

# Compare and contrast hegel and marx's understanding of alienation essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



The contemporary and generalised definition of alienation is “ the feeling that you have no connection with the people around you”. The feeling of being alienated from your environment because you are not familiar with your surroundings, for example a foreigner visiting another country can be seen as alienated from the native population as he or she is not familiar with the norms and customs of that environment. However, in the context of philosophy alienation arguably has many diverse understandings depending on the viewpoint.

In the philosophical sphere, many scholars have argued in favour or against Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Heinrich Marx's understanding of alienation. This essay will therefore portray both Marx's and Hegel's concept and understanding of alienation. Hegel's and Marx's understanding of alienation will be portrayed throughout this essay, and any similarities and differences between both concepts will also be noted. Once, both Marx's and Hegel's understanding of alienation have been explored, the question of whether is Marx and Hegel's understanding of alienation still relevant today will also be answered.

Marx's theory of alienation “ is the distance and estrangement man comes to experience in the limiting, constraining conditions of his practical creative activity in the context of nature and society”. Marx's was a pioneer in promoting materialist philosophy emphasised by the fact that his theoretical origin of alienation stems from the social structure and not from the individual, he strongly believed that the make up of the capitalist society is

organised to alienate labour as workers must in fact work for the capitalists who control the means of production.

Marx's theory of alienation is deeply entrenched in his strong belief against the capitalist economic model giving rise to his idea of alienated labour, "Marx looks on human labour as one of the chief ways in which humans are distinguished from non-human animals". According to Marx's theory of alienation, there are four aspects of the alienation of labour; the first of these is the separation of the worker from the product of their labour.

This entails that the worker creates a product or object for the market under capitalism; however the product that he or she has created is totally alien to them as the worker has no say on; what the product should be, no control over work conditions and the inevitable separation of the product from the worker. Marx concludes by declaring the fact that "Commodities produced by labour are taken away from the worker and sold" thus "labour itself becomes a commodity".

This alienation of labour brings power and money to the 'capitalists' owning the factories and production lines, while depriving the workers as "The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, assumes an external existence, but that it exists independently, outside himself, and alien to him, and that it stands opposed to him as an autonomous power". The second aspect of the alienation of labour according to Marx is alienation through the process of production itself or work.

Marx declares the physical process of production undertaken by the worker is an active form of alienation, as mentioned before the object produced is going to be separated from the worker and the market and capitalists control the production. Marx is trying to emphasise the fact that under capitalism the action of work is external to the individual, not in his or hers nature as the act of work becomes a burden with no satisfaction and is only a means of providing money for food, shelter and other basics.

Thus, as mentioned above Marx's belief in human labour being the most distinguished factor between humans and animals is greatly undermined, " Instead of work being an exercise of human creativity, workers feel free only in their animal functions (eating, sleeping, etc. ) and not in their human function (creative work). The potentially creative nature of human labour, that which distinguishes humans from non-human animals, is denied to workers".

Furthermore, another aspect of alienation in the form of human labour portrayed by Marx is the fact the worker is alienated from the human species and human potential. Marx emphasises that the worker is being alienated from their own human potential as individuals are forced to act more like machines than human beings. Humans depart from the likes of animals as they possess free will and have a conscious; " Conscious life activity distinguishes man from the life activity of animals".

Humans are defined by their ability to self-consciously choose their own life activity and express free activity as an essence of humanity. Therefore, Marx

argues that labour alienates the individual from expressing free activity as a human being; the individual is disadvantaged and is only important in the context of a worker under the guise of the political economy. In addition, "life activity, productive life, now appear to man only as means for the satisfaction of a need, the need to maintain physical existence", thus emphasising that human labour has to adapt to nature rather than conquering nature. 17] The final concept of alienation of labour Marx portrays is how the labour under capitalism alienates human beings from one and other. Marx argues that under capitalism human relationships become only money related, undermining the fact that humans are social beings. Marx states that the relationship of exchange between people should be that of exchange, not only money related as this in consequence alienates the individual from human life, rendering human beings alienated from one and other.

On the other hand, Hegel's theory of alienation is arguably very different than Marx's to a great extent, "As with Hegel, that is to say, there are aspects of alienation which are not specific to capitalism but apply to all historical societies" Hegel's theory's of philosophy is built on idealism where the mind is absolute, whereas Marx's theology as mentioned before stems from the materialistic ideology; "For Hegel, it should be noted... 'spirit' is not something abstractly mental but, rather, human being; and material labour is a 'spiritual' activity in that it leads to human development... or Hegel, this is ultimately a process which takes place primarily within

consciousness and self-consciousness. Marx, by contrast, insists upon the primacy of the material and economic factors in human development”.

