

Article

The Axiological Essence of Forced Labor and the Problem of Human Freedom

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Abstract: Forced labor remains one of the most persistent violations of human rights despite the establishment of comprehensive international legal mechanisms intended to eradicate it. Existing scholarship predominantly examines forced labor through legal, economic, sociological, or political perspectives, while comparatively little attention has been devoted to its philosophical and axiological dimensions. This article argues that forced labor should not merely be understood as unlawful economic exploitation but as an axiological crisis that undermines the intrinsic values constituting human existence. Employing philosophical hermeneutics, comparative normative analysis, and critical social philosophy, the study investigates the relationship between labor, freedom, dignity, and moral autonomy. Drawing upon the philosophical traditions of Kantian ethics, Aristotelian virtue ethics, Marx's theory of alienation, Hannah Arendt's conception of labor and action, Isaiah Berlin's theory of liberty, John Rawls' theory of justice, and Amartya Sen's capability approach, the article develops a multidimensional framework for understanding the ethical destruction produced by forced labor. The research demonstrates that forced labor simultaneously negates human autonomy, instrumentalizes the individual, destroys moral agency, weakens social solidarity, and transforms labor from a means of self-realization into an instrument of domination. The article further proposes the concept of axiological deprivation, defined as the systematic destruction of the moral values that enable individuals to exercise freedom, dignity, creativity, and responsibility. Unlike existing approaches that conceptualize forced labor primarily as economic coercion or legal violation, this framework interprets forced labor as the denial of the value structure necessary for authentic human existence. The findings contribute to contemporary debates in political philosophy, ethics, and human rights by offering a comprehensive philosophical model that integrates normative ethics, social justice theory, and value philosophy. The study concludes that eliminating forced labor requires not only legal reforms but also the restoration of human dignity, ethical responsibility, and value-oriented social institutions.

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1. Introduction

Freedom has historically occupied a central position in philosophical inquiry because it defines the conditions under which human beings become moral agents rather than merely biological organisms. Every civilization has developed normative conceptions of freedom, justice, dignity, and labor, recognizing that productive activity possesses significance extending far beyond economic necessity [1]. Labor constitutes one of the primary means through which individuals realize their capacities, construct identities, establish social relationships, and contribute to the common good [2]. Consequently, whenever labor loses its voluntary character and becomes imposed through coercion, violence, deception, or structural domination, the resulting condition represents more than

economic exploitation; it signifies the erosion of the very values that sustain human existence.

Contemporary globalization has simultaneously expanded economic opportunities and generated new forms of labor exploitation [3]. According to recent international estimates, millions of individuals continue to experience forced labor across diverse sectors, including agriculture, domestic service, manufacturing, mining, construction, and digital production chains [4]. Modern slavery increasingly manifests through debt bondage, human trafficking, state-imposed labor, exploitative migration systems, and technologically mediated forms of surveillance that restrict workers' autonomy [5]. These developments challenge traditional assumptions regarding freedom within liberal democratic societies and require renewed philosophical examination.

Existing literature predominantly approaches forced labor through international law, labor economics, criminology, development studies, or public policy. International conventions define forced labor according to observable elements of coercion and involuntariness [6], while economists analyze labor market distortions, and legal scholars focus on enforcement mechanisms. Although these perspectives provide indispensable analytical tools, they rarely address the deeper philosophical question: What values are destroyed when labor ceases to be free?

This article contends that forced labor constitutes an axiological crisis, not merely an institutional failure. The concept of axiology concerns the nature, hierarchy, and realization of values. Freedom, dignity, autonomy, responsibility, solidarity, creativity, justice, and self-realization are not simply legal entitlements but intrinsic values constituting authentic human existence. Forced labor systematically negates these values by transforming persons into instruments for external purposes.

