Work or labor is, according to Marx, the essential characteristic of being human. Man is a natural being, a biological species among others, who has needs that must be fulfilled. But unlike animals which simply utilize what the world provides to fulfill their needs, human beings transform the world. Human activity, in distinction to animal activity, is conscious and purposeful. Marx calls this essential human activity *praxis*, conscious physical labor directed toward transforming the material world so it will satisfy human needs. It is our labor that links us to the non-human world and to each other and through which we realize our potential as human beings. But in transforming the world, we are also simultaneously transforming ourselves. The specific mode of production in a society, its form of praxis or labor, determines the fundamental features of that society and the nature of its inhabitants. We are what we are because of what we do, specifically what we do to meet our basic needs in productive activities. As Marx puts this point:

> The mode of production of the material means of existence conditions the whole process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, it is their social existence that determines their consciousness.

In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx diagnoses the nature of labor under a capitalist mode of production where the power of production is in the hands of a small group of people. Capitalism impedes human self-realization and the full flowering of human potentiality by alienating us from our nature. Marx identifies four forms of alienation in capitalist societies.

1. Workers are alienated from the product of their labor. Workers put their lives into the objects they produce but then find that they have no control over them. What they produce is taken from them by the capitalist and used to enslave them further.

2. Workers are alienated from their labor. Their work which should be the realization of their potential as human beings, is in fact dehumanizing. They are forced to work under conditions over which they have little control.

3. Workers are alienated from their species-life. Capitalism prevents workers from engaging in the free productive activity that is the mark of their humanity, the activity of transforming nature not just in order to fulfill direct physical needs, as animals do, but for the sake of the full development of human potentialities.

4. Workers are alienated from other human beings. Where work should be a source of community it becomes a source of isolation and fragmentation where we can only view one another as competitors for scarce resources.