly feed their family and enjoy their intellectual and social wants, is different from a worker who cannot afford to regularly feed their family and finds most of their time spent labouring to reproduce themselves. While both are subject to exploitation under capitalism, the latter faces greater threats to their ability not only to reproduce themselves, but also to their ability to enjoy life.

To begin, it is helpful to contrast wage slavery to chattel slavery or 'free labour' in Marx's language. The slave, or free labourer, does not sell their labour power to the slave owner.⁶¹ The slave themselves is the commodity, not only their labour power.⁶² The slave is purchased together with their labour power.⁶³ In this regard, the slave is distinct from the wage slave. While the wage slave sells a portion of their life, the working day, they themselves are not a commodity: only their labour-power. However, both the slave and the wage-slave are subject to many of the same limitations. Both the slave and the wage-slave must be able to reproduce themselves.⁶⁴ Both are at the mercy of their owner in regards to their ability to reproduce themselves. While the slave is directly at the mercy of the owner, the owner being free to use or discard the slave how the owner sees fit, as with any other commodity, the wage-slave retains some agency. The wage slave is able to purchase whatever their wages can afford. Despite this, the wage-slave, like the slave, is an instrument to generate value for their owner. The wage slave operates under the same threat of deprivation as all workers, but receives the minimum wage

⁶¹ Karl Marx, "Wage Labour and Capital," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W Norton, 1978), 205.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ This is true for all humans, not just the slave and wage-slave.

required by capitalism: the minimum amount required for an individual to reproduce themselves. The wage-slave is only allowed to, “...live while [a capitalist] needs them, and as soon as it can get rid of them it abandons them without the slightest scruple; and the workers are compelled to offer their persons and their powers for whatever price they can get. The longer, more painful and more disgusting the work they are given, the less they are paid. There are those who, with sixteen hours’ work a day and unremitting exertion, scarcely buy the right not to die.”⁶⁵ It is this last sentence which typifies the position of wage slavery. Being paid enough to merely continue reproducing oneself. A “...cattle-like existence...” that reduces an individual to a mere tool to generate surplus rather than an individual with the capacity to self-determine in accordance with their own aspirations.⁶⁶

Ch 3.7: Marx and Dignity

Marx’s historical materialism commits him to certain attitudes about ethics. Notably Marx is outwardly hostile to discussions of morality that abstract morals away from the material. In *The German Ideology*, Marx is clear about his attitude towards morality asserting that “[t]he production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life”.⁶⁷ What humans actually *do* in the material world gives way to the production of ideas and concepts. Among the ideas humans produce, Marx includes morality. However, Marx’s rejection of morality is more a criticism of *how* the character of morality is understood: i.e. as divinely given or a feature of the world independent of human consciousness. But, the charge that Marx is levelling against morality is aimed at claims that morality exists independently of the material lives of humans.

⁶⁵ Marx, Economic Manuscripts 1844, Wage Labour, 15.

⁶⁶ Marx, Economic Manuscripts 1844, Wage Labour, 3.

⁶⁷ Marx, *The German Ideology*, 9.

Because of this, dignity occupies a unique position within Marx's philosophy. While Marx does not explicitly engage in discussions of dignity, it is an implicit foundation of his philosophy. Specifically, the account dignity put forth by Immanuel Kant in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. For Kant, dignity has no price as "[w]hat has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent, what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity." Moreover, Kant is clear that dignity is unique to humans stating "...humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity."⁶⁸ The foundation of Kant's theory of dignity is the categorical imperative. "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law."⁶⁹ This functions as a maxim to test the morality of a given action. If an act can be universalized, then it is morally permissible. Conversely, should an act fail this maxim, it would be morally impermissible. From the categorical imperative, Kant derives the concept of dignity based on the human capacity for reason.

