**Mises: The Disutility of Labor**

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“Well, a bad day of fishing is better than a good day at work,” jokes the wise fisherman. This whimsical thought tells us more than we might initially think. It reflects the individual’s everyman view of the relationship between labor and leisure. This turbulent but necessary relationship is a central point in the study of human action, where man engages in a grueling and uncomfortable labor process to enjoy the eventual benefits of a full day of fishing and drinking.

The relationship between leisure and labor propelled many historical ideas, including the works of several prominent socialists. Karl Kautsky, a well-known socialist thinker in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, recognized the pain often involved in the laborious process. However, Kautsky asserted that the disutility of labor was an inherent issue of capitalism, and a socialist revolution would need to transform labor from pain into pleasure. In contrast, the Austrian economist Ludwig Von Mises argues against Kautsky’s claims in his book *Human Action*, stating that Kautsky incorrectly based his belief that socialism can transform labor’s pain into pleasure on a misinterpretation of what characterizes an activity as work.[[1]](#endnote-1) According to Mises, labor creates disutility as long as the worker engages in the laborious process as a means to attain a specific end. Hence, work is inherently unpleasant, creating a loss of utility due to discomfort and foregone leisure utility.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The puzzle seems clear: if we examine the laborious process purely in terms of utility, why do individuals constantly engage in work activities deemed to reduce utility? A simple answer is that labor involves delayed gratification; man endures the negative utility of working only to enjoy the utility of leisure later. Mises noticed this curious relationship between labor and leisure and attempted to elucidate what seems to be a polarizing relationship. When working, a man seemingly engages in a process that does not grant a positive utility. Although many people do not enjoy the activity of working, they still endure it as a means to achieve a determined end. Hence, in order for an action to be considered labor, according to Mises, the individual must perceive that activity as a means to an end.

In the following sections, we will examine Mises’s definition of labor, his conceptualization of the disutility of labor, and a few exceptions that might overcome the disutility of labor. Finally, we will conclude our thoughts in the last section.

The Nature of Labor

While labor is initially perceived to be a standard concept, the idea of human labor can easily be incorporated into activities that should not be classified as labor. In *Human Action*, Mises defines human labor as the “employment of the physiological functions and manifestations of human life as a means.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Labor is defined as a tool for attaining specific human ends. Consequently, leisure is its polar opposite – the act of forgoing labor.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Labor is an inherently scarce resource since humans have a finite quantity of energy; hence, “every unit of labor can only bring about a limited effect.”[[5]](#endnote-5) A consequence of the scarcity of labor is the incapacity of individuals to attain every possible end or desire. Humans must choose wisely how and for what ends they will employ their physiological functions. Given its scarcity, workers need to economize their physiological functions and only employ it where they find it suitable for the attainment of an end. Such differences in abilities and pursued ends lead to differences among the workers: People face differences in their physiological function (e.g., their abilities) and what they prioritize through their physiological function. Mises describes this as the “work a certain individual can perform is more suitable for some ends, less suitable for other ends, and altogether unsuitable for still other ends.” [[6]](#endnote-6)

For the sake of comparison, Mises describes a hypothetical world where labor is abundant and thereby unconstrained by scarcity. In this world, all material factors of production are completely employed – including the labor supply. Consequently, the employment of more labor would not lead to an increase in output. As Mises points out, the wages offered by the market in this scenario would be insufficient to financially sustain an individual or their family. The price would be extremely low since an abundant labor supply would exist. Like any other product, if widely available and easily replaceable, all else being equal, the price of that good will be lower than if it was not widely available.

In reality, our world is constrained by labor’s inherent scarcity, among other constraints. For instance, labor may not always be easily replaceable or widely available. Just as workers exhibit differences in physiological functions, workers’ productivity also varies. Similarly, Mises asserts there is an inherent inequality among the results of their labor, which makes the results of any given laborer’s work vary significantly in terms of quality and quantity. Thus, it is unlikely that any two workers will have the same level of productivity. Take Adam Smith’s pin factory as an example: A worker whose job is to straighten the wire might have a different level of productivity than another worker who performs the same job.

