



Humanum

ISSUES IN FAMILY, CULTURE & SCIENCE

2017 - ISSUE ONE

All You Who Labor: The Vocation to Work





Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

2017 - ISSUE ONE—ALL YOU WHO LABOR: THE VOCATION TO WORK

Contents

| | Page |
|---|-----------|
| EDITORIAL | |
| MARGARET HARPER MCCARTHY — The Vocation to Work | 3 |
| RE-SOURCE: CLASSIC TEXTS | |
| POPE BENEDICT XVI — Ora et Labora: The Christian Discovery of Work | 8 |
| POPE SAINT JOHN PAUL II — To Toil Makes Us More Human | 10 |
| CHARLES PÉGUY — Finding the Eternal in Our Daily Toil | 13 |
| FEATURE ARTICLES | |
| DEBORAH SAVAGE — More Than Just the Paycheck: The Dignity of Work | 16 |
| D. C. SCHINDLER — Quaerere Deum: Work as Love of God and World | 25 |
| BOOK REVIEWS | |
| JONATHAN ELLIOTT — How Your Moleskine Can Bring Out Your Humanity: Why Matter Matters | 37 |
| JAKUB GRYGIEL — Work Is A Form of Prayer: The Thought of Cardinal Wyszyński | 41 |
| JOHN LARACY — Automation versus Artistry: On the "De-skilling" of the Workplace | 45 |
| ROY PEACHEY — Do We Need to Re-Think Modern Economics? | 49 |

The Vocation to Work

MARGARET HARPER MCCARTHY

Last year Humanum was dedicated to the question of ecology. At the heart of that question was the nature of the relation between man and the natural world of which he is both member and steward. This year Humanum turns to one of the activities which is most in play in that delicate relation: the activity of work. Work is so common, so quotidian, so totalizing, that it is easy to not to think about it . . . other than, how to get around it, beyond it, be treated justly for it, be better remunerated for it, or remunerated at all (in the event of the terrible case of unemployment). Indeed, these problems, the problems of justice at work, fair wages, “fair trade,” happiness at work, and unemployment, all have a great deal of our attention now. Pope Francis had everyone’s head turn when he made the startling claim that one of “the most serious of the evils that afflict the world these days are youth unemployment.” Was this mere hyperbole? What about the dissolution of the family? The attacks on human life? The loss of the sense of God?

And yet, put in the context of what the two previous Popes—both of whom provide Re-Sources in this issue—have said about work, one detects that the problem of unemployment touches on something that speaks to what is essential for the human person: obliging us to ask a more fundamental question. What exactly is work?

Work is the activity that both sets man apart from the rest of the created order and puts him in relation to it. “Work,” said John Paul II in *Laborem exercens*, “is one of the characteristics that distinguishes man from the rest of creatures whose activity for sustaining their lives cannot be called work. Only man is capable of work, and only man works.” It is the distinction by which man shares in the creative “labor” of the Creator, as Benedict XVI says. Indeed, the Son of God, “through whom all things were made” spent most of his time on earth working, repeating the same tasks, day in and day out. As Charles Péguy—also a Re-Source for us—says, in his signature style:

When Jesus worked at his father’s shop

Every day he relived the same day.

There was never any trouble.

Except once.

Just as we cannot take work for granted work in our own lives, we cannot take it for granted in the history of thought. David C. Schindler presents just such a history, magisterially, as he takes us through the historical “trptych” of pre-Christian, Christian, and modern attitudes about work. Referring to the fore-mentioned text by Benedict XVI, Schindler notes the Christian novelty of esteem for work. By contrast, the Greeks were ambivalent about work, relegating it to slaves. Schindler argues that this was not because they didn’t esteem matter, but rather because they thought of any transformative intervention as hubris, even desecration, in the face of a nature which had an absolute sense, the divine being its ultimate principle of order. It was not possible, until Christianity, to esteem an activity which took nature “outside” itself to serve “non-natural” ends, and which had the worker, moreover, subordinate his activity to something outside of himself, especially when that activity was instrumental to some ulterior need—not good for its own sake (as in the pure contemplation of nature). That said, Christianity did not just make the choice for the Jewish tradition—which did esteem the crafts and trades—over and against that of the Greeks. Rather, it was because of the distinctively Christian revelation about creation and its God that Christianity could take up both the positive role of transformative intervention, in imitation of the Creator—as the Jews did—while attending to the intrinsic goodness of the world, as the Greeks did. This was exemplified by the medieval monastic tradition in which the monk could at one and the same time live his life in the search of God—and make an abundance of good things out of good things. *Ora et Labora*. In connection with the fundamental relationship between contemplation of nature and the work of human hands [Fabrice Hadjadj’s reflections on art and nature are illuminating](#).

Just as a triptych has a third panel, though, so does the history of the thought about (and practice of) work. [Benedict XVI](#) hints at it when he says:

Naturally, this ethos [which esteems work] had to include the idea that human work and shaping of history is understood as sharing in the work of the Creator, and must be evaluated in those terms. Where such evaluation is lacking, where man arrogates to himself the status of god-like creator, his shaping of the world can quickly turn into destruction of the world.

The third “panel” is the degradation of work in the modern era where “such evaluation is lacking.” This degradation, according to Schindler, got its initial push from the Reformation which separated religious meaning from the natural goodness of created things, Christian piety being indifferent to nature. As far as work is concerned, it consisted in, essentially, the instrumentalization of the world in which the worker worked, even of work itself, where the sole aim of work became productivity—quantitatively understood—and the accumulation of wealth—these being signs (not the means) of salvation (as Max Weber put it). Not, that is, in the first instance, an encounter with the world—through substantial and self-sacrificial investment in it—and through it, with God. What results is, as Schindler says:

a total oblivion of work as good, as a privileged place in which man encounters the world, in which he grows by contending with something real, something that demands full-bodied attention, in which he receives in gratitude something that possesses its own beauty and goodness, and, through his own efforts, becomes in a perhaps surprising way even more beautiful and good.

It is not enough, says Schindler, to give to charity, remain honest in book-keeping, and say prayers at “team meetings.” All of this is good but not enough if it is merely compensating for having evacuated God from the heart of the world.

Just as our attitude about the nature on which we work rebounds back upon us, so too does an instrumental idea of work lend itself to the instrumentalization of the worker himself. In her meditation on *Laborem exercens*, Deborah Savage reminds us that man is not for work, so much as work is for man; and not only because it pays a wage (not a small matter) but because it is “something worthy . . . something that corresponds to man’s dignity, [something] that expresses this dignity and increases it” (John Paul II). Going even further, and, again, with John Paul II, “work [even] enters into the salvation process” (LE, 24). Indeed, returning to the old Reformation quarrel, we can ask with St. James: “what does it profit . . . if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? . . . faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2: 14, 16). This is the reason, says Savage, why unemployment is “one of the most serious of evils today.” And it is for the same reason that predictions about the coming end of work, on account of the trends in automation, is reason for grave concern, even if every one were to receive the proposed “Basic Income Guarantee” (BIG).

Our book reviews address different aspects of the third “panel.” Concerning the

subjective dimension of work, which is so much at risk, in various forms in the modern ambit of work, we have a great review of the classic: *All You Who Labor: Work and the Sanctification of Daily Life* by Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński, the great mentor of Wojtyła/John Paul II. On this same topic, specifically where the gradual extinction of work is concerned, we review Nicholas Carr's *The Glass Cage*. Here, the author takes the current "work" of piloting a plane as an image of what is becoming of work as an activity, now that automation has taken over not only the artistry of work, but the very work itself. Echoing [Matthew Crawford](#), who says much the same thing, Carr thinks of work, especially physical work, as an occasion to see the world face-to-face. With the ubiquitous medium of "glass" (the screen), and the "relief" it offers us from work itself, Carr wonders if the automation of labor might not "end up eroding one of the foundations of culture itself: our desire to understand the world."

David Sax's book *The Revenge of the Analog* turns our attention to the products of work, and to a rising consumer trend in favor of more "human-centric" things, real things, things with limitations, in exchange for digital "things" and the "limitless possibilities" that overwhelm us. You might say that the trend is an instance of the ineradicability of the human heart. Our reviewer, Jonathan Elliot pushes Sax further, deepening his aesthetic evaluation of the new trend:

For analog to be truly "human-centric" we cannot just consume it; we must encounter it more deeply. Several times Sax asserts that analog matters because it is real. But reality only leads to greater self-knowledge and wisdom when one is yoked to it. This requires more than enjoying analog products. It requires commitment to people, place, or things through good and bad. Only when the real world pushes back against us are we invited to self-reflect and ask the deeper questions about the world outside of ourselves, and only then can we develop the virtues that make us more human. The virtual world is almost entirely incapable of providing this kind of pushback because, from the user's perspective, it is almost entirely the product of human imagination. There are no natures to encounter, understand, and work with (or struggle against) in the virtual world. Through essentially the same actions one can play music, purchase a book, shoot the enemy, or perform calculations. The virtual world creates a one-way relationship, existing as the expression of our desires. The analog world establishes a two-way relationship, for it has its own stable existence apart from our imagination.

Finally, one of our veteran reviewers, Roy Peachey, looks at a relatively recent book by financial journalist Edward Hadas *Human Goods, Economic Evils*. Even if, as Peachey

contends, the book is limited in its scope, it makes the important point that “the anthropological confusion disfigures debate in all sorts of areas, including economics” which, in Hadas’s view, is governed by “massive intellectual errors”. No one can say it better than G. K. Chesterton: “We do not disagree, like doctors, about the precise nature of the illness, while agreeing about the nature of health.” Instead, Peachey adds, “we no longer agree about what health is. We no longer agree on what it is to be human. This anthropological confusion disfigures debate in all sorts of areas, including economics.”

As usual, Humanum is always trying to tease out what lies at the root of that disagreement.

Margaret Harper McCarthy is an Assistant Professor of Theology at the John Paul II Institute and the US editor for Humanum. She is married and the mother of three.