Each individual possesses the ability to autonomously govern oneself in accordance with moral principles. Subsequently, these moral principles are derived from 'practical reason'. This capacity for practical reason allows for the creation of moral laws. "Only a rational being has the capacity to act in accordance with the representation of laws, that is, in accordance with principles, or has a will. Since reason is required for the derivation of actions from laws, the will is nothing other than practical reason"⁷⁰ Because this faculty is universal to all humans, and only to humans, it distinguishes us from both animals and mere tools which are the subject of the wills of others. Moreover, reason allows for the creation of moral laws. Because each human possesses

⁶⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 42, <https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/blog.nus.edu.sg/dist/c/1868/files/2012/12/Kant-Groundwork-ng0pby>

⁶⁹ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 31.

⁷⁰ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 27.

the innate ability to practically reason, each human is an end in and of themselves. As each human themselves is capable of creating and obeying moral principles. This forms the basis of the Kantian account of dignity. That the nature of human beings as reasonable and capable of willing themselves to ends, they should never be treated as mere means to an end, as each human possesses the ability to practically reason. As Kant says, “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means, but always at the same time as an end.”⁷¹ It is universally true that humans possess the capacity to reason. Because treating another human as a means to an end rather than an end in and of themselves would violate the categorical imperative. Being treated as a means rather than an end cannot be universalized.

While these ends are subjective principles, as each person's ends vary, the ability to pursue these ends is an objective, or universal principle, as each individual possesses reason. The rule is subjective regarding what ends an individual chooses to pursue, but is objective because all humans possess this faculty. The feature that distinguishes humans from all other objects is our ability to reason and self-determine. Therefore, dignity, at least for Kant, is understood along these lines. That humans, being innately capable of reason, are ends in and of themselves and to treat humans as anything *but* an ends is to violate what makes us human.

Despite Marx's hostility towards morality, the Kantian account of dignity not only fits within the Marxist framework, but strengthens it. Marx's criticisms of the capitalist system are not rooted in the issue of unequal distribution of goods in the capitalist system. Rather, “...[f]or Marx the *real issue is self-determination*,⁷² not the free and equal flow of consumer products, the "socialist" cornucopia. An increase in the production of economic goods is not an end in itself,

⁷¹ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 37.

⁷² Italics added for emphasis.

but rather a mere means for the realisation of our true being or species nature.”⁷³ Instead, “...Marx’s view is that what is basically wrong with capitalism is that it cannot satisfy the conditions of autonomy: the labour contract is a contract of domination, and great economic inequality undercuts the possibility of universal autonomy.”⁷⁴ The concern for Marx is not whether a worker is able to afford the commodities they need or desire or whether we ought to pay workers higher wages. Rather, the chief concern for Marx rests in the idea that capitalism dominates the essential power of humans to labour for the purposes of accumulating wealth for the capitalist class.⁷⁵ Rather than being free to exercise one’s own ability to labour, workers are forced into a relationship where they are dominated by capitalists. For Marx, whether wages are higher or lower is not relevant, as he is concerned with how capitalism dominates human labour. Here, the connection between Kant and Marx becomes apparent. Both Kant and Marx object to the capitalist system undermining the possibility for each human to act as an autonomous agent capable of pursuing their own ends.

Furthermore, the fact that we *can*, and do, operate as autonomous agents, we are capable of creating our laws to be subject to. As mentioned above this includes the categorical imperative. If humans could not act as autonomous agents and were merely objects being bounced around by cosmic entropy with no autonomy, then the creation of moral laws would be both pointless and impossible. It is precisely because we are autonomous that allows for the creation of natural moral laws like dignity to be understood and subject to. However, under the capitalist system, natural laws like dignity and the innate ability for humans to act as autonomous agents are dominated by the alien laws of capitalism. Chiefly, that the laws of the capitalist system are designed to accumulate wealth to a handful of capitalists through the exploitation of

⁷³ Harry Van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co.,1988), 247.

⁷⁴ Van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, 250.

⁷⁵ Marx, Economic Manuscripts 1844, Wage Labour, 5.

the labourer. From this alien law, other laws are derived: i.e. that the purchase of labour-power grants the capitalists ownership of the products of labour.