*The Disutility of Labor*

Initially, Mises’s definition of labor may appear overly broad since it is easy to think of examples where humans employ physiological functions for the attainment of a specific end but would not necessarily be considered work. Imagine a recreational tennis player who employs physical effort as a means to attain the end of winning the match. Is the activity of the tennis player considered human labor? Mises replied to this point by using a similar analogy:

Hunting game was and is for many people regular disutility-creating labor. But there are people for whom it is pure pleasure. In Europe amateur hunters buy from the owner of the hunting-ground the right to shoot a definite number of game of a definite type. The purchase of this right is separated from the price to be paid for the bag. If the two purchases are linked together, the price by far exceeds the prices that can be obtained on the market for the bag.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Here, Mises stresses two points. First, one of labor’s defining characteristics is that its byproducts result in disutility for the worker. Second, he posits that the higher price paid to hunt is evidence that these hunters obtain utility from hunting. Mises asserts that the context and subjective preferences of people performing similar tasks distinguish the purposeful actions as either labor or leisure, based on differing ends.

For instance, fishing, like hunting, is practiced as both a hobby and work. Fishermen who go at dawn to set up their nets in the margins of a lake and return at sunset to sell their catches to provide for their families are engaging in a functionally different activity from fishermen who fish with friends during a hot summer weekend. The difference lies simply in the idea that the two groups of fishermen experience the disutility of labor with differing motivations. The disutility of labor, like utility in general, depends on the individuals’ subjective utility.

By the concept of the disutility of labor, Mises means that there is an uneasiness related to labor. That is, all else being equal, people value leisure more than they value the expenditure of labor. Leisure, in that sense, “is valued as a good and that labor is regarded as a burden.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Therefore, leisure or the attainment of leisure can be seen as an end of purposeful behavior. If, on the one hand, leisure is considered an end in itself, on the other hand, labor can be viewed as a means to an end. Thus, when someone is working, “the worker gives up leisure and submits to the disutility of labor in order to enjoy either the product or what other people are ready to give him for it.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

Mises argues that a worker only chooses to work “because he prefers the proceeds he can earn by working to the disutility of labor and the pleasures of leisure.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Only leisure can provide immediate gratification without the disutility of labor. Instead, “People trade the disutility-bringing labor for the products of labor; labor is for them a source of mediate gratification.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Regarding individuals’ motivations, “People work because they want to reap the produce of labor.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Labor is simply a means to an end, not, in most cases, the end itself.

It is important to note that Mises distinguishes between “Introversive Labor and Extroversive Labor” but argues that “seen from the point of view of economics, introversive labor is to be qualified as consumption.”[[13]](#endnote-13)Mises defines extroversive labor as labor where “he prefers the proceeds he can earn by working to the disutility of labor and the pleasures of leisure.”[[14]](#endnote-14) By contrast, introversive labor “is expended because the disutility of labor in itself – and not its product – satisfies.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Acts of service such as religiously-motivated acts, climbing a mountain for the achievement attained, or working toward self-improvement, Mises argues, all constitute introversive labor. In the case where fishing is a recreational activity, for instance, the disutility of fishing is part of the consumption process. While those who fish for leisure could purchase fish from the supermarket rather than endure the laborious fishing process, they engage in introversive labor as a consumption behavior.

In sum, Mises views extroversive labor as the only economically relevant form of labor, and it is the type of labor most comparable to Kautsky’s argument. A logical implication of Mises’s position is that if there is some “labor” that creates pleasure instead of reducing it, if there is some type of labor where there is no disutility of labor, no wage will be awarded for that activity. In Mises’s framework, extroversive labor requires the activity to be an end, not a means to an end, which makes bearing labor’s immediate disutility worthwhile. Even if, as Kautsky asserts, labor’s pain is transformed into pleasure, it no longer functions as labor in the economic sense but as a consumption-based introversive labor. Hence, in reality, any such activity is not labor *per se* but leisure.