Hegel does not share the same critic for the alienation of labour as Marx does, in fact Hegel embraces the idea as he “ sees labour as the essence, the self-conforming essence, of man; he sees only the positive and not the negative side of labour”. This is clearly in stark contrast to the condemning perspective of alienation through human labour Marx portrays. 24] Moreover, Hegel’s theory of alienation contrasts vastly from that of Marx’s because of the fact that Hegel arguably embraces alienation as a “ universal, ontological, and characteristic of self-conscious spirit... the Marxist concept of alienation is capable of serving as a critical concept in a way that Hegel’s is not ”. Thus, once again it is easy to point out the fact that the difference between the core ideological beliefs of both Hegel and Marx has resulted in very contrasting ideas about the concept of alienation.

According to Hegel’s diverse concept of idealism, Hegel regards alienation from nature as a feature of self-conscious spirit and it is a fundamental fact that the self-conscious spirit must attempt to overcome alienation. What’s more, Hegel’s idea of self-conscious spirit is historical in character, Hegel states spirit can and will overcome alienation when it has completed its development, in other words when the spirit is no longer an outsider or ‘ alien’ to the world. However, it can also be argued there are some similarities between Hegel’s and Marx’s theory of alienation and work.

Both Hegel and Marx agree that work or in other words labour is imperative to man and that humans have a conscious. Marx “ describes work as man’s ‘ vital activity’, his ‘ species activity’, ‘ man’s spiritual essence, his human essence”, and similarly “ These ideas are also fundamental to Hegel’s philosophy. According to Hegel, work plays an essential role in distinguishing human beings from other animals”. Both philosophers also agree on the fact that humans are not just mere animals, but a self-conscious being.

Hegel and Marx also agree on the subject of artistic activity being the highest form of free creation that a human possesses, again emphasising the fact that unlike a human being an animal is not free and thus incapable of creating art through its own free will. This is questionably a crucial issue that both Hegel and Marx agree on, as in the context of alienation, the ability to freely and actively create art and have a self-conscious as a human being are the two fundamental characteristics that are undoubtedly unique to man, arguably the only barrier avoiding total alienation.

To digress, Marx’s theory of alienation is unquestionably relevant still to this day. As mentioned in this essay, Marx’s theory of alienation refers to four different concepts of labour alienation, of which the first two are very prominent in this modern era. The first aspect of alienation in labour today is the separation of the worker from the product; this can be put into context today by highlighting the thousands of factories set up by Multi National Co-operations (MNCs) in poorer developing countries.

As Marx would undoubtedly claim, these 'private' companies have strategically targeted these countries to keep wages down, thus keeping production costs down, allowing the capitalists to hold onto a monopoly. In addition, the second aspect of the alienation of labour according to Marx is alienation through the process of production itself or work, labourers working on a systematic 'monotonous' production line have very little to no job satisfaction and to emphasise Marx's theory, most production line workers rarely see the fruits of their labour and in many cases would not be able to even afford 'their' finished product.

However, you can also argue to an extent that Marx's theory on alienation of labour is not really relevant in some places in the world today. As mentioned before, Marx's theory of alienation is heavily emphasised around the capitalist model, his solution was the progression to the fourth stage where the world will be communist has not come about, and looks highly unlikely. And for those countries which are still entirely communist like North Korea are arguably ironically one of the most isolated and alienated nations in the modern world.

Also, Marx only mentions the labour market and private property as a cause for alienation, however many other aspects such as race, ethnicity and gender is also reportedly a cause for alienation today. Marx's theory of alienation only in relation to the capital-labour market would be considered a very narrow minded approach today for dealing with the cause and solution of alienation.



It can also be claimed Hegel's theory in this modern era is not significant and satisfactory in portraying the causes and solutions of alienation. Although it can be agreed upon Hegel's notion of human labour and productivity is the path forward for development. However, Hegel's theory of alienation arguably fails to acknowledge the fact that today alienation for example at a place of work is not really acceptable, whereas Hegel's theory rather inadequate and outdated on the sensitive issue of alienation.

In conclusion, Marx and Hegel do have very minute similarities in their theories of alienation. Both these great philosophers acknowledged the fact that human beings are conscious beings, with the unique quality of freely creating art. However, the similarities are limited to just that and the differences between both alienation theories far out way the similarities. Firstly it is crucial to reminisce that both Marx and Hegel believed in very diverse philosophies.

Hegel was an idealist, who was adamant about mind over matter and thus his theory of alienation portrayed the notion that the self-conscious spirit will and can overcome alienation, he also believed people can express themselves through private property and it can be a manipulation of alienation. And it can also be said Hegel's theory of alienation is not relevant today. On the other hand, Marx's theory of alienation differs a lot from that of Hegel's. Marx was a diehard materialist and a communist which affected his theory of alienation substantially.

Marx's theory of the alienation of labour was closely based around the critical capitalist labour market. Marx's theory on alienation was very critical towards the capital-labour market as it pretty much condemned all workers to alienation; he expresses this through the four different aspects of alienation of labour discussed in this essay. In addition, Marx's theory of alienation also condemned the private ownership of property as he saw the ownership of property as a means for the bourgeoisie to further manipulate and alienate the proletariat.