The character of capitalism attacked by Marx directly and required by Kant's commitment to the ability of humans to self-determine highlights the central importance both Kant, and more importantly for this paper, Marx place on an individual's ability to self-determine as the central characteristic of dignity. The issue for Marx is centrally one of self-determination. The capitalist system undermines the ability of autonomous agents within capitalist society to self-determine as capitalists control their access to the means of their reproduction through their control over an individual's ability to engage with the market. Because it is our nature to be self-determining agents, having a system predicated on the threat of deprivation of basic needs should an individual not enter into a relationship where they are dominated is anathema to self-determination. The alien laws of capitalism compound this issue by replacing true freedom, our species nature as rational beings, with the conditions of servitude. A worker must enter into a position of servitude in order to acquire the means, wages, to meet their material needs.

Ch 3.8: The Limits of The Marxist account of Dignity

While this account of dignity places emphasis on the ability of humans to self-determine, it does not provide a positive account of what a dignified life looks like. The character of this account is negative rather than positive. It describes what sort of thing dignity is and how the capitalist system undermines it, but does not provide a robust positive account of what features a dignified life ought to have. In order to provide a complete account of dignity, a positive account of what a dignified life ought to possess is required. However, this positive account must meet certain criteria to be able to fit within the Marxist framework established throughout this chapter. Most centrally, the account must be materialist in nature. It cannot rely on features or elements

outside of what exists in the material world: i.e god granting dignity. Nussbaum's capabilities centred approach on dignity both meets these criteria, while providing a positive account of what a dignified life ought to look like.

Chapter 4: The Capabilities Approach

CH 4.1: The Capabilities Approach as a Response to Conventional Measures

The capabilities approach is Nussbaum's attempt to create a normative framework that describes the material conditions required to live a dignified life. At its core, the capabilities approach is motivated by two central claims. i) The freedom to achieve well being is of central moral importance. ii) That we ought to understand well-being through their ability to exercise capabilities. Of these two claims, I am primarily concerned with the latter. This is not because the latter is of greater significance than the former. Rather, it is because I take for granted that the ability to achieve well-being is of central moral importance, as this is the foundation of this paper. This leaves the question of how to understand well-being which is the project of the second claim. Before discussing the capabilities approach itself, it is important to contextualise it as a response to the failing purely economic metrics of measuring the quality of life within a given society.

Both Amartya Sen, the progenitor of the capabilities approach, and Nussbaum make note that purely economic measures of society, particularly the commonly used Gross Domestic Product (GPD), are insufficient measures of the quality of life in a given society. While GDP may show how much net income a country earns it does not reveal how that income is distributed. To use Nussbaum's example, take a nation with a GDP of 10,000 and a population of 1000.⁷⁶ If the wealth of this nation is distributed so 1% of the population, 10 people, have 99% of

⁷⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, Belknap Press, 2011), 46-48.

the GDP then the GDP is not an accurate measure of what it is like to live in that country for the overwhelming majority of people. Even models of GDP that aim to account for such wealth inequality are still insufficient at providing an account of what life is like in a given society. Suppose that GDP is more equally distributed, but the freedoms an individual has are greatly reduced. They are unable to freely associate, choose what to eat or drink, participate in democracy, etc.⁷⁷ The failure of economic models to provide an accurate account of what it is like to live within a given society is what necessitated the creation of the capabilities approach. Here, the inequality of distribution is the cause of the problem, but not the problem itself. The uneven distribution means that those at the lowest economic levels of society, such as those in the position of wage slavery, are unable to afford the basic necessities required to live a dignified life. However, while this foreshadows the importance of economics in determining the quality of life for an individual, it does little to answer what kinds of things are required to live a dignified life.

CH 4.2: The Capabilities Approach: A Case Study

Nussbaum begins her understanding of human capabilities with the assertion that all beings worthy of and capable of achieving a dignified life.⁷⁸ This echoes. She begins her analysis of capabilities by presenting the account of Vasanti: a woman in her 30's living in Gujarat, India.⁷⁹ Vasanti either does not have, or faces barriers, to her exercising her capacity to live a fulfilling and dignified life. She is poor, a domestic abuse victim, a small woman, and uneducated to the point of near illiteracy. The barriers to her livelihood are apparent. Being a domestic abuse victim she is not secure in bodily integrity. Her small stature is a consequence of being malnourished as a child. This compounded with the patriarchal nature of India and her lack

⁷⁷ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 50.