No activity can simultaneously be labor and leisure in Mises’s framework. The functions of leisure and labor are separate in his mind from the emotional relationship to (extroversive) labor. Thus, “The joy of labor therefore can neither alleviate nor remove the disutility of labor. Neither must the joy of labor be confused with the immediate gratification provided by certain kinds of work. It is an attendant phenomenon which proceeds either from labor’s mediate gratification, the produce or reward, or from some accessory circumstances.”[[16]](#endnote-16) Mises further argues that the joys of labor depend partially on ideological factors, and these ideologies are interchangeable in the laborer’s eyes:

However, the joy of labor … can be eliminated by ideological influences and be replaced by the tedium of labor. The worker begins to hate his work if he becomes convinced that what makes him submit to the disutility of labor is not his own higher valuation of the stipulated compensation, but merely an unfair social system. Deluded by the slogans of the socialist propagandists, he fails to realize that the disutility of labor is an inexorable fact of human conditions, something ultimately given that cannot be removed by devices or methods of social organization. He falls prey to the Marxian fallacy that in a socialist commonwealth work will arouse not pain but pleasure.[[17]](#endnote-17) [[18]](#endnote-18)

This argument illustrates that the ideological context does not influence labor production or the disutility of labor since “people do not work for the sake of labor’s joy, but for the sake of the mediate gratification… The joy of labor is no substitute for the mediate gratification of labor.”[[19]](#endnote-19)

Mises’s argument applies equally to the case of the two groups of fishermen. The first group is giving up leisure time and submitting to the disutility of labor. That is, fishing is a burdensome activity they engage in to attain a specific end – in this case, their family’s survival. The fishermen bear the burden of waking up early, facing the heat of a clear summer day’s sun, the burden of the employment of physical and mental energy into the labor-intensive activity of fixing and placing the nets, steering the boat, and pulling the fish on board. They endure this so that, after an entire day at the lake, they may sell some fish at a local market to sustain their families. Fishing, in this case, is simply a taxing process for eventually attaining the desired end.

The second group of fishermen, however, practice a very similar activity. They wake up early on the weekend and spend an entire day at the lake. They do this so that they can return at the end of the day with a few pictures, a catch, and some fishing stories. However, for these fishermen, the entire fishing process only created enjoyment. Just as “The mountain-climber does not want simply to reach the peak, he wants to reach it by climbing…”[[20]](#endnote-20), the fishermen’s disutility of labor created pleasure and excitement and is linked to the experience. The fishing weekend activity was an end in itself. The goal of the activity was not to provide for their families or any other goal that requires fishing as a means.

The same argument applies to the hunter. Someone who hunts for a living engages in a different physical and mental activity from someone who practices hunting as a sport. Suppose both hunters employ the same number of calories in the activity, use the same rifle, camouflage, and truck, and spend the same time of their day hunting. All else being equal, the only difference between their externally identical activities is that one serves as a means to an end. In contrast, the other serves as an end, even if no physiological differences set them apart. Hence, one hunter’s actions lead to the disutility of labor, and the other hunter’s actions lead only to enjoyment and pleasure. The hunter who hunts for a living engages in the laborious process, whereas the hunter who hunts for fun engages in leisure since they are forgoing actual work to enjoy a day of hunting.

Mises’s position is highly connected to a marginalist, individualistic, and subjectivist approach to economics. Nothing inherent in physical activity defines economically relevant labor; an entire range of activities requires a level of physical and mental effort from individuals, but these efforts are not equally comparable. In practical economic terms, what truly defines labor is the idea that the individual perceives that action as a means, not an end. The disutility of labor depends on each individual’s rationalization of their action. That is, if an individual perceives fishing as a means to attain an income, then fishing is labor, and the individual is subjected to the disutility of labor. However, if the individual perceives fishing as an end of itself, then fishing is not labor but leisure.

*The Labor Utopia*

The misunderstanding of the disutility of labor phenomenon gave rise to a common interpretation of working relations among socialist thinkers. Socialist thinkers identified the poor working conditions created by the Industrial Revolution as one of the primary factors driving the discomfort of engaging in the laborious process. Kautsky argues that Socialists sought to transform labor into