Keep reading! The next article in the issue is [Ora et Labora: The Christian Discovery of Work](#), an excerpt from Pope Benedict XVI’s Address to the Representatives from the World of Culture.

Ora et Labora: The Christian Discovery of Work

POPE BENEDICT XVI

The following is an excerpt from Pope Benedict XVI's Address to the Representatives from the World of Culture, delivered at the Collège des Bernardins in Paris, September 12, 2008. It is available in its entirety [here](#).

Thus far in our consideration of the “school of God’s service,” as Benedict describes monasticism, we have examined only its orientation towards the word—towards the “ora.” Indeed, this is the starting point that sets the direction for the entire monastic life. But our consideration would remain incomplete if we did not also at least briefly glance at the second component of monasticism, indicated by the “labora.” In the Greek world, manual labour was considered something for slaves. Only the wise man, the one who is truly free, devotes himself to the things of the spirit; he views manual labour as somehow beneath him, and leaves it to people who are not suited to this higher existence in the world of the spirit. The Jewish tradition was quite different: all the great rabbis practised at the same time some form of handcraft. Paul, who as a Rabbi and then as a preacher of the Gospel to the Gentile world was also a tent-maker and earned his living with the work of his own hands, is no exception here, but stands within the common tradition of the rabbinate. Monasticism took up this tradition; manual work is a constitutive element of Christian monasticism. In his *Regula*, Saint Benedict does not speak specifically about schools, although in practice, he presupposes teaching and learning, as we have seen. However, in one chapter of his Rule, he does speak explicitly about work (cf. Chap. 48). And so does Augustine, who dedicated a book of his own to monastic work. Christians, who thus continued in the tradition previously established by Judaism, must have felt further vindicated by Jesus’s saying in Saint John’s Gospel, in defence of his activity on the Sabbath: “My Father is working still, and I am working” (5:17). The Graeco-Roman world did not have a creator God; according to its vision, the highest divinity could not, as it were,

dirty his hands in the business of creating matter. The “making” of the world was the work of the Demiurge, a lower deity. The Christian God is different: he, the one, real and only God, is also the Creator. God is working; he continues working in and on human history. In Christ, he enters personally into the laborious work of history. “My Father is working still, and I am working.” God himself is the Creator of the world, and creation is not yet finished. God works, *ergázetai*! Thus human work was now seen as a special form of human resemblance to God, as a way in which man can and may share in God’s activity as creator of the world. Monasticism involves not only a culture of the word, but also a culture of work, without which the emergence of Europe, its ethos and its influence on the world would be unthinkable. Naturally, this ethos had to include the idea that human work and shaping of history is understood as sharing in the work of the Creator, and must be evaluated in those terms. Where such evaluation is lacking, where man arrogates to himself the status of god-like creator, his shaping of the world can quickly turn into destruction of the world.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI served as pope from 2005 to 2013.

Keep reading! The next article in this issue is, [To Toil Makes us More Human an excerpt from *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II's encyclical on human work.](#)

To Toil Makes Us More Human

POPE SAINT JOHN PAUL II

One of Saint John Paul II's great contributions to Catholic social teaching is *Laborem exercens*, his encyclical on human work. It was promulgated in 1981 and is available in its entirety on the [Vatican website](#). The excerpts that follow serve as an introduction to his thought on the meaning and dignity of work.

Through work man must earn his daily bread and contribute to the continual advance of science and technology and, above all, to elevating unceasingly the cultural and moral level of the society within which he lives in community with those who belong to the same family. And work means any activity by man, whether manual or intellectual, whatever its nature or circumstances; it means any human activity that can and must be recognized as work, in the midst of all the many activities of which man is capable and to which he is predisposed by his very nature, by virtue of humanity itself. Man is made to be in the visible universe an image and likeness of God himself, and he is placed in it in order to subdue the earth. From the beginning therefore he is called to work. Work is one of the characteristics that distinguish man from the rest of creatures, whose activity for sustaining their lives cannot be called work. Only man is capable of work, and only man works, at the same time by work occupying his existence on earth. Thus work bears a particular mark of man and of humanity, the mark of a person operating within a community of persons. And this mark decides its interior characteristics; in a sense it constitutes its very nature.

God's fundamental and original intention with regard to man, whom he created in his image and after his likeness, was not withdrawn or cancelled out even when man, having broken the original covenant with God, heard the words: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (Gen 3:19). These words refer to the sometimes heavy toil that from then onwards has accompanied human work; but they do not alter the fact that work is the means whereby man achieves that "dominion" which is proper to him over the visible world, by "subjecting" the earth. Toil is something that is universally known, for it is universally experienced. It is familiar to those doing physical work under sometimes exceptionally laborious conditions. It is familiar not only to

agricultural workers, who spend long days working the land, which sometimes “bears thorns and thistles” (Heb 6:8; cf. Gen 3:18), but also to those who work in mines and quarries, to steel-workers at their blast-furnaces, to those who work in builders’ yards and in construction work, often in danger of injury or death. It is likewise familiar to those at an intellectual workbench; to scientists; to those who bear the burden of grave responsibility for decisions that will have a vast impact on society. It is familiar to doctors and nurses, who spend days and nights at their patients’ bedside. It is familiar to women, who, sometimes without proper recognition on the part of society and even of their own families, bear the daily burden and responsibility for their homes and the upbringing of their children. It is familiar to all workers and, since work is a universal calling, it is familiar to everyone.

And yet, in spite of all this toil—perhaps, in a sense, because of it—work is a good thing for man. Even though it bears the mark of a *bonum arduum*, in the terminology of Saint Thomas, this does not take away the fact that, as such, it is a good thing for man. It is not only good in the sense that it is useful or something to enjoy; it is also good as being something worthy, that is to say, something that corresponds to man’s dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it. If one wishes to define more clearly the ethical meaning of work, it is this truth that one must particularly keep in mind. Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes “more a human being.”

Since work in its subjective aspect is always a personal action, an *actus personae*, it follows that the whole person, body and spirit, participates in it, whether it is manual or intellectual work. It is also to the whole person that the word of the living God is directed, the evangelical message of salvation, in which we find many points which concern human work and which throw particular light on it. These points need to be properly assimilated: an inner effort on the part of the human spirit, guided by faith, hope and charity, is needed in order that through these points the work of the individual human being may be given the meaning which it has in the eyes of God and by means of which work enters into the salvation process on a par with the other ordinary yet particularly important components of its texture.

John Paul II served as pope from 1978 to 2005. He was canonized in 2014.

Keep reading! The next article in this issue is [Finding the Eternal in Our Daily Toil](#) an excerpt from Charles Péguy's *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*.

Finding the Eternal in Our Daily Toil

CHARLES PÉGUY

This is an excerpt from Charles Péguy's *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope* (Trans. David Louis Schindler, Jr. [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986]: 119–21). It is published here with permission and available for purchase in its entirety on the [publisher's webpage](#).

The *Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, first published in 1912, is Charles Péguy's most famous prose-poem. Going through over sixty editions in the last hundred years, it gives voice to the French socialist's profound conversion to the Catholic faith, anchored in a vision that married eschatological vision with a deep sense of social realities. For Péguy, "the little girl Hope" is the most dynamic of the three virtues, enabling Faith and Charity to reach those parts of the humanity which a merciful God desires to plumb. The virtue of hope was of especial relevance to Péguy himself, whose personal circumstances prevented him from receiving the very sacraments around which his poetic vision revolved. Few poets have meditated so deeply on the meaning of human work, and he remains the poet of the disenfranchised and the dispossessed: those who might be tempted to despair at the futility of everything they do.

Every day, you say, all your days are alike

On earth, all days are the same.

Departing from the same mornings they convey you to the same
evenings.

But they do not lead you to the same eternal evenings.

Every day, you say, looks the same.—Yes, every earthly day.

But have no fear, my children, they do not at all look like

The last day, which is different from any other.

Every day, you say, repeats itself.—No, they are added

To the eternal treasury of days.

The bread of each day to that of the day before.

The suffering of each day

(Each though it repeats the suffering of the day before)

Is added to the eternal treasury of sorrows

The prayer of each day

(Even though it repeats the prayer of the day before)

Is added to the eternal treasury of prayers.

The merit of each day

(Even though it repeats the merit of the day before)

Is added to the eternal treasury of merits.

On earth everything repeats itself. In the same matter.

But in heaven everything counts

And everything increases. The grace of each day

(Even though it repeats the grace of the day before)

Is added to the eternal treasury of graces. And it's for this that the

young Hope

Alone doesn't spare anything. When Jesus worked at his father's shop

Every day he relived the same day.

There was never any trouble

Except once.

And yet this is the fabric, within these days of sameness,

This is the web of the same workdays

That make up, that eternally make up

The admirable Life of Jesus before his preaching

His private life

His perfect life, his model life The life he offers as an example, as an inimitable Model to imitate.

Charles Péguy (1873-1914) was a notable French poet, essayist and editor.

Keep reading! The next article in this issue is, [More Than Just the Paycheck: The Dignity of Work](#) by Deborah Savage

More Than Just the Paycheck: The Dignity of Work

DEBORAH SAVAGE

“Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master.”

Matthew 25:21

Two conflicting narratives have entered into public discourse of late, in particular since the inauguration of President Donald Trump. The first describes—in variously triumphant or despairing terms—a seemingly inevitable future in which a significant portion of the jobs now performed by humans will be done by robots or otherwise automated. This is not a particularly new topic of concern for the human community. Such **predictions** have punctuated our economic lives since the Industrial Revolution. But this time, the horizon appearing before us is arguably quite radically different. Economists—and others in the know—are warning us to prepare for a seismic shift in the way work gets done in the rapidly approaching “second machine age.”^[1] It is a future of self-driving cars, robotic bank tellers and fast-food servers, automated health services and legal advice—a world in which jobs formerly thought to be immune to automation have been consumed by the juggernaut of technology.