⁷⁸ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 5.

⁷⁹ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 2.

of education means that her job prospects are scarce at best. Thus, she must remain with her abusive partner or be without home and what few necessities she can afford. Despite the grim position she finds herself in, Vasanti's life begins to change once Self Employed Women's Association, or SEWA, a nongovernmental organisation provided Vasanti with legal, educational, housing, and financial aid. This assistance allowed for Vasanti to divorce her abusive husband, find shelter in a safe environment, and become educated to the point of being able to find and maintain a job that meets the necessities for life. Another consequence of this newfound security is that Vasanti now has the capability to become involved in political and cultural discourse. Once Vasanti was placed in a position where she was able to meet her basic needs it opened the opportunity for Vasanti to engage in higher level social acts such as political and cultural discourse. Her previous inability to engage in such acts was not only because her ability to understand political discourse had been hindered, as she was previously illiterate, but because of an increased level of independence previously inaccessible to her.⁸⁰ Her illiteracy was not the primary barrier to her political engagement. Rather, her inability to engage in political discourse was a consequence of her lack of independence and autonomy. In fact, Nussbaum cautions interpretations of the capabilities approach that suggest political engagement is a privilege to be earned rather than a right afforded to all. Nussbaum uses Vasanti as a case study to show how an individual who has had their capabilities stifled can achieve a higher quality of life when their ability to exercise their own capabilities are realised.

CH 4.3: The Particular Kinds of Capabilities

At the core of the capabilities approach are the ten central capabilities. It is these capabilities which form the foundations upon which the more specific and plural capabilities can be built upon. The table below includes each of the ten capabilities as described by Nussbaum on

⁸⁰ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 8.

pages 33-34 of *Creating Capabilities*. Each of the ten central capabilities is to be understood as something which is required in order to live a dignified life. Echoing Marx, Nussbaum places emphasis on the material conditions required for humans to reproduce themselves. However, Nussbaum also provides features which are physical in nature, such as play, but that do not directly relate to an individual's ability to reproduce themselves. Rather, Nussbaum understands that simply being able to reproduce oneself is insufficient to be considered a dignified life. Rather, the ability to reproduce oneself is a prerequisite to all other capabilities. Being able to live is clearly a requirement for playing or to be able to express one's emotions. While Nussbaum does not explicitly make a distinction between needs, the material conditions required for an individual to reproduce themselves, and capabilities generally for the purposes of this paper such a distinction is required.

Life: "Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living." ⁸¹	Health: "Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter." ⁸²	Bodily Integrity: Freedom to move from place to place, to be free for violence, including sexual and domestic violence. Fulfilment of sexual desires and choice in reproductive matters ⁸³	Senses, Imagination and Thought: Being able to use innate faculties of reason in a human way. Includes education. To have pleasurable experiences. ⁸⁴	Emotion: Being able to form emotional attachment. Not having emotional development hindered by fear. Being able to express justified anger. ⁸⁵
Practical Reason: "Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning	Affiliation: Being able to empathise. Freedom of speech and assembly,	Other Species: Freedom to live with and have concern for other species and the planet.	Play: The ability to enjoy fulfilling recreational activity.	Control Over One's Environment. Freedom of participation in political choices.

⁸¹ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 33.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 34.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

of one's life." ⁸⁶ This includes freedom for religion and conscience.				Ability to hold property, including land, freedom to work and freedom from unwarranted search and seizure.
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While this list of capabilities aims to be universal, it is by no means a finalised or immutable list; something Nussbaum herself is aware of. What is of value for both this paper and Marx is that it represents the desire for all humans to use our intellectual and creative powers for the betterment of human development.