…a joy, so that it will be a pleasure to work, so that the laborer will go to his work with pleasure. To be sure that is not so simple a thing, but at least a beginning to it can be made by the proletariat at the beginning of its rule in that it will shorten the hours of labor. At the same time it will endeavor to make the place of labor more hygienic and friendly and to take from the labor process as much as possible its disagreeable repulsive side that the laborer will go to his work with pleasure.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Kautsky believed it is possible to transform the discomfort associated with labor into joy. That is, by promoting better working conditions and more labor regulations, the laborer will yield, on net, pleasure from labor. Similarly, Engels claims that, in a socialist commonwealth, “productive work, instead of a means of enslavement, becomes a means of liberating people by offering each individual the opportunity to develop and use all of their abilities, physical and mental, in all directions, and in which it is so a burden becomes a pleasure.”[[22]](#endnote-22) Mises cites this as the “Marxian fallacy that in a socialist commonwealth work will arouse not pain but pleasure.”[[23]](#endnote-23)

Mises points out that it is a mistake to attribute the disutility of labor exclusively to the capitalist system. Mises argues that the disutility of labor is a phenomenon that is an inextricable part of human nature. The idea that a more regulated economy overcomes the disutility of labor ignores the root of the phenomenon.

People have misinterpreted this fact grotesquely and have based on this misinterpretation fantastic plans for social reforms. One of the main dogmas of socialism is that labor has disutility only within the capitalist system of production, while under socialism it will be pure delight. We may disregard the effusions of the poor lunatic Charles Fourier. But Marxian “scientific” socialism does not differ in this point from the utopians. One of its foremost champions, Karl Kautsky, expressly declares that a chief task of a proletarian regime will be to transform labor from a pain into a pleasure.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Mises provides several reasons why it is impossible to disentangle the disutility of labor from labor itself. First, limiting the hours of labor does not change the phenomenon itself. Whether the laborer works six or twelve hours per day, they will still face labor’s disutility. The foregone time spent laboring could be spent on more pleasurable activities, regardless of whether the marginal disutility of labor changes based on the hours worked.

In addition, Mises argues that this policy effectively increases labor’s scarcity and indirectly makes capital goods scarcer as well, which “may entirely undo the potential rise in the marginal productivity of labor as against the marginal productivity of capital goods.”[[25]](#endnote-25) He states that this shift originates in a capitalist system, not in spite of exploitation:

Capitalism, says Marx, unthinkingly repeating the fables of the eulogists of the Middle Ages, has an inevitable tendency to impoverish the workers more and more. The truth is that capitalism has poured a horn of plenty upon the masses of wage earners who frequently did all they could to sabotage the adoption of those innovations which render their life more agreeable…Capitalism, by raising the standard of living, changes the worker’s valuation of leisure over time. Better supplied with the amenities of life as he is, he sooner reaches the point at which he looks upon any further increment in the disutility of labor as an evil which is no longer outweighed by the expected further increment in labor’s mediate gratification… As far as the allegedly prolabor laws decreed measures which were not merely the ratification of changes already effected or the anticipation of changes to be expected in the immediate future, they hurt the material interests of the workers.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Mises argues that such limits on labor cannot decouple the inherent trade-off between labor and leisure consumption. Since the enjoyment of leisure depends on the standard of living and the amount of labor exerted to reach said standard of living, a decrease in the marginal productivity of labor from reducing labor’s supply comes at the expense of a decreased utility of leisure. There is still an opportunity cost to forgoing additional labor or leisure. The government would effectively be restricting the laborer’s freedom to choose if the disutility of one more hour of labor outweighs the delayed benefits of that same hour of labor. As Mises points out, like any other economic phenomenon, labor depends on the worker's subjective marginal utility, not solely on whether the institutional setting is capitalist or socialist.

*Labor’s Mental Perception*

Kautsky implicitly asserts that the disutility of labor is dependent upon the setting. Similarly, Marx argues that labor’s disutility is tied to the alienation of labor, which occurs in a capitalist system:

The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. The *devaluation* of the world of men is in direct proportion to the *increasing value* of the world of things. Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a *commodity* – and this at the same rate at which it produces commodities in general.[[27]](#endnote-27)

While Mises argues that the division of labor increases the utility of leisure over time, Marx argues that it increases labor’s disutility by alienation in a private property-driven capitalist system, stating that “Labor’s realization is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as loss of realization for the workers; objectification as loss of the object and bondage to it; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation.”[[28]](#endnote-28) Mises criticizes the argument that Marx’s ideology[[29]](#endnote-29) can explain labor’s disutility throughout human action, firstly on a logic-based approach, and Marxian ideology:

Marx had a solution at hand. Human reason, he asserted, is constitutionally unfitted to find truth. The logical structure of mind is different with various social classes. There is no such thing as a universally valid logic. What mind produces can never be anything but “ideology,” that is in the Marxian terminology, a set of ideas disguising the selfish interests of the thinker’s own social class. Hence, the “bourgeois” mind of the economists is utterly incapable of producing more than an apology for capitalism.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Mises further explains that the mental perception or ‘ideology’ of the disutility of labor is altogether separate from Mises’s conception of the disutility of labor:[[31]](#endnote-31)

No ideology, however impressively emphasized and taught, can affect the disutility of labor. It is impossible to remove or to alleviate it by persuasion or hypnotic suggestion. On the other hand it cannot be increased by words and doctrines. The disutility of labor is a phenomenon unconditionally given. The spontaneous and carefree discharge of one’s own energies and vital functions in aimless freedom suits everybody better than the stern restraint of purposive effort.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Mises argues, “…it [The disutility of labor] cannot be increased by words and doctrines. The disutility of labor is a phenomenon unconditionally given.”[[33]](#endnote-33) Instead, the disutility of labor is an innate quality given by scarce human attention, resources, and time. Marx’s conception of labor is based on Hegel’s work, which Hegel describes as “desire held in check, it is vanishing *staved off*, or: work *cultivates and educates…*”[[34]](#endnote-34) Mises argues that such Hegelian premises are ill-suited to the conception of labor, and often the result of misinterpretation.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Suppose Karl Kautsky’s assertion is correct and that a socialist system can transform labor from pain into pleasure.[[36]](#endnote-36) If that is the case, the activity that people perform in his socialist utopia cannot be considered labor, since it is not “the employment of their physiological functions for the attainment of ends other than the mere exercise of these functions. It is merely pleasure. It is an end in itself; it is done for its own sake and does not render any further service.”[[37]](#endnote-37) If, and only if, an activity is being exercised to achieve an end, can this activity be considered labor. Hence, if socialism transforms work into pleasure, then work under a socialist system cannot become labor but simple pleasure. The act of straightening the wire in a factory under a socialist regime is an end of itself and not labor. Under an alternative motive proposed by Mises, labor is undertaken so that the disutility of labor *is* the source of satisfaction; it ceases to be economically relevant and is more accurately categorized as a form of consumption.[[38]](#endnote-38) Such activities create a disconnect between Kautsky’s and Mises’s definitions of what activities constitute labor. Nevertheless, these differences so far do not reflect the relationship between labor and markets for goods and services.

In this sense, in this utopian socialist economy, labor would not exist, and consequently, labor markets would be nonexistent. As Mises points out, “people trade the disutility-bringing labor for the products of labor.”[[39]](#endnote-39) Therefore, if labor does not yield disutility, then people cannot acquire the products of labor. Trade in this scenario ceases. Furthermore, if labor does not bring disutility, it would become abundant. Regardless of whether a laborer’s mindset or ideology makes labor more or less enjoyable, it cannot wholly remove the disutility of labor since, “The joy and the tedium of labor are psychological phenomena which influence neither the individual’s subjective valuation of the disutility and the mediate gratification of labor nor the price paid for labor on the market.”[[40]](#endnote-40)

Like any other service or good, if its supply increases, we will see a decrease in its equilibrium price. Wages likely reflect this relationship, as Mises asserts: “The eagerness of certain people to get jobs which offer an opportunity for the enjoyment of these particular satisfactions tends to lower wage rates in this field.”[[41]](#endnote-41) Nevertheless, a resulting decrease in the price of labor often does not hold true since it ignores the fact that the demand for labor is also affected by labor’s proposed positive utility. All else being equal, in a hypothetical world where suddenly every individual gains utility from labor – such as Kautsky’s hypothetical socialist system – there would be an increase in the labor supply, thereby reducing wages in equilibrium.