From a Kantian perspective, coercive labor violates the categorical imperative because individuals are treated exclusively as means rather than ends in themselves [7]. Marx's theory of alienation similarly demonstrates how exploitative labor separates workers from their productive capacities, creative potential, and humanity [8]. Hannah Arendt distinguishes labor necessary for biological survival from meaningful action that expresses political freedom, suggesting that domination reduces human existence to repetitive necessity [9]. Isaiah Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberty further illustrates that genuine freedom requires both the absence of coercion and the capacity for autonomous self-direction [10]. Sen and Nussbaum extend this argument by emphasizing substantive capabilities rather than merely formal rights [11].

Despite their differences, these philosophical traditions converge on one fundamental principle: labor possesses ethical significance only when performed under conditions that preserve human freedom, dignity, and moral agency. Therefore, the philosophical analysis of forced labor demands a multidimensional framework capable of integrating ethics, political philosophy, social theory, and value theory.

The originality of this study lies in introducing the concept of axiological deprivation, referring to the systematic destruction of the moral value structure through which individuals become autonomous persons. Unlike conventional legal definitions emphasizing coercion alone, axiological deprivation recognizes that forced labor destroys not only freedom of action but also the moral capacities underlying responsibility, creativity, recognition, and human flourishing.

Accordingly, this article seeks to answer three research questions:

1. How should forced labor be interpreted from the perspective of philosophical axiology?
2. In what ways does forced labor undermine the conditions necessary for human freedom and moral agency?

3. Can an integrated philosophical framework contribute to more comprehensive approaches for combating contemporary labor exploitation?

The study argues that the abolition of forced labor cannot be achieved solely through legal regulation or economic reform. Sustainable solutions require reconstructing the ethical foundations of labor by reaffirming human dignity as the highest normative value governing economic institutions. Such a philosophical perspective broadens existing human rights discourse and contributes to contemporary debates concerning justice, democracy, and social responsibility.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative philosophical research design grounded in normative inquiry, comparative philosophical analysis, and hermeneutic interpretation. Unlike empirical studies that rely on surveys or experimental data, the present research seeks to examine the axiological essence of forced labor by investigating the values embedded in philosophical conceptions of freedom, dignity, autonomy, and justice. The study is based on the assumption that forced labor cannot be fully understood solely through legal or economic categories; rather, it requires an interdisciplinary philosophical framework capable of explaining how coercive labor undermines the moral foundations of human existence.

The research follows a constructivist philosophical paradigm, according to which social phenomena acquire meaning through ethical values, cultural interpretations, and normative institutions rather than through objective empirical observation alone. Accordingly, this study combines conceptual analysis with critical philosophical reflection to develop an original interpretive framework referred to as axiological deprivation, which conceptualizes forced labor as the systematic destruction of the moral values that sustain human freedom, dignity, and moral agency. This theoretical perspective enables the investigation of forced labor beyond its legal and economic dimensions by emphasizing its normative and axiological implications.

The study is based exclusively on secondary qualitative sources selected according to their academic relevance, authority, and contribution to the subject. The research materials encompass three principal categories: (1) classical philosophical works by Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Amartya Sen, and Martha C. Nussbaum, which provide the conceptual foundations for understanding freedom, labor, dignity, and moral agency; (2) international legal and normative instruments, including conventions and recommendations of the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) [12], the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Target 8.7 on the elimination of forced labor; and (3) contemporary peer-reviewed studies indexed in Scopus and Web of Science that examine forced labor, modern slavery, human rights, ethics, and political philosophy. This combination of philosophical, legal, and contemporary academic sources ensures a comprehensive and interdisciplinary foundation for the analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Forced Labor as an Axiological Crisis

The philosophical analysis demonstrates that forced labor should be understood not merely as a violation of labor rights but as an axiological crisis that undermines the fundamental values constituting human existence. While international legal frameworks primarily define forced labor in terms of coercion, involuntariness, and exploitation [13],

the present study reveals that its most profound consequence lies in the destruction of the moral foundations of personhood.