Indeed, in its 2014 issue on the impact of technology, **The Economist** reported on a study published by Oxford University scholars who predicted that, within the next 25 years, 47% of traditional jobs will have given way to automation.^[2] Fast forward to a 2016 interview with well-known venture capitalist, **Art Bilger**, a member of the board at the Wharton School of Business, who stated unequivocally that the nature of work is changing in fundamental ways—and that the “trend is irreversible.” The jobs that made the ascendancy of the middle class possible over the last century are simply not coming back: the term “structural unemployment” has claimed a permanent place in our lexicon. In addition, adds Mr. Bilger, no one is prepared.

So dramatic are these developments that serious consideration is being given to what we might do once some 50% of our jobs have been taken over by automation. One

proposal gaining steam, especially (and perhaps unsurprisingly) in the tech community, involves yet another innovation and another new term; it is referred to as the Basic Income Guarantee (or BIG for short).[3] The proposal is simple: provide every American citizen with a guaranteed subsistence income to insure everyone a minimal level of well-being. The BIG would replace existing poverty programs and, to insure a just system, would be available to all no matter their current level of income. **Michael Munger**, an economist and professor of political science at Duke University and an advocate of this approach, acknowledges that the feasibility of the proposal requires further discussion, but points out that we are already doing something like it, just not very well. After all, it really would be a much more efficient way of redistributing the benefits of globalization, some of which, let us admit, do not reach everyone. The BIG would insure that everyone got their fair share, insuring a measure of prosperity for all. Who would be responsible for handing out the money? Why—the state, of course. After all, they are doing that now.

Don't worry, declare the tech community, the globalists, and the state, we've got your back.

Enter candidate, now president, Donald J. Trump. President Trump does not seem to have been brought up to date on this scenario. In his inaugural address, he laid firm claim to a vision that had formed a major theme of his candidacy. He described a future for America in which the jobs that made the middle class a stable feature of the polis would return, once again, to the steel mills, coalmines, and factories that now stand empty in many parts of the country. The narrative he has offered the American people tells a story of jobs that were lost in the flight of American companies in search of cheap labor at offshore manufacturing sites, or stolen by other countries who took advantage of our naïve trade policies. What had been a theme in his candidacy has now been elevated to public policy. He has withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, is well on his way to imposing tariffs on foreign goods, and is insisting on a new reliance on American-made products. On this account, the way to return to full employment is not primarily education and training (though these are needed) but through protectionism and tariffs.

Now, it is easy for the more sophisticated among us to shake our heads at President Trump's apparently uninformed and clearly unenlightened point of view. Obviously, we scoff, he is perpetrating a myth, perhaps unwittingly, on a mostly unwitting public; he is selling the country a bill of goods. Does he not realize that these approaches cannot possibly prepare us for the future that presses so insistently upon us? Surely,

some staff member should alert him to the fact that his policies fly in the face of developments over which none of us has any say. Does he not know that the forces at work are inevitable, as unavoidable as the ever-forward march of history? Has he not accepted, as most of humankind clearly has, that human civilizations are on the march toward an ideal future in which real freedom from toil and drudgery has finally been achieved? Is this not the goal toward which human history is ordered?

Hmm—let me think.

Mr. Trump may be simplistic in his outlook. He may be ignoring trends that seem clear to the rest of us. But we miss something essential about Trump's surprising victory if we fail to realize that at the heart of his insistence that we "make America great again" is an appeal to those in our community who have experienced what [Arthur C. Brooks](#) of the American Enterprise Institute has called the "dignity deficit." Trump won, says Brooks, because he grasped that the nature of the gap that appeared to concern the American public was not about income but about dignity. And that those on the "wrong side" of the dignity gap were mostly working class men. [4] Our current president may operate on instinct, but that does not mean his instincts are always wrong. And clearly, what he does understand is that when you rob someone, especially a man, of the chance to earn his own livelihood, for whatever reason, you take away more than merely an income. You take away his dignity, his sense of self-worth, and his pride at being the master of his own destiny—and that of his family.

Now, no doubt it is unrealistic to expect a return to full employment by counting on what is likely a disappearing landscape. But it should also be clear that those who gleefully declare as inevitable a future devoid of meaningful work for most of us are caught up in denial themselves. Such a future would look more like a scene from *The Hunger Games* than the free and flourishing society they so glibly promise.

And here we come to our purpose in this essay. For the lacuna in both of these narratives is a true and explicit understanding of the real meaning of human work, its place in the life of man, and its significance for his natural right to become most fully himself. In the first instance, work is for man; man is not for work (*Laborem exercens*, 6). The technocrats miss this entirely. It is the missing premise in Trump's vision of full employment. Human beings do not live for the sake of technology, civilization, or culture. We live by means of these things, always preserving our own purpose and personal dignity.[5] For work cannot be reduced to a mere job or even a career. It cannot be reduced to a purely economic enterprise at all. It is not simply something we do for pay—it is fundamental to who we are as human persons. Even little children

have chores to do—and parents know that without them, without learning to work and to love it, their children will never be happy. When tethered to a right understanding of meaningful leisure and its summit, the celebration of the Eucharist, it is how we become who we are meant to be.[6] For human life reflects two fundamental rhythms—work and leisure—and wherever man, woman, or child is robbed of their full expression, humanity is profoundly impoverished.[7]

This is not only a deeply theological truth. It is a truth that must govern our understanding of what constitutes actual human progress. It must provide the starting place for economics and public policy, at least if these features of human community are to contribute to the creation of a peaceful and just society ordered toward authentic human flourishing. Mankind has always asked and will never cease asking the question of how to live in peace secured by justice, something the Church refers to as “the social question.”[8] And, admittedly, the way to that goal gets increasingly complex with every passing generation. But it will never be realized by denying the given nature of the human person and the meaning that work has in a life fully lived.

We find this thesis demonstrated most fully in Pope St. John Paul II’s 1981 encyclical on the topic, *Laborem exercens* (On Human Work). There the late Holy Father makes a surprising and arguably radical claim. He goes so far as to declare that “human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question” (LE, 6). In other words, the answer to a question that has concerned humankind since the beginning of recorded history will be found in an understanding of human work (LE, 6). A bold claim indeed.

John Paul II’s argument begins with a return to the first chapter of Genesis, to a passage found at Genesis 1:28 where, after creating male and female in his image at 1:27, God tells man and woman to “be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it.” This passage has been rightly interpreted in the tradition as the command to get to work. John Paul points to an important exegetical insight: it is a command that comes before the fall, when, as he explores so beautifully elsewhere, man and woman are in the state of original innocence. They are absolutely without sin: the passage illuminates human nature in its fundamental, original design. Therefore, argues John Paul, work cannot be seen as a punishment for sin—though we know that it will become more burdensome because of it. But if Scripture is to be believed, we can most certainly say, that since the call to work comes before the fall, we can understand it as a natural part of our human condition. John Paul tells us in his encyclical that the only conclusion we can draw from this account is that work is truly a fundamental

dimension of human existence; it is an integral part of the mystery of creation itself.[9]

The Holy Father goes on to say that we are called to work because we are made in the image of the God who creates. And that it is in working that we reflect that image and participate in the on-going process of creation. In fact, work is one of the characteristics that distinguishes the human person from the rest of creation, for it is through work that our lives are sustained, communities are built, and our nature is realized. He states: “Only man is capable of work, and only man works, at the same time by work occupying his existence on earth. Thus work bears a particular mark of man and of humanity, the mark of a person operating within a community of persons” (LE, Introduction).

His argument further depends on a fundamental distinction he makes between two dimensions of human work. The first, the objective dimension, is that which results from work in the external or material sense, either a product or a service, whether in the public or the private sphere. This is the dimension we most associate with working. It is what the customer buys, it is what we may or may not get paid to produce; it is the pizza or the products we deliver, the meal our family eats, the never-ending home project.

The second, the subjective dimension, and the primary concern of the encyclical, refers to the person performing the work, that is, the “subject” of work, who, by virtue of his very humanity, is called to be a person in the fullest sense of that word. The human person, made in the image of God, reflects God’s creative activity in the act of working and is “a person, that is to say, a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself and with a tendency to self-realization” (LE, 6).

The subjective dimension of human work is constituted by the fact that in working, the person not only creates some object—a meal, a widget, a paper—but also creates himself in the process. Through his work, man simultaneously reflects both his own dignity and his grateful recognition of the gift on creation, without which he would be bereft of the resources he needs to survive and flourish. John Paul states:

work is not only good in the sense that it is useful or something to enjoy; it is also good as being something worthy, that is to say, something that corresponds to man’s dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it. If one wishes to define more clearly the ethical meaning of work, it is this truth that one must

particularly keep in mind. Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed in a sense becomes “more a human being.” (LE, 9)[10]

In contrast with the general outlook of our time, the Church proclaims that the value and dignity of work is not a function of the kind of work being done but is to be attributed to the fact that the one who is doing it is a person (LE, 6).[11]

Let us pause here and consider just two of the implications of this realization. If work is a fundamental dimension of human existence and if it is in part through work that we become who we are meant to be, we need to reflect on the devastation wrought on human persons and human communities by unemployment. We must think for a moment about the technocrats’ dream of a world in which humans have become mostly irrelevant to the productive economy.[12] The first is a tragedy, the second, a fool’s paradise. Both possibilities call for human intervention if we are to realize the Church’s social vision.

The starting place of the Church’s social teaching is a fundamental recognition of our status before God and the fact that we are already in debt to our Creator for the gift of life. We are obligated by that debt to become the person God had in mind when he created us. We are being told here that this takes place, in part, through work. Unemployment is an evil because it robs human persons of the chance to achieve material and spiritual well-being. The technocrats’ solution forgets that man does not live by bread alone. But both would rob us of something even more precious—our natural right to fully actualize the potencies that were given to us at the moment of conception, potencies that move into act through the effort to do a job well.

Thus is our obligation to one another made manifest: we are each called to establish social structures that permit every human person to fulfill their obligation to their Creator.

