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# Work and value: More than economics

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Work is a commonly used concept in many fields of life yet perceived differently. A job or career path is a broad framework within which we carry out many activities during our wakeful hours. It is thus unarguably very important that we carry out good work, as it occupies a great portion of our lives. The value of work is clearer when we perceive its contribution to achieving self-development (and the means needed to attain self-development and community sustenance) and thus see it as part of our pursuit of happiness. Work then is a necessity for humans and engagement at work is an important aspect of wellbeing. This article clarifies some misconceptions about work as a burdensome punishment, based on insights from Laborem Exercens and philosophy.

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Laborem Excercens presented work as a means of self-development. It is our way of dominating the world, which shows we are in control over our natural habitat. Being rational animals, applying that capacity to reason in adapting the world to our needs, we can develop ourselves while responsibly using the resources naturally available to us. Laborem Excercens points out that work is an activity by humans, whether manual or intellectual, whatever its nature or circumstances, directed towards chosen purposes. These activities are permeated by rationality which is proper to human nature, whether rightly or wrongly applied, and which gives value to human work whether it be cooking, sweeping or executive office work.

From the above statements, one can say that work is a natural human activity. A person's rational nature makes it possible to identify their constructive activity (intellectual or manual) as work. Human rationality makes our work different from animal activity. The awareness of our activity and understanding of the basis and reasons for our actions make it possible for us to order them towards the goals we wish to achieve, giving them a value, which is appreciably different from random occurrences in nature. It is also interesting to note that the intrinsic value of the work is not dependent on the type of work but the dignity of work stems from the inherent dignity of the worker.

Work, in as much as it consists of free human actions, greatly shapes our personality, life, and ultimately happiness. Oftentimes, it involves the use and making of material, intellectual property leading to results that are separate from us and perceptible to others. However, we also transform ourselves by building habits in the process. Forming good habits when exercising freedom and demonstrating creativity at work leads to our development. In other words, while at work, we not only make things but we simultaneously "make ourselves".

Work has more than an economic value. It affects us internally and externally. Work is not only a means of economic sustenance, but an arena for growth in virtues. It is a means of contribution to the common good and a tool for moving us towards our various goals. Work is therefore a good thing for humanity because through work we not only transform nature, adapting it to our own needs, but we can also achieve fulfilment as human beings through it. Indeed, we become 'more human beings' in a sense, when we work virtuously.

Even though people believe that religion plays a role in giving meaning to work and motivation to work, work is sometimes negatively described as a punishment from God for Adam's ambition. John Paul II *Laborem Exercens* made some specific insights, which can clarify such negative connotations of work in some religious and secular circles. He presented work as a means of self-development and described two dimensions of work, the objective sense (technology) and the subjective sense (human beings as the subject of work). Humans are the subject of work. Our work, consisting of free actions, greatly shapes our lives and personality and is a sphere for living several virtues. One can consider the virtues needed to abstain from unethical conduct at work such as the justice, temperance and loyalty (among others) needed to avoid insider trading conflicts of interest etc. in the business world.

Alasdair MacIntyre, arguably one of the most influential contemporary narrative philosophers affirms that human life is best understood when it is being viewed as a narrative. In other words, we define ourselves and describe our identity to other people with our actions within our narrative. With our actions, at work or elsewhere, we weave an important part of our narratives with our actions. We knowingly or unknowingly choose to either make a good life story, or not to, as we pursue happiness even at work and craft ourselves and our identities by our daily actions. Furthermore, our activity defines our community and its history.

In conclusion, the value of human work stems from the dignity of the one who carries it out; a person, a conscious and free subject, actively crafting them to be a kind of individual. Work is an important means of growth and self-perfection, a means to show concern for others and to act for the progress of society. Diligent work is work that is well done out of love, love for the self and for others (including a supreme being: God.) When we understand work within the broad context of life and its aspirations as narratives help us to, we will see it as a part of our quest for human fulfilment and flourishing. Such robust understanding of work could motivate us to work hard to build good narratives for ourselves and history for our communities.

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