

Many modern nations operate under the economic idea of capitalism and the “free market” system it promotes. But what does this “free market” system entail? Ideally, a “free market” society is free of government intervention, with the markets instead controlled by the natural balancing act of supply and demand. But the reality is that supply and demand are artificial concepts created by institutions of power. In the pre-modern world, humans would produce and consume products needed for survival, like food and shelter, for themselves. However, with the emergence of capitalism, institutions separated the production and consumption of these products through market systems. This separation created what is known as alienation, where the worker involved in producing a good is disconnected from their labor because it no longer benefits themselves but the institutions who profit off markets. Alienation under capitalism negatively impacts our identities by opposing our natural tendencies and values.

To explain the complex nature of human identity, psychologist William James developed his concept of the parts of the self. This concept states that our identity consists of four parts: the material self, the social self, the spiritual self, and the pure ego. Each part contributes to the unique formation of the beliefs and values that define an individual’s unique identity. The first part of the self, the material self, occurs external to the body and is found in objects which we place value upon. Through this placed value, objects become bound up in the agency of the self. We begin to view these objects as extensions of ourselves. Alienation disconnects the material self from valuing the objects we produce through our labor. Under capitalism, we no longer create objects for ourselves but rather for the benefit of the economic market. The lack of seeing the fruits of our labor reduces the role of the material self in our work.

played in our environments. In a work setting, it is the role played within the institution we work for and the relationships it holds. Job alienation creates a disconnect between ourselves and those we have professional relationships with, like bosses and coworkers. The lack of seeing the fruits of our labor in the material self creates personal doubt surrounding the importance of our labor roles. These feelings of doubt and uncertainty can lead to feelings of isolation within the workforce.

This shift in how we view the importance of our labor under capitalism is due to the spiritual self. Unlike the material and social selves, the spiritual self is internal and encompasses all our personal beliefs, values, and morals. Most people agree that a job should provide personal meaning and fulfillment. Feeling a lack of purpose within your job conflicts with this belief. This conflict between the expectations and reality of labor under capitalism can lead to a loss of spiritual identity in work settings that can carry over to other aspects of our lives.

The last piece of the self, the pure ego, or more commonly, the soul, is our internal essence. This essence cannot be broken down or further explained like the other parts of the self. Yet, the pure ego is still distinctly responsible for forming personal identity. It is the core part of our identity, so the effects of alienation profoundly impact its stability. Disconnection and lack of power felt by workers lead to a loss of agency over their lives. We spend most of our lives working. When not working, we mostly spend our time dedicated to activities for our survival, like eating and sleeping. When alienated in their work, individuals are susceptible to feeling a lack of control over their lives and a lack of motivation to progress.

The rise of capitalism in the modern world has led to a shift in our motivations for production. The new need to produce for the satisfaction of markets creates alienation between

in work environments. Since we spend so much of our lives within this work environment, our identities and sense of worth are susceptible to harm. To promote our well-being under the negative impact of capitalism, we must find agency in other aspects of our lives outside of the work setting. We should discover and pursue hobbies related to our interests to strengthen the parts of the self. For one person, this could involve pursuing woodworking to find value through the material self. For another, this could be joining a club to improve the social self. While alienation has negatively impacted the working class, there is a positive outlook in the plethora of pursuits we can embark on to strengthen our identities and feel connected to our world.