Secondly, if it is the subjective dimension of work that gives it its dignity, then we are obligated to question the bias that exists in our culture toward placing more importance on the objective value of work than on its subjective dimension.[13] This insight should do away with the differentiation of people into classes according to the kind of work they do. The men and women who serve us in restaurants, collect the garbage, or work in factories lend as much dignity to their work as those who occupy the more prestigious jobs in our community. Public school teachers, insurance agents,

and police officers are heroes equal to the sports celebrities or the CEOs in our culture. Closer to home, staff possess as much dignity as faculty or department chairs. This does not mean we cannot rate or quantify the value of work in its objective aspect; it does mean we must remember that the primary basis of the value of work is man himself, who is its subject.

Only when the goal of work is man himself, only when he is reflecting his personhood as a “conscious and free subject” making decisions about his work, can he be said to be master of it. It is only in this context that the biblical meaning of work is fulfilled, when throughout the process man manifests himself and confirms himself as the one who has dominion over it. This is what constitutes the ethical dimension of work—that the one who does it is a person, “a subject that decides about himself” (LE, 6).

Finally, perhaps the most dramatic aspect of John Paul’s account of the significance of human work is his argument that it actually enters into the process of salvation itself. He declares that human acts, including work, are always the act of a person who is a conscious being, “capable of deciding about himself with a tendency toward self-realization” (LE, 6). Thus the whole person—body and spirit—participates in the act of working which can and should lead, much like other human activities, to a closer relationship to God and a deeper friendship with Christ. He states:

These points need to be properly assimilated: an inner effort on the part of the human spirit, guided by faith, hope and charity, is needed in order that through these points the work of the individual human being may be given the meaning which it has in the eyes of God and by means of which work enters into the salvation process on a par with the other ordinary yet particularly important components of its texture. (LE, 24)[14]

Ultimately, our work calls us to imitate the work of Christ himself, who performed, obediently and willingly, “the work of salvation that came about through suffering and death on a cross” (LE, 27). We show ourselves to be true disciples of Christ by accepting to make the sacrifices necessary to perform our own daily tasks, to work at them diligently and generously out of love for those we serve. In so doing, we work in union with Christ on the Cross, joining ourselves to his sacrifice—and collaborating with the Son of God for the redemption of humanity and the sanctification of the world.

And so we have come to see that the stakes are indeed very high in these conflicting versions of the future. It turns out that the meaning of work is intimately connected to

the very meaning of man himself and the telos toward which he is ultimately ordered. Whether that work is intellectual or manual, whether it takes place in the public domain or the home, whether its impact is global or domestic, it is, always and everywhere, a human act that must be governed by the faithful quest for virtue and pursued with a clean and loving heart. It is how we show our love for God and for humanity. It is, in the end, a crucial means by which we may enter into the joy of the Master.

Deborah Savage is a member of the faculty at the St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul Minnesota where she teaches philosophy and theology and also serves as Director of the Masters in Pastoral Ministry Program. She is the co-founder and director of the Siena Symposium for Women, Family, and Culture, a think tank organized at the University to respond to John Paul II's call for a new and explicitly Christian feminism.

[1] Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technology* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., January 2016).

[2] This study is also cited by Dylan Pahman in his February 2017 essay in *Public Discourse*, "Protectionism and a Universal Basic Income Won't Solve Our Economic Problems. Max Torres also takes up this general topic in his March 2017 essay in *First Things* "America Needs Work." These two essays are excellent but, in my opinion, do not go far enough to provide a fuller account of the Catholic understanding of human work as an antidote to contemporary discourse on the subject.

[3] *Elon Musk*, founder of Tesla, is one vocal proponent.

[4] For a complete analysis of the disturbing trends in male participation in the labor force, see Nicholas Eberstadt, *Men Without Work: America's Invisible Crisis* (Templeton Press, 2016).

[5] John Paul II, "On the Dignity of the Human Person," *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Teresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 178-179.

[6] See Joseph Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 1998), 3-50. Also, *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 21.

[7] Michael Naughton, "Work as the Basis of Leisure: Toward a Unified Life," *Values*,

Work, Education: The Meanings of Work, Value Inquiry Book Series 22, January 1995: 53-75. See also Pope John Paul II, *Dies Domini*.

[8] Fr. William Byron argued that this was the best way to summarize the so-called “social question.”

[9] From what I have been able to determine, there is only one other place in John Paul’s entire body of work where he refers to something as a fundamental dimension of human existence. He uses those particular words in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, where he points out that the philosophical categories we find in Aquinas—that is, being and existence—are really only abstractions in a way until they find their expression in persons. And there they are characterized by the encounter of the “I and the thou.” This I-thou relationship, he says, and I quote “is a fundamental dimension of human existence” and, perhaps unsurprisingly, his argument is derived from the exact same place in Genesis we have been discussing, Genesis 1:27: male and female he created them.

[10] Here John Paul is not declaring an absolute right to the goods of creation or invoking man’s power over creation in any Baconian sense. His argument is grounded in a profound grasp of man’s role as steward of creation while at the same time acknowledging his need to access those goods in order to survive and flourish as a species. See his encyclical on the Sabbath, *Dies Domini* (no. 67) for further elaboration on these points.

[11] This understanding of the subjective dimension of work simply must rule out certain types of work (prostitution, servitude or slave wages) as a betrayal of the dignity of the person.

[12] Historian and author, Yuval Noah Harari, refers to those left behind by technology as the “useless classes.” See *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), 326.

[13] For example, wealthy CEOs, highly paid sports stars, and media celebrities garner more respect, even adoration, than those who perform less glamorous or lucrative tasks. In 2015, the Economic Policy Institute reported that between 1978 and 2014, inflation-adjusted CEO pay increased by almost 1,000% while typical workers in the U.S. saw a pay raise of just 11% during that same period. The *ratio between average American CEO pay and worker pay* was 303-to-1 in 2015.

[14] Work is not only a sharing in the creative act of God, but also a sharing in his

redemptive and sanctifying aspects.

Keep reading! The next article in this issue is, [Quaerere Deum: Work as Love of God and World](#) by D.C. Schindler

Quaerere Deum: Work as Love of God and World

D. C. SCHINDLER

In an address to the “ministers of the world of culture,” given in 2008, Benedict XVI recalled the central role monasteries played in the development of Europe: during a time of general upheaval, Benedict of Nursia (480–543) established a “stable” place wherein men could come and pledge their lives in toto to a single task, namely, quaerere Deum, the search for God. As he explains, in seeking God, the monks also found a new source of human creativity. The extraordinary focusing of human existence in the monastic life ought not to be interpreted as a flight from the world, as superficial judgments often suggest, but rather as an opening up of the world in its deepest meaning. Created for no other reason than as a definitive expression of God’s goodness, his gratuitous love, the world flourishes as world in giving glory to God. The former pope praised monasticism, in his address, not simply for the service rendered to the Church, but specifically for the great and abiding fruit it has borne as a generator of culture.

It is in this context that, after highlighting the contribution to spiritual culture in the beautiful forms of contemplative prayer, centered on the Word, Pope Benedict drew attention also to the monastic expression of material culture: the monks not only praised God in the singing of hymns, but also in manual work. The Benedictine motto is ora et labora. What seems at first glance, perhaps, to be a trivial point turns out to have a profound significance, both when we consider it in light of pre-Christian conceptions of work and in light of contemporary notions, the view of work in our “post-Christian” world. The Benedictine motto ought to be understood as a statement concerning the very meaning of work: to affirm “labora” as an essential part of the monk’s mission is to say that, in addition to all of the other “benefits” it makes possible, human labor offers a way of seeking God. In other words, work represents a specially designated place of man’s encounter with the world’s Creator and Redeemer. What exactly does this mean, and why is it important, particularly for us today?

The Greek and Jewish view of work

On the way to explaining the Christian sense of work, Benedict XVI draws a contrast between the Greek and the Jewish attitude toward this essentially human activity:

In the Greek world, manual labour was considered something for slaves. Only the wise man, the one who is truly free, devotes himself to the things of the spirit; he views manual labour as somehow beneath him, and leaves it to people who are not suited to this higher existence in the world of the spirit. The Jewish tradition was quite different: all the great rabbis practised at the same time some form of handcraft.

It is important to reflect on this contrast, and see how Christianity not only follows the Jewish tradition in granting a special sense to productive human labor, as Benedict says, but in doing so takes up a decisive dimension also of the Greek tradition.

The most basic reason that the Greeks had an ambivalence toward work, which in some context would reach the point of outright disdain, was not, as one might think, laziness or even contempt for matter. Instead, as philosopher Jean Pierre Vernant has shown, this ambivalence is due first of all to the absolute significance the Greeks accorded to nature.^[1] The Greeks did not recognize God as Creator *ex nihilo*, but rather as the ultimate principle of order, and they saw nature—that is, the given intelligibility, beauty, and goodness of things—as the place wherein divine order culminates. This order is, in fact, so divine that it even presents a constraint on the activities of the “gods” themselves. When the Greeks called the world “kosmos,” meaning “jewel” or “ornament,” they were setting into relief both this essential order and its divine provenance. Divine order, the presence of the gods, shines forth in the resplendent goodness that inheres in things, and this implies that the noblest human act is the aesthetic gaze. We commune, so to speak, with God when we contemplate the intrinsic goodness of things, their radiant order, the splendor of their truth.

The perfection of this radical affirmation of reality explains the ambiguity of work. The act by which, instead of beholding the beauty of things, we change them, we intervene in their natural order in order to redirect them, so to speak, to the service of some extrinsic need, cannot fail to appear as a kind of desecration. The Greeks were never able finally to excise from work, and most specifically the work associated with human ingenuity (*technē*) and creativity (*poēsis*), the shadow of hubris, and even blasphemy. The mythological origin of the human arts, the “*technai*,” is Prometheus’ theft from the gods. Work, in other words, has an ineluctable tragic character, even, or

perhaps especially, when it exhibits the artisan's exceeding skill.[2] It is interesting to note that agriculture, while entailing a certain drudgery and unrelenting uncertainty, and thus falling short of the divine ideal of contemplative leisure, nevertheless did not betray the same ambiguity, for the Greeks, as *technē*[3]: in agriculture, human activity is not so much an intrusion into nature as it is a cooperation, an effort that serves principally to allow nature's own generative forces to reach their most excellent discharge.