Ch 4.4: Needs and Capabilities

While a failure to meet one's needs may result in their inability to reproduce themselves, there may be contexts in which an individual must choose between exercising a given capability at the expense of another. This is the case with Vasanti and her family. As stated above she was uneducated before SEWA's assistance. Because Vasanti's family was poor they had to prioritise educating the children most likely to get jobs. In India, these were the sons of the family. This violates the capacity for Vasanti to fully exercise her capabilities as education is instrumental in being able to fully make use of one's practical reasoning skills. However, this painful decision was done in service of maintaining enough income to be able to fulfil the capability for health ,and by extension life.⁸⁷ This is not to suggest that the violation of certain capabilities are more or less permissible than others. Violations of or more of these capabilities should be understood as severely damaging to one's dignity. These choices are made within the societal context that Vasanti and her family find themselves in. This painful situation is one that the capabilities approach aims to resolve by aiming to achieve a system wherein all ten-central capabilities are

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 15.

guaranteed. By assuring that all capabilities are met, it allows an individual to be free from being forced to choose between capabilities.

Ch 4.5: Basic Capabilities

In order to fully realise the ten central capabilities a set of ‘basic’ capabilities must first be fostered. Basic capabilities refers to the required capacity to engage with all other capabilities.⁸⁸ For example, the ability to read and write would be considered a basic capability, as being able to read and write allows for an individual to more fully engage within their society politically and socially. These are the kinds of capabilities present in an infant despite their inability to read and write while they are infants. This is because assuming that efforts are made to foster these basic capabilities an infant will likely develop the capability to read and write. However, there are individuals who do not have the basic capabilities required to gain access to the more advanced capabilities and may never develop basic capabilities. Take for example an individual with a severe disability that makes the ability to read or write near impossible. This individual may never fully develop their basic capabilities. However, this does not mean that this should exclude such an individual from being able to exercise the ten-basic capabilities or more advanced capabilities. Nussbaum understands that individual requirements to exercise the ten central capabilities are plural. An individual with a severe disability still has the right to all ten central capabilities. While this individual may not be able to do this alone, they may require a guardian. The purpose of the ten capabilities is to act as a baseline for what features of life an individual must be able to exercise in order to live a dignified life. This does not preclude an individual needing assistance to exercise their capabilities, but rather guarantees that the individual is in possession of these capabilities but may need external assistance in exercising

⁸⁸ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 24.

them. All humans possess the potential to exercise their capabilities, but each individual has their own requirements to be able to exercise said potential.

Nussbaum stresses the inability of an individual to use their basic capabilities does not disqualify them from exercising the central capabilities. Nussbaum's concern is that her account of basic capabilities could be used to suggest that political engagement should only be accessible to those who show a higher faculty for basic capabilities. Stating "...we can easily imagine a theory that would hold people's political and social entitlements should be proportional with their intelligence or skill".⁸⁹ This is antithetical to Nussbaum's theory, wherein each individual is worthy of dignity and is capable of exercising the ten central capabilities when provided with the necessary resources to do so: such as a guardian as mentioned above. While Nussbaum believes she has accounted for all universalizable capabilities she in no way suggests that this list is exhaustive or fixed. Rather, she encourages the possibility that other capabilities may be added or. This is largely because changing the particulars of the capabilities does not interfere with her main project. The particulars of the capabilities matter less than the understanding than the fact that a dignified life is understood by an individual's ability to exercise their capabilities.

CH 4.6: Doings and Beings

Capabilities cannot be understood without understanding 'functionings'. Nussbaum understands 'functionings' as the various 'doings as beings' a person engages in or exists within. "Functionings are beings and doings that are outgrowths or realisations of capabilities"⁹⁰ In turn, the kinds of 'functionings' that an individual may partake in inform the 'capability set' available to them. A 'capability set' being understood as what capabilities an individual is able to exercise at a given time. For example, the act of playing rugby with my friends, reveals that I am able to

⁸⁹ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 19.

⁹⁰ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 25.

exercise the capability to play through the function ‘playing rugby with my friends’. Nussbaum distinguishes between three types of functionings: i) bodily functionings, ii) emotional functionings, and iii) cognitive functionings. Bodily ‘functionings’ refer to the basic physical needs and capabilities that individuals require to survive and thrive, such as adequate nutrition, shelter, and healthcare.⁹¹ These are the needs that an individual requires to be able to merely reproduce themselves but does not equate to a dignified life by themselves. Emotional ‘functionings’ refer to the individual's ability to experience a range of emotions, including love, joy, and grief, and to have the freedom to express them. Cognitive functionings refer to the individual's ability to reason, think critically, and learn. However, functioning is context dependent.