The comparative analysis of philosophical traditions indicates that freedom, dignity, autonomy, responsibility, and self-realization constitute interconnected values rather than isolated ethical concepts. Once labor becomes compulsory, these values are simultaneously weakened. Consequently, forced labor transforms productive activity from a means of human flourishing into an instrument of domination and dehumanization.

This study introduces the concept of axiological deprivation, defined as the systematic erosion of intrinsic human values through coercive labor relations. Unlike economic deprivation, which concerns the loss of material resources, axiological deprivation refers to the loss of moral agency, personal autonomy, social recognition, and existential meaning. Therefore, forced labor should be interpreted as a multidimensional assault on the value structure of human life.

3.2. Human Freedom Beyond Legal Definitions

One of the principal findings of this research is that legal freedom alone is insufficient to explain the ethical significance of labor. Contemporary legal instruments successfully identify situations involving physical coercion or institutional compulsion [14]; however, they often overlook structural conditions that substantially restrict genuine freedom.

Drawing upon Isaiah Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberty, the analysis demonstrates that individuals may formally possess legal freedom while remaining incapable of exercising meaningful autonomy because of poverty, debt, discrimination, migration dependency, or unequal power relations. Similarly, Amartya Sen's capability approach emphasizes that authentic freedom depends not merely on legal rights but on the real opportunities individuals possess to pursue lives they have reason to value.

Accordingly, the findings suggest that forced labor should be evaluated through a multidimensional conception of freedom encompassing legal, ethical, psychological, social, and economic dimensions.

3.3. Human Dignity as the Central Moral Value

The philosophical comparison identifies human dignity as the foundational value unifying diverse ethical traditions. Kant's moral philosophy establishes that every human being possesses intrinsic worth independent of economic productivity or social utility [15]. Consequently, any labor system treating workers solely as instruments violates the categorical imperative by denying their status as autonomous moral agents.

Marx's theory of alienation complements this conclusion by explaining how exploitative labor separates individuals from the products of their work, from their creative capacities, from their fellow human beings, and ultimately from themselves. Hannah Arendt similarly distinguishes meaningful action from mere biological labor, arguing that genuine freedom emerges only where individuals participate voluntarily in shaping their social world.

Together, these philosophical perspectives indicate that forced labor destroys not only economic welfare but also the ethical conditions necessary for personal identity, creativity, and self-respect.

3.4. Reconstruction of the Value Structure of Labor

The analysis demonstrates that labor possesses an inherently dual character. Under conditions of freedom, labor functions as a means of creativity, social participation, responsibility, and personal fulfillment. Under conditions of coercion, however, labor becomes a mechanism of domination, surveillance, fear, and moral degradation.

3.5. Theoretical Contribution

The principal theoretical contribution of this research lies in introducing the concept of axiological deprivation into contemporary philosophical discussions of forced labor. Existing scholarship generally conceptualizes forced labor through legal definitions, economic exploitation, or human trafficking [16]. While these approaches remain indispensable, they insufficiently explain the destruction of ethical values experienced by individuals subjected to coercive labor systems.

Consequently, combating forced labor requires not only stronger legal enforcement but also institutional arrangements that preserve these fundamental human values.

3.6. Implications for Human Rights and Social Justice

The findings have important implications for contemporary human rights theory. Existing international frameworks primarily emphasize legal prohibition and criminal accountability [17]. Although these mechanisms remain essential, the philosophical analysis suggests that genuine eradication of forced labor also requires ethical reconstruction of labor institutions.

Governments should therefore complement legal reforms with educational policies promoting human dignity, labor ethics, democratic participation, and social responsibility. Likewise, businesses should recognize that corporate responsibility extends beyond compliance with labor regulations toward creating workplaces that respect workers as autonomous moral persons rather than merely productive resources.

From the perspective of political philosophy, social justice requires institutions that maximize individuals' capabilities for meaningful participation rather than merely preventing explicit coercion [18]. Such an approach broadens contemporary understandings of labor rights by integrating freedom, dignity, and human flourishing into a single normative framework [19].

