

In some ways, the past two hundred years of one area of ethical thought have been an argument between three groups of people: owners, workers, and us. These three groups share a story, but interpret the story in different ways.

In his *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith introduces an idea that we can use to stand for a key component of capitalism. He describes how the division of labor can produce more of a quantity. In his example, if people divided the process of making a pin into steps, then together they could produce more pins than any of them could alone. Naturally, the same idea applies to individuals who wish to engage the labor of others to produce products.

The division of labor, and later the assembly line, has indisputably transformed the lives of billions of people. These have allowed companies to produce more products using fewer capital and labor resources. Indeed, as Leonard Read points out in his charming "I, Pencil", the division of labor has become so specialized that there is scarcely a single person who processes the knowledge and know-how to make even a single pencil. Now, however, pencils by the millions are produced by a few workers and their machines. Not just pencils, but pens, computers, laptops, and iPads. The desire to make a profit in the marketplace has produced beneficial innovations too numerous to count. The material products in the First World, even to a person of limited means, are giant testimonies to the benefits of capitalism and techno-science. Let me just give one set of examples: this essay was first drafted on an iPhone, which updated through my WiFi to the iCloud and then I copied into a Word document on my computer, put on a flashdrive, and edited on my laptop. I did all this while listening to music from an iPod, and with all the comforts that a middle-class lifestyle provides. That one can do all this, all this that seems to differ little from magic, is one side of the story.

The very same process which makes the division of labor pin-maker more efficient also produces a monotonously repetitive job for the one performing the labor. One repeatedly performs the same simple action. The very same division of labor that makes the production of the pencil makes a monotonously repetitive job for the one trapping the rubber and a dangerous one for the person in the mines. Time and again, from the reduced wages paid to women and children in textile mills in Britain to the wages paid to Chinese to produce iPhones or shoes, we have seen that companies are willing to exploit labor, to pay them subsistence wages, in order to more cost effectively produce a product. Consider, for a moment, the bateys involved in the production of sugar. Furthermore, this process of breaking a job down into smaller components reduces the power of labor. These simple jobs only need unskilled labor, labor that is also easier to train and easier to replace.

Both of these interpretations of the pin-story are true. They are two aspects of the same action: if we break an activity down into simplistic steps to be performed over and over we also create a boring job. If a company moves a plant to an area where labor is cheaper, we will also soon hear news of workers in the first area losing their jobs.

The current system seems great for a few while it creates misery for many more. As people not involved in pin-making or its equivalent, it's easy, too easy, to conclude that there is little that one can do to change the situation. It matters little if I stop using pins, sugar, oil, water, or any of a thousand other products; the injustices will continue and I will have needlessly deprived myself of pins and sugar.

In response to this, I don't know the right course of action. Do I stop buying goods, do I continue to feel alienated; do I seek to do as little harm as possible; do I speak out against the worst offenders, do I stand up for the most oppressed; do I do nothing? I don't have the answers to these questions, but I believe they are issues worth discussing. As for me, sometimes the only thing I can do is thank the fates that I am not now at the bottom of the totem pole.

April 2013