The functioning of a given state or act does not necessarily reveal the person's ability to exercise their capabilities. In order to understand how a given ‘functioning’ relates to a person’s ability to exercise their capabilities further context must be given. For example, an individual starving for religious reasons or in protest does not necessarily share the same access to capabilities as an individual starving because they do not have access to food.⁹² While their states are functionally the same in terms of nutrition they do not have access to the same capabilities. The individual who is starving due to a lack of food can choose not to starve. This is not a capability which the person who is starving due to a lack of food can exercise. These ‘functionings’ are built out of the capabilities accessible to an individual. The intersection between ‘functionings’ and the capabilities required to exercise them is vital to understanding Nussbaum's account of a dignified life as one in which an individual is free to pursue a number of functionings to best meet their own subjective metrics for flourishing.

⁹¹ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 26.

⁹² Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 32.

CH 4.7: Nussbaum's Account of Dignity

Nussbaum's account of dignity echoes Kant in the assertion that all humans have inherent dignity, but provides a different account of what forms the foundations of dignity. Whereas Kant asserts the human ability to reason as the foundation for humans innate dignity, Nussbaum asserts that "...human beings have a worth that is indeed inalienable, because of their capacities for various forms of activity and striving."⁹³ The basis for Nussbaum's account of dignity rests in the fact that humans are able to strive towards goals. While Kant shares this sentiment as well, However, Nussbaum places greater emphasis on the material conditions that facilitate this capacity to strive towards goals. It is worth noting that while both Kant and Nussbaum are concerned with dignity, their project is somewhat different. Kant simply aims to present the argument that humans possess inherent dignity purely by virtue of being human. However, as Nussbaum notes, an individual will always possess their dignity, but may not live a dignified life because of the harm dealt to their dignity. Where Nussbaum goes further than Kant is she provides considerations for what material conditions need to be met in order for an individual to live a dignified life through her understanding of capabilities. Simply possessing dignity does not mean that an individual is living a dignified life. While it would be reductive to suggest that dignity for Nussbaum equates the ten central capabilities, it is accurate to state that any violation of the central capabilities should be understood as seriously harmful to the dignity.

To illustrate how dignity is harmed, Nussbaum uses the example of an individual who has been sexually assaulted. Sexual assault is harmful to one's dignity not because it devalues them or reduces them to a means, but because it "...violates the bodily, mental, and emotional life of an [individual], affecting all [their] opportunities for development and functioning."⁹⁴ While

⁹³ "Human Dignity and Political Entitlements" Human Dignity and Bioethics, George Brown College, https://bioethicsarchive.georgetown.edu/pcbe/reports/human_dignity/

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Nussbaum does assert that it violates one's dignity to be used as a means rather than an end, she expands upon this idea to relate more directly to the capabilities approach. When one's ability to exercise their capabilities is harmed in such a way that the functions they can pursue are limited as a direct cause of the action done to them or the position forced upon them we can consider their dignity to be violated. They still possess dignity, but the harm done is not on the basis that they have been used as a means rather than an ends. Rather, it is because the individual's ability to perform the functions that express their capabilities are harmed.

Dignity violations for Nussbaum occur when an individual's ability to express their capabilities through function are harmed. Underpinning this, is the assumption that the individual is able to self-determine as an individual. With Vasanti, what limited her ability to express her capabilities was her inability to act autonomously as a self-determining agent. She is limited by her financial situation which dictates what capabilities she is able to exercise. However, what Nussbaum fails to recognize is the origins of this lack of autonomy. Vasanti, being unable to engage with the market, is unable to be independent because she is unable to afford to be independent.