The Jewish people had a similar esteem for agriculture.[4] In their case, however, this esteem arose not most basically from a recognition of the intrinsic goodness, the essential divinity, of nature, but from the command given by the almighty God, the Creator of all things in heaven and on earth.[5] When God created Adam, he placed him specifically in the garden in order to tend it and to keep it. Like all created living things, man receives the commandment, which is at the same time a blessing or conferral of creative power, to "be fruitful and multiply," a commandment he lives out in the one-flesh union of man and woman. But beyond this general prescription, man is given another injunction to fruitfulness, which is specific to him, namely, the command to have dominion over the things of the earth.[6] Agriculture, which is an activity that gives form to the natural world in such a way as to enable it to bear fruit, is obviously a paradigm of such dominion. The special status of agriculture becomes apparent, moreover, in the fact that the Covenant God makes with Abraham, which forms the central identity of the Jewish people, coincides with the gift to them of the Promised Land.

We see in all of this that man is offered a special relationship to God, so to speak, in the medium of labora. If God commanded Adam to till the garden, it was not because God was incapable of putting order into vegetation himself, or even because man would otherwise have to starve (there is no suggestion in the text that tending the garden was necessary for the production of food); instead, work is given to man principally as a gift, as a particular way to commune, so to speak, with God, by imitating his own absolute creativity, his perfect work.[7] Because, however, the special significance of agricultural work, for the Jews, stemmed not first of all from the intrinsic goodness of nature but most basically from the transcendent power of God's command—or, to put it more adequately, the goodness of agriculture is due to God, not qua sanction of natural order, but qua almighty Creator—the Jews, unlike the Greeks, were able to affirm unambiguously the goodness of crafts and trades.[8] In a certain respect, such activities are more divine than agriculture precisely because in their transformative intervention into nature they more closely image the creative

power of God.

The Christian synthesis

It is just in this context that we are able to recognize the distinctiveness of Christianity, the new light that specifically Christian revelation is able to shed on the meaning of work. What characterizes Christianity, as Benedict so memorably showed in the so-called “[Regensburg Address](#),” is not so much the option for the Jewish tradition rather than the Greek, as it is an opening of the Old Covenant made with the Jews now also to the Gentiles—paradigmatically to the Greeks, but in and through them to all people. Christianity, in other words, is a transfiguring inclusion of both the Jews and the Greeks. This “synthesis” of sorts can be seen in the meaning of work, as it is expressed, for example, in the Benedictine tradition of *ora et labora*, contemplation and action, a union of radically different kinds of human activity that transforms the meaning of each. At the heart of this new insight into work—though, to be sure, it is important to point out that this was an insight that was lived and practiced long before it was understood, and that the task of understanding still remains before us to be accomplished—is a metaphysical and christological deepening of the meaning of *creatio ex nihilo*. [9]

There is perhaps no one who has expressed this deepening more vividly than the 6th century writer who called himself Dionysius the Areopagite, no doubt, in part, to represent his thought as a Christian transformation of Greek philosophy.[10] According to Dionysius, God’s creation of the world is best understood, not as a purely transitive act, an imposition “from above” of force, an exercise simply of extrinsic power applied to something foreign to the exerciser of that power—a gesture of absolute control, so to speak. Instead, creation is best understood as a kind of excess of superabundant goodness, by which God comes out of himself, so to speak, into the very heart of the world, without, however, leaving himself or compromising his perfect transcendence and absolute simplicity. In a provocative image, Dionysius suggests that God was “coaxed” out of himself, drawn by the world’s own beauty and goodness, to create the world:

And we must dare to affirm (for ‘tis the truth) that the Creator of the Universe Himself, in His Beautiful and Good Yearning towards the Universe, is through the excessive yearning of His Goodness, transported outside of Himself in His providential activities towards all things that have being, and is touched by the sweet spell of Goodness, Love and Yearning, and so is drawn from His

transcendent throne above all things, to dwell within the heart of all things, through a super-essential and ecstatic power whereby He yet stays within Himself. [11]

His ex nihilo creation, in other words, paradoxically takes the form of a response to the world's intrinsic goodness and beauty. By the same token, God's perfect ec-stasis, his productive bringing about of something genuinely other than himself, something "outside" of him and his nature (creation is understood as an opus "ad extra"), coincides with his remaining "contemplatively" inside, at rest within himself. Being perfect within himself and being generative of something other are both essential expressions of the goodness identical with absolute love. Such a view of creation, of course, can be sustained, finally, only in light of a notion of God as Trinity, which is to say of a God for whom relation to an Other is not opposed to being in oneself. It is indeed the Trinitarian God who is manifest in Christ's incarnation and redemptive death on a cross: Here is God, who can hand himself over so perfectly to his other as to be one Person in two natures, and can hand himself over so perfectly as to sacrifice the life that belongs to his nature—all without ceasing to be God.

These are central Christian mysteries, and their rich significance could fill more books than the world can contain. But we recall them here specifically in order to consider what they imply for the meaning of work, both in relation to the ancient world and our own contemporary age. To put the matter somewhat oversimply, the Greeks recognized the intrinsic goodness of things, the fundamental beauty of nature. For that very reason, however, they were ambivalent about work, in which things were, so to speak, brought "outside" their nature to serve non-natural ends, and the worker, too, subordinated his activity to the service of something outside himself (both in the sense that his activity results in a change in something other than himself and in the sense that he typically makes things to sell to others). Both of these dimensions stand in contrast to contemplation, in which things are beheld in their natural goodness and the beholder enjoys the perfect immanence of the activity: contemplation is good simply for its own sake, and not because it fills some external need. The Jews, on the other hand, affirm the value of work, the nobility of service, above all obedience to God's Law, and recognize, in the light of God's creation, the meaningfulness of genuinely productive activity—but not in the first place because any of this is simply good by its nature. It is interesting to note that, unlike the Greeks, the Jews did not have a practice of contemplation—strictly speaking, keeping the Sabbath has a very different principle from that of Greek *scholē*. [12]

The Christian affirmation of *ora et labora*, contemplation and action, represents a kind of unity of these two traditions. As we see in Dionysius' interpretation of creation, an affirmation of God's absolutely productive activity, his giving rise to something truly other than himself, coincides with an affirmation of the intrinsic goodness of the world in itself; indeed, creation as perfect generosity in a certain sense absolutizes that intrinsic goodness. At the very same time, because this absolute goodness coincides with genuinely productive activity, the Christian mysteries reveal that even the movement out beyond one's nature, to the point of self-sacrifice, is not an abandonment of intrinsic goodness, but a gratuitous—i.e., grace-full—fulfillment of it. Both the affirmation of contemplation and the sacrifice of work give glory to God.

Let us consider this point more concretely. In the Christian vision, there are two ways a tree can be good. There is first its immediate, natural goodness, as when it displays itself in a forest or a park, in the magnificence of its stature, manifesting the beauty of its color, filling the air with its scent, perhaps offering food to squirrels or a home to birds.[13] Then there is a second, "artificial" goodness, when it becomes wood for a fire, for a chair, for a door of a cathedral. These are radically different kinds of goodness, even to the point of being mutually exclusive in any particular case (to enjoy the goodness of the tree *qua* firewood requires the elimination of the tree *qua* living organism), and yet there is no contradiction in affirming both. Indeed, there is a deep connection between the two, which allows one—in fact, ultimately compels one, if one is to love properly—to love trees in both ways. To love a wooden chair does not oblige me to hate the tree in the forest. To the contrary, the more deeply I love a wooden chair, the more interested I become in the kind of tree out of which it is made, the quality of this sort of wood in comparison to the wood of other types of trees, where such trees grow, what they look like—and feel like, and smell like, as trees.

If such a love is a true love, which is to say if it is such a love as to call me to give myself over to it with a certain seriousness, I may become a carpenter. In this case, I involve myself in the reality of trees, of wood, in a genuinely corporeal way, and in a way that makes a claim on a significant part of my existence—or perhaps better on the whole of my existence in a certain respect. Mastering this craft requires a great deal of time and a discipline, or in other words a learning that is at the same time a training of energies, an inscribing of certain practices, so to speak, into my very flesh. I have to come out of myself, in what can be a toilsome and even painful activity, in order to work with the wood. As contemporary writer Matthew Crawford has shown, such work is not the dialectical opposite of contemplation, but rather represents a kind of contemplation of its own,[14] insofar as it offers a special and indeed

irreplaceable way of knowing things, beyond the knowledge of concepts alone. This is a properly intimate knowledge, and a fruitful one. In this “act of knowing,” a tree is lifted out beyond its natural goodness to put that goodness at the service of some end not immediately inscribed within the boundaries of its nature. It is not wrong to see this transformation of a tree into wood, and then into a chair, as an analogy—distant, to be sure, but no less real—of self-sacrificing love, both on the part of the worker and on the part of the tree. Recognizing it as such brings one to recall the natural goodness of the tree that precedes the work, to see that the transformation is a kind of fruit of the tree’s natural perfection, a fruit in which the tree remains somehow present. The work is thus a joining together of two movements of self-transcendence: man the worker spends himself in a form-giving activity, and the tree is thereby taken up and made into something new. The chair, which results, is more than man and more than tree. It is a new reality that bears the traces, as it were, of its two sources. In bearing witness to what is analogous to the surprising goodness of self-sacrificing love, at the deepest level, such work makes manifest the ultimate Source, the love of God himself. In doing such work, whether one is conscious of it or not, one is seeking God. The deep pleasure of the work is a sign of this.