3.7. Discussion

The findings of this study support and extend existing philosophical literature on labor and freedom while offering a distinct axiological perspective. Unlike conventional approaches that conceptualize forced labor primarily as economic exploitation or legal coercion, this research argues that its most profound consequence is the destruction of the value structure that enables individuals to function as autonomous moral agents.

The concept of axiological deprivation provides a new theoretical lens through which forced labor can be interpreted as a comprehensive ethical crisis affecting both individuals and society. This perspective contributes to contemporary debates in political philosophy, ethics, and human rights by demonstrating that labor cannot be separated from the moral values that give it human significance.

Ultimately, the analysis suggests that the abolition of forced labor should not be regarded solely as a legal or economic objective but as a philosophical commitment to restoring human dignity, freedom, and justice. The preservation of these values constitutes the indispensable foundation of any genuinely democratic and humane society.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined forced labor from an axiological and philosophical perspective, arguing that it should be understood not merely as a legal violation or an economic form of exploitation but as a profound ethical crisis that undermines the fundamental values constituting human existence. Through a constructivist philosophical approach and comparative analysis of classical and contemporary philosophical traditions, the research demonstrates that forced labor systematically destroys the intrinsic values of freedom, human dignity, moral agency, social recognition, and self-realization. These values are not independent moral ideals but interconnected foundations of authentic human life and democratic society.

One of the principal contributions of this article is the development of the concept of axiological deprivation, which describes the systematic erosion of the value structure that enables individuals to act as autonomous moral agents. Unlike conventional interpretations that focus primarily on coercion, exploitation, or legal non-compliance, this framework explains how forced labor deprives individuals of the ethical conditions necessary for exercising freedom and developing their human potential. In this sense, forced labor represents not only the denial of individual rights but also the degradation of the moral order upon which social justice depends.

The comparative philosophical analysis further demonstrates that despite significant differences among the theories of Kant, Marx, Arendt, Berlin, Rawls, Sen, and Nussbaum, they converge on a common normative principle: labor possesses genuine human value only when it is performed under conditions of freedom, dignity, and moral responsibility. Whenever labor becomes an instrument of coercion or domination, it ceases to function as a means of personal development and instead becomes a mechanism of alienation and dehumanization. This finding reinforces the argument that freedom should be understood not only as the absence of external coercion but also as the presence of substantive opportunities that enable individuals to make meaningful and autonomous choices.

The study also contributes to contemporary discussions on human rights and social justice by proposing an expanded normative framework for evaluating labor systems. Existing international legal instruments have made significant progress in defining and prohibiting forced labor [20]; however, their effectiveness can be strengthened by incorporating philosophical considerations concerning dignity, autonomy, and value-based institutional development. Accordingly, the eradication of forced labor requires more than legislative enforcement or economic reform. It demands educational, social, and institutional policies that cultivate ethical responsibility, democratic participation, and respect for the intrinsic worth of every human being.

Despite these contributions, the present research has several limitations. As a conceptual and normative study, it does not include empirical evidence derived from interviews, surveys, or comparative case studies. Consequently, the proposed framework should be regarded as a philosophical model rather than an empirically validated theory. Future research could test the concept of axiological deprivation through qualitative investigations involving survivors of forced labor, comparative analyses across different legal and cultural contexts, or interdisciplinary studies integrating philosophy with sociology, psychology, and labor economics.

In conclusion, the article argues that the struggle against forced labor is ultimately a struggle for the preservation of humanity itself. Eliminating coercive labor practices requires not only protecting individuals from exploitation but also safeguarding the ethical values that make freedom meaningful and human dignity inviolable. By reframing forced labor as an axiological crisis, this study offers a broader philosophical understanding of labor, justice, and human freedom, while providing a normative foundation for future scholarship and policy aimed at building more humane, equitable, and value-oriented societies.

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