Chapter 5: Capitalism as Antithetical to Universal Dignity

Ch 5.1: The Market as a Means to Access Capabilities

Now having a positive account of what constitutes a dignified life, let us return to the position of wage slavery. As I have posited, while all worker labour within capitalism may be exploitative, this alone does not constitute a dignity violation. It is disingenuous to suggest that all workers are having their dignity violated. There are many workers who can easily exercise their ten central capabilities with ease, and are able to engage in social, political, and intellectual whims. However, for those in a position of wage slavery, where an individual is barely able to

reproduce themselves, I argue that such positions constitute dignity violations. Individuals within this position are not able to fully express their autonomy because of the inherent threat of deprivation underpinning the capitalist system. The capitalist system leverages this threat of deprivation to force workers to sell their labour, the activity that both generates value and is the fundamental activity of humanity, to capitalists.

When describing the reasons for why capabilities are harmed, Nussbaum refers to someone not being able to afford something. This was the case for Vasanti. Nussbaum is acutely aware of the fact that an individual's financial situation directly impacts their ability to exercise their capabilities. Vasanti's family was not able to afford to send her to school, as they needed the wages generated by her labour power to continue to afford to live. To return to Nussbaum's example of sexual assault, her reasoning for why sexual assault violates an individual's dignity is because of the harm that is deliberately inflicted to the victims ability to exercise their capabilities. Their ability to engage in various 'functionings' are harmed because of their inability to acquire their basic needs in the market. In order to manifest the central capability of 'health' one must be nourished. However, engagement with the market is required to manifest this capability. If one cannot afford to pay for food, they will either not eat, or must rely on external entities to provide them with food or the ability to acquire food. For example, the functioning of whether or not an individual cannot afford to eat or charity is unable to acquire food is the same. The individual goes hungry.

It is clear that the capabilities approach aims to foster a greater level of freedom as represented by an increase in 'functionings' that an individual can meaningfully participate in. Nussbaum is explicit in this noting "...freedom to choose [is] built into the notion of capability."⁹⁵ For many things, freedom of choice is represented through engagement with the market. Needs

⁹⁵ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 36.

are all constrained by engagement with the market. Food and shelter are both necessities which are prerequisites to fulfilling central capabilities. However, access to both food and shelter are largely predicated on an individual's ability to acquire these things within the market.

Ch 5.2: Mass Produced Dehumanization

As stated at the outset of this chapter, I acknowledge that not all labour undertaken by a worker constitutes a violation of an individual's dignity even though it is exploitative. The reasoning being that the standard for what ought to be considered a dignity ought to be uniquely high. However, I argue that the position of wage slavery meets the criteria set out by Nussbaum to constitute a dignity violation. The position of wage slavery does not arise incidentally. Rather, it is a direct consequence of a system devoted to the accumulation of wealth for a handful of people at the expense of the worker. The position of wage slavery is one wherein the individual's ability to exercise their capabilities are greatly harmed by choices made by capitalists. A capitalist does not need to be excessively cruel to inflict such harm. Because the worker is simply a part of the labour process, they are understood not as someone's means to exist, but as a business expense like any other. Indeed, as Marx predicted, the position of wage slavery is something which is built into the innate inequality of the capitalist system. The capitalist mode of production, being the production of surplus value not of use-values, incentivises generating higher rates of surplus value. While the exchange value of commodities is not determined by the capitalist, as it is defined by the amount of socially necessary labour time, the wage paid to workers is defined by the capitalist. The minimum threshold of wages, that being, only what is required for the worker to reproduce themselves and nothing more, is desirable for the capitalist. Simply, paying a worker less results in a greater return of surplus value.

The individual in a position of wage bondage rarely chooses to be in such a position. Rather, it is a necessity as wages are required for them to live. The threat of deprivation exists at the core of the worker-capitalist dynamic: particularly in the position of wage slavery. Wage slaves, like chattel slaves, must rely on a dominant class of society to exploit their labour in order to continue living. The capitalist system, being chiefly concerned with generating surplus value, necessitates that the production of workers is defined by capitalist needs, rather than the needs of the individual. The individual, while able to exercise some ability to self-determine, is largely beholden to the whims of capitalists. As Marx suggests, because the worker is themselves reduced to a commodity because of their role in the capitalist mode of production, so to do so they forfeit a central element of self-determination. Namely, that an individual ought not be used as a means to an end.