To be sure, one works, not simply to enjoy a special sort of intimacy with creation and thus to commune with God, but perhaps most obviously in order to produce things that are useful for human existence; moreover, even such production for the most part serves a yet more extrinsic end in providing wages for the laborer, and profits for the merchant. But these further ends do not in principle require the elimination of the fruitful encounter we just described. Instead, these more extrinsic ends can be affirmed as implications, necessary but subordinate, of the principal good that is the work itself. When we turn, in the light of this description, to look at the world of work in the Christian middle ages, with the monastery at its center, we cannot help but be struck by the sheer abundance of creativity, which is of a specifically organic sort. On the one hand, in part by virtue of the special organization of work in the monasteries, the high middle ages were marked by a surge in what we would today call technological innovation, both in “machines” and in working methods, and on the other hand, at the same time, we find a celebration of the gifts of nature, precisely as natural, in the multifarious expansion of “material culture.” One of the most distinctive dimensions of medieval life is the great proliferation of crafts and guilds. These represented not merely instruments of economic production, but at the same time they entailed ways of life, formation in a particular ethos, with its own codes of conduct, its rituals, traditions and organs of their transmission, not unlike the sacral orders of the Church and the monastery, all at the service of making good things . . .

out of good things. This abundance of creative life appears against the background of the abiding fundamentality of agriculture: “Tilling the garden” and keeping the herds and flocks was the bedrock of Feudalism (from the Latin “feudum,” land granted to be held as a benefice), which was the defining economic form of the middle ages. A beautiful expression of the intersection of time and eternity, world and God, in medieval work can be found in the illuminations that commonly graced the pages of the Books of Hours, by which lay people lived the form of holiness according to their own state of life.

The degradation of work in the modern era

The notion of work as an intrinsic good casts a critical light on what it has become in the modern world. Historians generally acknowledge that what we might call the essence of work underwent a profound change with the Protestant Reformation (which, not incidentally, eliminated monastic existence in principle). Martin Luther, who quite admirably sought to recover a sense of the holiness of ordinary, everyday life, separated religious meaning from the natural goodness of created things: any kind of work, regardless of its nature, can be a path to holiness if lived as a divine calling. There is no doubt a certain truth to this notion, a truth that was fructified, as it were, at the height of the middle ages in infinitely creative ways. But when the vitality of the middle ages began to wane, and the Greek sense of the “cosmos” began to fade, the assertion of this universally accessible holiness over against the classical tradition represented a piety that made itself simply indifferent to nature. According to Max Weber’s classic text on the subject,^[15] Luther’s theologizing of work opened up the possibility of its proto-capitalistic exploitation in Calvinism and Puritanism. In this exploitation, the indifference to nature turns into a method, an organizational principle, when the evidence of religious piety gets located in the quantitatively assessed productivity of the work, and eventually in the accumulated wealth it generates, insofar as these both bear witness to the sincerity of the worker’s “virtue”: a growing bank account is a sign both of one’s willingness to spend oneself tirelessly in useful activity, and of one’s willingness not to spend one’s earnings in ostentation and self-indulgence.

Whatever the precise historical origin of the modern view of work, there can be no doubt that, at its very heart lies an elimination of the generative encounter between man and world under the sign of beauty, goodness, and truth. The developments in the practice, purpose, and organization of work beginning in the mid-19th century—the industrial revolution, the institution of factories and methods of mass production,

the radical sub-division of labor, the emergence of finance, marketing, and management as distinct fields of work, the radical sub-division of these fields, the commodification of land, labor, and money itself, the globalizing of both labor and consumption, the creation, and then the normalization, of large-scale industrial farming and agribusiness, the technological replacement of labor, and indeed the technological replacement of management—all share a common principle and goal: the complete instrumentalization of work, and so the oblivion of its intrinsic goodness. This instrumentalization, by necessary implication, tends to engulf not only the workers, which is obvious, but also the consumers of the fruits of labor, which is less obvious. To be sure, work has always had an instrumental value, but as we suggested above, in the healthiest instances the “external” ends of work are recognized as fruits, and therefore as requiring investment, so to speak, in the activity itself as an integral whole, a good already in itself. We recall that God gave man work first of all as a gift, and not as a mere means of survival or to accomplish what God was impotent to do himself.

In the modern world, if a technique or technology could be discovered that would reduce the cost of labor—both by eliminating the number of laborers necessary and, even more fundamentally, cheapening its value by radically simplifying its content—and at the same time increase the productivity, it would make no sense at all not to implement it. In fact, one could argue with some plausibility that it would be irresponsible not to do so. But note what is implied here: this judgment assumes that work, as an activity whereby man as an integral reality encounters a thing in the world as an integral reality, is not itself a good, one that would weigh in the scale against the increase in efficiency. At our more reflective moments, we might speak of the “human cost” of, say, the technological replacement of labor, but even in this case what we tend to mean is nothing more than the unemployment it produces in its wake. In other words, we express a regret that work as a mere instrument of production has evicted work as a mere instrument of wage-earning.

Without in the least dismissing the significance of earning a living or of producing necessary goods, we need to see that this reflection betrays a total oblivion of work as good, as a privileged place in which man encounters the world, in which he grows by contending with something real, something that demands full-bodied attention, in which he receives in gratitude something that possesses its own beauty and goodness, and, through his own efforts, becomes in a perhaps surprising way even more beautiful and good. A machine, or in any event a system of machines, can turn a stack of wood into a hundred times more chairs than a carpenter can produce by his own

hand. But if we say that the exchange of the one for the other is an unqualified good, we are ultimately denying, however unwittingly, the goodness of creation, and therefore the existence of God. This denial of God remains the case no matter how much we might go on to dedicate the profits of our business to charity, treat our customers with personal attention, bear heroically the competitive costs of remaining honest in our book-keeping, or even say our prayers while we operate the machinery or before every “team meeting.” None of these practices touch the meaning of work; they become so many efforts that vainly seek to compensate for having evacuated God from the heart of the world.

We all recognize what Harry Braverman called the “degradation of work” in the modern world, and we all suffer from it in some respect, some of us quite directly and severely.[16] One manifestation of this degradation is the radical mobility of modern labor, both in the geographical sense that work is sent to its cheapest locale around the globe and workers are prepared to follow wherever it goes, but also in the anthropological sense that it has become normal to change one’s career multiple times over the course of one’s life: this shows that the career at issue is easy enough to pick up quickly, without much self-investment, which means in turn both that it is content-poor (and so not humanly fulfilling) and that the workers in this career are more or less interchangeable. The degradation of work and the suffering it causes has provoked efforts in various quarters to remedy at least some aspects of its implications. On the one hand, there are movements for justice, calling for improvements in working conditions, protections for workers’ rights, growing support for “fair trade” business practices. On the other hand, in response to the nihilistic ethos of the modern corporation, the absence of meaning in so many lines of work, even those considered privileged or even prestigious, one finds attempts to make the work-place more friendly, more fun, more flexible and accommodating. In the end, however, genuinely human work is not simply work that has been rendered less burdensome or more just (though of course this latter quality is indispensable); work is genuinely human when it becomes a concrete expression of man’s ultimate vocation.

Life coaches encourage people to forget about money and pursue a career that involves work that they “love.” The use of this word might be thought of as an echo, no doubt unconscious, of the great Christian tradition of work. But the word in the contemporary context means something quite different from what the word might mean, for example, to a medieval stone mason. From a career counselor, the word is basically psychological, and means more or less subjective pleasure or self-fulfillment:

this is work I can take a certain delight in doing, and it allows me to use my talents. However valuable such things may be, they are fundamentally different from love as a response to objective goodness, a response that includes pleasure and fulfillment, but gathers these up into the form of an objective bond. To be sure, this sense of love as bond is not especially romantic, since it directly implies some suffering, the bearing of what is heavy precisely because it is substantial. But nothing insubstantial can be truly meaningful. Substantial love, for all of the suffering it brings with it, is a celebration of the goodness of the created world in its ontological density, a celebration that is altogether bodily, demanding the investment of one's whole person for the sake of something that has intrinsic value, becoming fruitful for oneself, one's family, and one's community. The monastic existence that Benedict XVI recalled as a wellspring of culture is characterized by substantial love because it is characterized by "permanence": the Benedictines took a vow of stability, all monks enter this existence through the pronouncement of perpetual vows, they fill their time with a consideration of things eternal. It is as part of such an existence—or in forms of life analogous to it—that work becomes a *quaerere Deum*, and thus a fully human expression of Christian love.

D. C. Schindler is Associate Professor of Metaphysics and Anthropology at the John Paul II Institute, an editor of *Communio: International Catholic Review*, and the author of *The Catholicity of Reason* (Eerdmans, 2013) and *The Perfection of Freedom: Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel Between the Ancients and the Moderns* (Cascade Books, 2012), among others.

[1] Jean Pierre Vernant, "Work and Nature in Ancient Greece," in *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 248–70.

[2] The classic expression of this tragic character is the famous "ode to man" in Sophocles's *Antigone*, lines 332–75.

[3] See Herbert Applebaum, *The Concept of Work, Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 37–44.

[4] See Arthur T. Geoghegan, *The Attitude Towards Labor in Early Christianity and Ancient Culture* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1945), 59–89, esp. 62.

[5] This is not to say that the goodness of the world is in any sense denied—quite the contrary, the creation narrative in *Genesis* affirms the world's goodness unequivocally: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very

good” (Gen 1:31). The point is that it is good as a result of God’s creative power rather than as an absolute “given,” which is how it tends to be seen by the Greeks.

[6]As John Paul II’s encyclical *Laborem exercens* observes, work is a uniquely human activity. The encyclical likewise explains that the “dominion” man is to have over creation must be interpreted, not as an absolutized power, but a creativity that is responsive because it first presupposes man’s receptivity to the God-given meaning and value of the natural world.

[7]Gen 2:2-3 refers 3 times (a perfection number) to God’s creation as an accomplished “work” (“melachah,” as opposed to the more general term for work, “avodah,” which can be translated as “labor” or “toil.” “Melachah,” the word exclusively used for God’s work, is a creative, productive, or perfective activity).

[8]It is interesting to note that, in Scripture, the handicrafts are especially honored by God in the construction of the Tabernacle: see Geoghegan, 65. To say that the Jews esteemed the crafts and trades, however, does not mean that there were no prohibitions against particular trades: see Applebaum, 182.

[9]The connection between a robust notion of creation and a positive conception of work is presented quite clearly by George Ovitt, Jr., *The Restoration of Perfection: Labor and Technology in Medieval Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

[10]Often referred to now as “Pseudo-Dionysius,” this anonymous author was likely a monk who lived around 500 AD. He took his name from the Greek judge who was converted by St. Paul by the famous sermon the latter delivered at Mars Hill. See Acts 17:34.