Opportunity cost and the law of diminishing marginal utility would still grant compensation. Even in the hypothetical world where labor is enjoyable, individuals are still subject to these economic principles. Economizing man will need to allocate their time among different activities, and they would still face diminishing marginal utility like any other pleasurable activity. If labor gives positive utility and is classified as consumption, the opportunity cost of foregoing other consumption activities that give positive utility remains.

This hypothetical world is nothing more than that – hypothetical. Labor as a source of delayed gratification is a means to an end, not an end in itself. While Mises asserts that people engage in labor for various reasons, including labor for labor’s sake, he argues that such activities are only a subset of labor activities. They are not of primary economic relevance. Transforming labor, as Kautsky suggests, involves transforming labor into consumption or leisure, but it cannot wholly negate the disutility of labor through physiological, psychological, or institutional changes. Mises admits that some labor can provide utility from its “joys and tediums.”[[42]](#endnote-42) These are separate from the disutility of labor, and in most cases, these motivations for labor are more accurately described as consumption, whereas the disutility of labor is most accurately applied to the cases where “He may work because he prefers the proceeds he can earn by working to the disutility of labor and the pleasures of leisure.”[[43]](#endnote-43) Even without these factors, Israel and Fegley observe that any labor activity’s opportunity cost involves foregoing leisure’s utility.[[44]](#endnote-44) People engage in the pain of labor – or, at minimum, foregoing the consumption of additional leisure – in order that they may purchase other activities, goods, and services.

Mises’s descriptions of labor intertwine multiple rationales for the causes of the disutility of labor, including psychological perceptions,[[45]](#endnote-45) physiological costs,[[46]](#endnote-46) and the opportunity costs of foregone consumption of leisure.[[47]](#endnote-47) These various sources of the disutility of labor often intermix Mises’s claims about the ways in which socialist goals of eliminating labor’s disutility are infeasible. Other economists often similarly describe these factors of Labor’s disutility. For instance, Jevons defined labor as “any painful exertion of mind or body undergone partly or wholly with a view to future good.”[[48]](#endnote-48) Despite this, even supposing that Kautsky’s assertions are correct in that some or all of the psychological and physiological factors Mises describes could be reduced or even transformed into positive utility under a socialist regime, labor’s opportunity cost is inescapable since every unit of labor incurred involves sacrificing some amount of leisure consumption.

*The Creative Genius*

One notable exception to Mises’s definition of labor is the creative genius. Creative geniuses are “pioneers,” people who discover and create what was previously unknown to mankind. A creative genius does not experience the phenomenon of the disutility of labor. According to Mises: “The activities of these prodigious men cannot be fully subsumed under the praxeological concept of labor. They are not labor because they are for the genius, not means but ends in themselves.”[[49]](#endnote-49)

For example, consider Michelangelo’s process of creating the *fresco* “The Creation of Adam” in the Sistine Chapel. During the creative process, Michelangelo does not face disutility since the task of creating the *fresco* is not a means to an end but an end itself. The artists are not necessarily searching for financial value as compensation for their work (even though many get compensated) but in search of aesthetic value.[[50]](#endnote-50)

Curiously, sometimes, artists ended up indirectly profiting in the search for aesthetic value. If the market values aesthetic value, then the artist, by pursuing the creation of aesthetically pleasing *frescos*,can profit from it. Nevertheless, though Michelangelo did not face the disutility of labor, he also did not necessarily gain gratification while completing his work. The process might have been frustrating, but not in the same sense as a regular laborious process.

It is, furthermore, impossible to substitute other people’s work for that of the creators. If Dante and Beethoven had not existed, one would not have been in a position to produce the *Divina Commedia* [italics in original] or the Ninth Symphony by assigning other men to these tasks. Neither society nor single individuals can substantially further the genius and his work.[[51]](#endnote-51)

A creative genius’s work cannot be equivocated to a production result of labor or leisure unambiguously in the same economic sense, Mises argues, since the act of creation is the end rather than a means.[[52]](#endnote-52) The work of the creative genius, their creation, remains one of the exceptions to the phenomenon known as the disutility of labor.