The dignity violations Nussbaum is concerned with stem from the underlying social construction based on the capitalist mode of production as purchasing power within the market. In order to fully understand what barriers lay between an individual and their capabilities, the lack of control they have over their labour must first be confronted. Once confronted, it becomes clear that while Marx's account of dignity violations may not apply to each position a worker can occupy, the exploitation, domination, and alienation that workers in the position of wage slavery suffer is harmful to their dignity. The material deprivations that wage slaves individuals face harms their dignity through a harming of their abilities to fully exercise their capabilities and acquire their needs. However, the root cause of these material deprivations is the violations suffered by the inability of workers to control their own labour free of domination.

To become desensitised to a system that produces dehumanising positions as a consequence of adhering to the central motivation of said system we ourselves become

dehumanised. The ability to empathise with others is indispensable to our ability to Nussbaum's project. A project I hold in incredibly high regard. However, if the production of dehumanising positions is simply accepted as a necessary evil, then the project of ensuring that each human is able to live a dignified life is threatened.

CH 5.3: The Expectations and Promises of Liberal Capitalism

It is clear from the explicit project of the capabilities approach that the measure of what constitutes a good life cannot be reduced down to economic measurements. But the promises of liberal capitalism seem ill-equipped to handle the production of positions of dignity violations. The promises of liberalism and cosmopolitanism espoused by Nussbaum increasingly ignore the fundamental underpinnings of the problem at hand. As much is noted by Jeff Noonan. He notes that “[d]espite [Nussbaum’s] not infrequent references to Marx, she nowhere seeks to elaborate an analogous criticism of capitalism as a society systematically steered by the goal of expanding the production of money-capital at the expense of the satisfaction of human life-requirements and the enjoyment of intrinsically life-valuable human capacities.”⁹⁶ Noonan identifies that the barriers to the valuable human capacities is the capitalist system itself. My own criticisms of Nussbaum’s commitment to dignity follow much the same logic.

The problem with the capitalist mode of production is that it necessarily requires that labour produces more than itself, allowing for the creation of surplus value for the benefit of the capitalist. Because the capitalist class exists on the basis of the creation of and subsequent theft of surplus value, the system itself requires a relationship of domination between the capitalist and the worker. The worker must always be in a relationship where they are exploited. For those who labour simply not to die, it is difficult to see how such an individual exercises their ability to

⁹⁶ Noonan, Jeff. “The Contradictions of Nussbaum’s Liberalism.” *International Critical Thought* 1, no. 4 (2011): 427–436.

self-determine as an autonomous agent within a system that merely considers them another commodity that exists for the purpose of producing surplus-value.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This project exists to advocate for the abolition of a position I strongly feel both constitutes a dignity violation and is a consequence of the continued and dogmatic use of the capitalist mode of production. For the purposes of this paper, the first claim is more significant. If I have only been convinced in my claim that the position of wage slavery ought to be understood as violating the inherent dignity of an individual, and therefore should be abolished, then I feel I have been successful in my project. This is not to suggest that I am dismissing the charges I myself levelled at the capitalist system. While I hope that this is sufficiently convincing to motivate actions that would see the capitalist system dismantled I must also acknowledge that I am unable to fully articulate and express such convictions here given the scope of this paper. Discussions around how to dismantle, change, or otherwise adapt the capitalist system rapidly turn into a discussion of reform versus revolution. Defenders of capitalism, like Nussbaum, argue that a sufficiently regulated capitalist system can achieve the goal of ensuring dignity for all people. Taking the traditional liberal approach that reformation as opposed to revolution is the avenue to progress. Given the scope of this paper, I am unable to present a full argument on the topic of reformation versus revolution. However, given the dehumanisation that modern capitalist states place their citizens in, it is of the utmost importance to be highly critical of how we, as a species, understand and engage in labour. We need not yoke other humans into dehumanising positions for the sake of maintaining our own positions of dignity. To do so collectively dehumanises us.

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