[11]Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*, trans. C.E. Rolt, 106.

[12]It was the Jewish philosopher Philo who first used the language of contemplative leisure to describe the keeping of the Sabbath, but of course he was deeply influenced by the Greek philosophical tradition.

[13]Note that, already at this level, there is an analogous extension of the meaning of goodness: being food for squirrels or a home for birds is already a movement beyond the tree’s immediate nature, but it is nevertheless a movement beyond that takes place within nature.

[14]See Matthew Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*

(New York: Penguin, 2009).

[15]Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Penguin, 2002).

[16]Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, 25th anniversary edition (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998).

Keep reading! The next article in this issue is, [How Your Moleskine Can Bring Out Your Humanity: Why Matter Matters](#), a book review by Jonathan Elliot.

How Your Moleskine Can Bring Out Your Humanity: Why Matter Matters

JONATHAN ELLIOTT

Sax, David, *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter* (PublicAffairs, 2016).

Up until very recently, if something could be digitized, its fate was a foregone conclusion... Our world would be successively rendered into bits and bytes, one program at a time, until we reached a state of digital utopia, or the Terminators came for us. (xvi)

In his 2016 book, *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter*, journalist David Sax attempts to explain how, contrary to predictions, analog goods and ideas have clawed their way back to a state of cultural and financial relevance.

In two parts, Sax shows how, beginning in the mid-2000s, the digital takeover unexpectedly plateaued and analog began its resurgence. Part one narrates the return of four analog products through stories of the businesses behind them: teenage girls buying Taylor Swift records at the local vinyl shop; Milan Fashion Week designers sketching in their Moleskine notebooks; two bold entrepreneurs attempting to revive an iconic Italian film manufacturing company; a board game sommelier chatting up yuppies at a board game café on a Friday night in downtown Toronto.

Part two explores the revenge of analog ideas: independent bookstores opening in Manhattan; Amazon's brick-and-mortar Seattle store; students and teachers interacting in classrooms, unmediated by iPads or laptops; manufacturing jobs in Detroit; and Facebook's Analog Research Lab, where employees (and yes, this actually happens) hand-craft motivational signs to kick-off a project.

While some of these background stories include amusing anecdotes, the repetitive arc of sales-go-down, new-twist-on-an-old-classic, sales-go-up can become a bit monotonous. More interesting is Sax's analysis of why analog is on the rise. From a production standpoint the answer is simple: companies are manufacturing more and more physical products because they are profitable. Despite the effortless scalability of digital products, many technology companies, large and small, have failed to generate consistent profit. For example, Amazon's online retail division profited just 2.5% in the second quarter of 2015, following nearly two decades of un-profitable operation. Analog products provide a more certain future and a more lucrative present.

And if analog products are more profitable, it is because consumers find analog things to be more suited to human nature—or more “human centric” as Sax puts it—than digital things. Sax argues that analog helps satisfy our need for “in-real-life” relationships, which social media and other virtual ‘worlds’ cannot. The promise of person-to-person interactions at board game cafés and bookstores draw us away from video games and Amazon's ‘You-Might-Also-Like’ list. Analog products and services have built-in limitations which, Sax argues, free us to be creative, rather than overwhelming us with limitless possibilities. This is a major reason why musicians have returned to recording with analog equipment. Digital recording software allows for a practically unlimited number of takes and the splicing of the best bits of each, thus creating the idea that the perfect version of a song is within reach. Analog, on the other hand, necessarily restricts the process, which frees the musicians and producers to focus on the performance of the songs. The result is “more heartfelt, raw, and organic” music. Analog goods also engage more of our senses—the smell of the newspaper, the feel of a book—creating a richer and more aesthetically satisfying experience.

Sax is undoubtedly right that profit drives production and that we are drawn to physical things because we are physical and social creatures, and his book contains the seeds of a deeper analysis of the importance of the physical world. He builds the case against the usefulness of technology in education by describing a number of failed technological initiatives (including a billion-dollar iPad disaster in Los Angeles public schools) and the recent successes of new analog educational products. This suggests that learning requires more than access to information and that the student-teacher relationship, which technology disrupts, is a necessary part of that process. Sax's recurring argument that we “crave limitations” points to the inherent physical, intellectual, and temporal limitations of our human nature. In the best part of the chapter on work, Sax discusses the development of judgment and reason through

manual labor. The quotes he borrows from author Nicholas Carr regarding our ability to “weave the knowledge we draw from observation and experience, from living, into a rich and fluid understanding of the world that we can then apply to any task or challenge...” has shades of Aristotle’s notion of *ars* (art) and Aquinas’s theory of the role of experience (*experimentum*) in cognition (*vis cogitativa*). It points to the reality that manual labor can truly engage both the body and the mind.

The motif of the pleasure of analog, which Sax returns to in each chapter, also reveals, albeit indirectly, another important aspect of our human nature. Sax describes what people enjoy in using analog products, “from the serendipity of getting a roll of film back from the developer... to the luxurious sound of unfolding the Sunday newspaper.” These aesthetic pleasures and the satisfaction of using the right tool for the job certainly help explain why analog. But many of the reasons Sax and his interviewees cite for the popularity of analog products and ideas are traditionally called vices: buying a Moleskine notebook to “feel creative even if they are not,” reading the Economist to “feel smarter,” using instant photography to satisfy the desire for “instant gratification,” playing board games to “liberate one another from reality,” shopping as a form of entertainment. Our use of analog goods to indulge pride, vanity, or *acedia* (sloth) would not be particularly noteworthy were it not for the fact that people use the digital world just as much for these same reasons.

There is, I think, an important lesson here, which Sax seems to miss. We often consume analog things, despite their physicality, in a way that actually de-humanizes us. For analog to be truly “human-centric” we cannot just consume it; we must encounter it more deeply. Several times Sax asserts that analog matters because it is real. But reality only leads to greater self-knowledge and wisdom when one is yoked to it. This requires more than enjoying analog products. It requires commitment to people, place, or things through good and bad. Only when the real world pushes back against us are we invited to self-reflect and ask the deeper questions about the world outside of ourselves, and only then can we develop the virtues that make us more human. The virtual world is almost entirely incapable of providing this kind of pushback because, from the user’s perspective, it is almost entirely the product of human imagination. There are no natures to encounter, understand, and work with (or struggle against) in the virtual world. Through essentially the same actions one can play music, purchase a book, shoot the enemy, or perform calculations. The virtual world creates a one-way relationship, existing as the expression of our desires. The analog world establishes a two-way relationship, for it has its own stable existence apart from our imagination. Ontology establishes relations and relations

help form moral habits.

This all brings us back to the subtitle of the book, *Real Things and Why They Matter*. Sax provides two compelling answers. First, analog products produce a greater number of well-paying jobs than do digital products. Second, they draw us out of the virtual world and into the real world. Sax is most concerned with this latter reason: “Why a book? Why print? Because it is real.” By emphasizing, throughout the book, the ways in which analog things are more suited to our human nature, Sax points to our irrepressible desire for reality and our growing wariness of the promised digital utopia. As Hopkins once wrote, “there lives the dearest freshness deep down things.” Analog’s revenge, however, will only be humanity’s victory if it leads us to a fuller understanding of what it means to be human.

Jonathan Elliott received his M.A. in theology from the Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception. He and his wife live and raise livestock at Whiffletree Farm in Warrenton, Virginia.

Keep reading! The next article in this issue is, *Work is a Form of Prayer: The Thought of Cardinal Wyszyński*, a book review by Jakub Grygiel

Work Is A Form of Prayer: The Thought of Cardinal Wyszyński

JAKUB GRYGIEL

Wyszyński, Stefan Cardinal, *All You Who Labor: Work and the Sanctification of Daily Life* (Sophia Institute Press, 1st American ed. 1995).

All You Who Labor (the title of the original is *The Spirit of Human Work*) is a meditation on work by Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński (1901–1981), published in 1946. The core argument is that work is an indispensable part of our lives because it is an instrument not just of material well being but also of salvation. Work is an essential feature of humanity, therefore, and, if properly understood and pursued, it is a form of prayer that sanctifies us. *Ora et labora*, the Benedictine saying, does not put the two actions—working and praying—in opposition to each other, as two realms with little in common between them. Rather, as Wyszyński observes, work should be done in the shadow of prayer and, even more, work, undertaken as prayer, brings us closer to God.

Wyszyński wrote this book in the immediate aftermath of World War II, when his country, Poland, was slowly beginning to rebuild itself from the devastation of Nazi and Soviet occupation. All people wanted, he wrote in a short prefatory paragraph of the Polish edition, was to go back to “calm, lasting, fruitful, blessed work.” The problem was that by 1945 the Nazi occupation was replaced by a Soviet one, both equally brutal and destructive. For the Communist overlords, work was an activity that would be transcended by eliminating private ownership and by automating production. Human labor, in other words, was a burden, a form of oppression that ultimately had to be eliminated. While marching toward that earthly workers’ paradise, the Communist system planned in a “scientific” way how everything ought to be produced, assembled, and grown. The individual worker had to accept the plan, abandon his individual desires, and labor as small cog in an increasingly automated machine. The path toward the abolition of work began with the elimination of its individual purpose for each person.

Without mentioning the war or Communism, Wyszyński rejected the view of work as an activity to be avoided or abolished. Work was not a punishment imposed upon us by a wrathful God or by an unjust economic structure. Man had to work even before the Fall, instilling order in the world. In fact, the necessity of work is a tangible sign of God's trust in us because it allows us to cooperate with Him. We do not create through work, but we engage with the created world, participating in God's plan for it.

