5 Property and Labour

There is a range of arguments about property which are enmeshed in different understandings of the necessity of labour and the extent to which it can be overcome. In this chapter we shall examine four of these arguments. The first advocates using the property system to provide individual workers with an incentive, and it was made explicit by James Mill (1978). The second is the theory that the labourer is entitled to a property in the product of his labour, a theory capable of many interpretations which is associated particularly with John Locke and Robert Nozick (e.g. Drury, 1982). The third is Hegel’s idea that property is necessary to freedom, realised in acts of taking or making, and thus in labouring (e.g. Teichgraeber, 1977). The fourth is Marx’s (e.g. 1977, pp.77–96) critique of alienated labour and private property under capitalism, his concern with the social character of labour, and the implications this has for ‘co-operative’ property. Our aim is not only to explain why the proponents of these theories were led to particular conclusions about desirable property arrangements by their various conceptions of the nature of labour and work, but also to scrutinise the conclusions drawn to see if they follow as readily as their advocates imagine.

Labour is necessary, in some form, if human life is to be possible. The Western tradition of political thought has been informed by a number of different understandings of the nature of this necessity, and of the extent to which particular persons, or man in general, can escape from it, overcome it or transcend it. While all four theories which we examine provide examples of such understandings, it will be helpful to discuss briefly two important sources of modern ideas: the classical Greek exclusion of most labourers from political participation and the Genesis story of the Fall. Both draw attention to a dualism which we shall notice in modern theories: on the one hand, labour is a painful necessity, imposed by man’s needs and
what he has to do to satisfy them; on the other, labour and work are a form of creative activity through which he can give himself expression and impose himself on his external world.

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt provided an interpretation of this dualism, in which she wrote eloquently of the Greek denial of the capacity of those engaged in labour to enjoy a full political life:

‘Contempt for laboring, originally arising out of a passionate striving for freedom from necessity and a no less passionate impatience with every effort that left no trace, no monument, no great work worthy of remembrance, spread with the increasing demands of polis life upon the time of the citizens and its insistence on their abstention (skholé) from all but political activities, until it covered everything that demanded an effort. Earlier political custom, prior to the full development of the city-state, merely distinguished between slaves, vanquished enemies (dmoès or douloi), who were carried off to the victor’s household with other loot where as household inmates (oiketai or familiares) they slaved for their own and their master’s life, and the demiourgoi, the workmen of the people at large, who moved freely outside the private realm and within the public.’

She goes on to point out that later developments led to the classification of occupations according

‘... to the amount of effort required, so that Aristotle called those occupations the meanest “in which the body is most deteriorated”. Although he refused to admit banausoi to citizenship, he would have accepted shepherds and painters (but neither peasants nor sculptors).’ (1958, pp.81–2)

Slavery, of course, was the paradigm condition of persons locked into a sphere of necessity, whose purposes in life were exclusively the satisfaction of their own and others’ needs. Other persons engaged in labour might also be more or less restricted in their purposes. The condition of the slave allowed the freedom of the master: the master could escape from the realm of necessity by domination of those whom he forced to provide for him, while his wealth gave him the opportunity to participate in common, public