*Conclusion*

Mises’ understanding of the disutility of labor highlights the inherent discomfort associated with work. Individuals inherently perceive labor as a burden, which functions as a means rather than an end.[[53]](#endnote-53) This disutility motivates people to work for future leisure or other rewards until the marginal utility of additional labor is less than their marginal disutility of labor. Regardless of the economic system, the disutility of labor persists.

Mises’ analysis demonstrates that, despite improved working conditions, labor remains a source of disutility due to the inherent nature of real-world constraints such as time and physiological limitations. These constraints conflict with socialists’ claims that socialism would not only remove the disutility of labor but turn it into an enjoyable activity. Admittedly, there are exceptions to Mises’s argument, particularly the creative genius whose work surpasses the disutility of typical labor due to intrinsic motivation and creative fulfillment. However, his general criticisms of the socialist theories regarding labor – that the disutility of labor is unique to capitalism and that socialism can convert the disutility of labor into positive utility for workers – are not convincingly refuted. While the environment may contribute to the disutility of labor, Mises counters that there is no socialist utopia that overcomes the problems of scarcity and opportunity cost associated with labor.

While Mises acknowledges there are types of labor that provide fringe benefits to laborers, these are an end in themselves, or a form of consumption that does not wholly eliminate the disutility of labor. Mises’ praxeological framework emphasizes the subjective nature of labor and its disutility, reinforcing the argument that a desire to maximize utility ultimately motivates the laborious process with the expectation of gaining leisure in the future.

*Notes*

1. Ludwig Von Mises. *Human Action* *A Treatise of Economics*. (Mansfield Centre, Ct: Martino Publishing, 1949[2012]), 133&137 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The concept of loss of utility is often referred as disutility. This term appears as early as the 1879 work of the economist W.S. Jevons. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 131 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Tate Fegley and Karl-Friedrich Israel, “The Disutility of Labor.” *Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics* 32, no.2 (2020): 171-179. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Mises, *Human Action* *A Treatise of Economics*, 131 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 134 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 138 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 65-66 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 137 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 585 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 137 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 586 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 584&585 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 585 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 585 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 588 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 588 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Here, Mises (ibid., 588) refers in a footnote specifically to Engels’ claim that labor’s pain would be replaced by pleasure in a socialist commonwealth. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 589 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 585 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Karl Kautsky. *The Social Revolution, Vol. II*. (Charles Kerr & Co, 1902[1903]), Part I [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Friedrich Engels. *Herrn Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft*.(Stuttgart, 1928), 317 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Mises, *Human Action* *A Treatise of Economics*, 588 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 137 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 611 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 612 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Karl Marx. *Economic & Philosophic* Manuscripts of 1844. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1932[1959]), 28&29 [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 29 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. See Mises, *Human Action* *A Treatise of Economics*, 690 for a brief description on how he reports that Marx perceives capitalism’s corrosive quality on labor. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Mises, *Human Action* *A Treatise of Economics*, 74 [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 80 explains that the perception of being exploited by labor in a capitalist system is weakly based on Hegelian Dialectics but it lacks substantial support. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 588 [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 2018. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by Terry Pinkard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Mises, *Human Action* *A Treatise of Economics*, 74&75 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Karl Kautsky. *The Social Revolution, Vol II,* Part I [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Mises, *Human Action* *A Treatise of Economics*, 137 [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., 589 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 138 [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 589 [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 589 [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 584-589 [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 585 [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Fegley and Israel, “The Disutility of Labor,” 171-179. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Mises, *Human Action* *A Treatise of Economics*, 584-589 [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 131 [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., 132 [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. William Stanley Jevons. *The theory of political economy*. (New York: Kelly Millman, 1879[1957]), 168 [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Mises, *Human Action* *A Treatise of Economics*, 139 [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Ennio E Piano and Rania Al-Bawwab. "The artist as entrepreneur." *The Review of Austrian Economics* (2023): 1-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Mises, *Human Action* *A Treatise of Economics*, 140 [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid., 139-140 [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Note that Ibid., 589 argues that attempting to influence laborers’ perceptions so that they perceive labor as a benefit is “no substitute for the mediate gratification of labor.” He argues further that joy or tedium associated with labor cannot overcome the disutility of labor, and that these factors are implicitly reflected in the price of labor. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)