Wyszyński thus clearly rejects the Communist view of work as historically transient. But the temptation to consider work as a form of oppression and a burden to be jettisoned is not limited to the particular experience of 1946, the year of this book. The author's observations are applicable to our times, too. For instance, he writes: "How different a city looks in the early morning, when the crowds of rested, happy people are going to work, from the evening, when the worn-out, drooping figures return, weighed down with the burden of the whole day" (85). The commuters in the late afternoon appear devoid of joy, crushed by the physical fatigue of the day but even more so by the purposeless monotony of their job. A description of slavery or life under a Communist regime, certainly; but also a description of people for whom work is only a temporary means to a material end.

Wyszyński exhorts the reader to approach work as a means to spiritual betterment. "The result of all human work should be not merely the perfecting of the thing produced, but also the perfecting of the worker; not merely external order in work, but also inner order in man" (151). Work, he writes, "by its difficulty, redeems, liberates, ennobles, and sanctifies" (98).

How can we turn work into more than a way of providing for our families and ourselves? How can our work bring us closer to God? Wyszyński offers a few suggestions. First, work cannot be a replacement for prayer: the saying is not *ora aut labora*! On the contrary, prayer, and the development of one's interior life, is the foundation for good work. Work is an aid in that struggle to be close to God, but it cannot replace prayer. Wyszyński notes succinctly that "[t]here is no shortage of religious workers who feel Martha's anxiety about the fate of God in the world, but who forget about the fate of God in their own souls" (105).

Second, there are necessary limits to work. Even God rested on the seventh day, giving us a clear example of the necessity of repose. Rest should not be the playground for the satisfaction of our pleasures or a time to indulge in laziness, but an occasion to "tear ourselves away from matter, to free ourselves from its powerful influence, to realize that it is not creation that governs man but man creation, to remember the service of

God” (178).

Third, work should be done in “the great silence” (another reference to the Rule of Saint Benedict—Chapter 42). This does not mean that we should seek jobs in the desert, or far from the hustle and bustle of cities, or refuse to speak to our coworkers in the next cubicle (however, Wyszyński does note that those who work outside, in nature, in the midst of God’s creation, tend to be more capable of listening to God). It only suggests that any type of work should be pursued with the purpose of seeking God, and silence—that is, interior recollection—is necessary to listen to God. Again, pray and work; listen to God and work.

Whenever we forget these simple realities, work ceases to be a means to participate in God’s plan, a way of bringing us back to Him—and becomes purposeless drudgery. It is also likely that the state or the culture in which we live deny us the possibility of seeking God through work. Wyszyński saw this firsthand under the most brutal political regimes of the 20th century; we may see it in less bloody circumstances as faith is relegated to the confines of our private lives through cultural and even legal pressures. Such a schizophrenic life, in which God is absent from 9 to 5, is a recipe for unhappiness, as well as a decaying society. As Wyszyński observes,

the violation of the human right to look for God is reflected in the increased sense of the burden of work, in disillusionment with life, in the disappearance of interest, in indifference to all other human duties, in depression, in an increasing sense of social degradation, in the growing sense of the hopelessness of existence, and in the spirit of opposition and revolt. There is no time for God, or for one’s own children; there is only continuous work. (179)

In 1953, a few years after the publication of this book, the Communist regime in Warsaw tried to force a decree that would have given full authority to the state to appoint and remove bishops in Poland, making the Church a subsidiary of the state. The bishops, led by Wyszyński, replied with a firm statement that ended with this: “We are not allowed to place God’s things on Caesar’s altar. Non possumus.” We cannot. This non possumus applies equally to work: work is not a realm under the control of Caesar, pursued for Caesar and allowed by Caesar. Work is a gift that allows us to cooperate with God and thus to be near Him. If we are prevented from seeking God through our daily work, we should be ready to reply: non possumus.

Jakub Grygiel is Associate Professor of International Relations at the [Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies](#). Most recently, he co-authored *Unquiet*

Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power (Princeton University Press, 2015) with Wess Mitchell.

Keep reading! The next article in this issue is, *Automation versus Artistry: On the "De-skilling" of the Workplace*, a book review by John Laracy

Automation versus Artistry: On the "De-skilling" of the Workplace

JOHN LARACY

Carr, Nicholas, *The Glass Cage: How Our Computers Are Changing Us* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2014).

In *The Glass Cage: How Our Computers Are Changing Us*, technology writer Nicholas Carr raises a timely question: Are computers affecting human lives for better or worse? He shows how computer automation is changing the way we work. Computers produce more at ever-faster rates, but they may also make the work itself less enriching. Carr is best-known for his essay in *The Atlantic*, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" (2008), and his book that deepens its argument, *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Think, Read and Remember*, which was a finalist for a 2011 Pulitzer Prize. Drawing on scientific research, especially social science, as well as philosophy, history, and literature, he challenges popular attitudes toward technology today. Some think technological "progress" is inherently good. Others think that technology is morally neutral—that its value depends wholly on how humans choose to use it. Yet Carr argues that Google, for example, inclines users to seek superficial information to the detriment of the learning-process itself (cf. *Glass Cage*, 78–80). Similarly, computer automation tends to transform work from being a creative encounter into a mere means to a pre-programmed end.

In *The Glass Cage*, Carr explains that an "automated system" is a computer with a "sensing mechanism," which gathers data from the external environment, and includes a "feedback method" that adjusts calculations based on the accumulated data (36). Automation simulates—and consequently displaces—actual intelligence and decision-making in the workplace: "The person operating the computer is left to play

the role of a high-tech clerk” (67). This leads to the “de-skilling” of workers and, in turn, greater complacency and dependency on computers. In short, “automation breeds automation” (202). The increasing automation of everyday tasks—as we move from GPS in the car to Google’s self-driving car—seems to make life safer and less burdensome. Carr points out, however, that the interdependence of automated systems, connecting business and politics to everyday life, may lead to “cascading failures” in which small glitches lead to systemic breakdown (155). Our growing complacency toward automation makes us vulnerable to unforeseeable, large-scale emergencies. He cites a recent example that hits close to home: “Miscalculations of risk, exacerbated by high-speed computerized trading programs, played a major role in the near meltdown of the world financial system in 2008” (77).

Carr’s primary and more insightful criticism of automation is that it diminishes the quality of work, draining it of thought and “artistry” (85). To be clear, he is not critical of machinery as such but favors the use of tools that enhance the human experience of work itself. For example, he contrasts the skilled “machinist,” whose work is made more challenging by use of power hand-tools, with a “machine operator” who passively monitors a factory computer (111). Carr pays considerable attention to the advanced automation of airplanes (the “Glass Cage” of the title derives from the name for computerized cockpits: “a glass cockpit” [63]). He suggests that the pilot with some manual control of the plane, rather than one relying wholly on computers, is not only the happier pilot, but also the better one, ready to respond to unforeseen problems. Likewise, the doctor reliant on the guidance of an electronic medical-records system is less equipped to attend to the patient as a whole person (93ff.), and the architect dependent on advanced CAD (computer-aided design) software may lose his ability “to imagine the human qualities of their buildings” (145). In accord with Catholic social teaching (see *Gaudium et spes*, 1 and *Laborem Exercens*, 9), Carr thinks that work is integral to human dignity and that it is more fulfilling when it elicits our creativity by challenging us without overburdening us.

His philosophical perspective is a realist one that acknowledges the fundamental role of the body in human action and thought: “We’re real beings in real bodies in real places” (131; also see 148, 232). Humans are meant to know reality, and we know it by interacting with our physical surroundings. To put his view of work in classically metaphysical terms: the physical movement of work toward its intended end is itself a necessary and desirable dimension of that completed actuality (see 132). The joy of flying an airplane, for instance, is intrinsic to the pilot’s work of delivering passengers to their destination. Attentive care for the embodied person is intrinsic to the doctor’s

work of improving health. Creative sketching is intrinsic to the work of architectural planning. Bodily labor, in general, is “a form of contemplation, a way of seeing the world face-to-face rather than through a glass” (214). By contrast to this rich immediacy, the constant mediation of computer screens distances us from reality, “making our lives more programmatic” (199; see 151). Restrained in tone and lacking apparent ideology, Carr’s thoughtfulness nonetheless leads him to a grim assessment: “[...] the automation of mental labor [...] may end up eroding one of the foundations of culture itself: our desire to understand the world” (123).

Carr emphasizes that we must therefore cast a critical eye on every new form of technology, yet one wonders if he is sufficiently critical in the end. Attempting to accommodate some form of automation, he expresses approval of “human-centered automation,” designed to interact with, adapt to, and enhance the human worker: “Some early users of the systems report that they feel as though they’re collaborating with a colleague rather than operating a machine” (165). But this sort of automation, giving the illusion of interpersonal collaboration, might be most dangerous of all. As Pope John Paul II writes in the opening of *Laborem Exercens*, “work bears a particular mark of man and of humanity, the mark of a person operating within a community of persons.” If automation tends to displace what it attempts to simulate, as Carr reveals, should we not avoid this “adaptive automation,” lest it displace community? Carr never addresses this problem.

Similarly, he raises an important ethical issue about automated “decision-making” but fails to reach clarity on it. Google’s self-driving car, he points out, will need to be programmed to make instantaneous “decisions” about life and death (186–89). Let us say that a child suddenly walks into the path of a self-driving car, leaving insufficient time to brake. Should the car swerve violently to save the child and risk the life of the driver? What if there were several passengers in the car—should that alter the car’s response? Carr exposes the conundrum generated by such automation: who should program these moral decisions and what criterion should they use? Yet he skirts a deeper question, without raising it explicitly: should this kind of automation exist at all? Perhaps driving should be left to a driver, who can assume direct responsibility for the consequences. Likewise, perhaps “lethal autonomous robots (LARs),” designed to act like soldiers in the battlefield, should not exist at all. Machines should not “decide” whether or not to pull the trigger on a possible enemy. Indeed, they cannot actually decide. Soldiers must not be removed from the work of soldiering. Nor, more generally, should “programmed morality” displace actual, real-time moral decisions, lest we begin to forget that we humans are the moral agents.

On the whole, *The Glass Cage* succeeds in showing, quite vividly, how expanding automation is displacing human work to our detriment. But this reader would recommend a firmer readiness to completely reject certain forms of automation. If society continues to uncritically embrace it, one should be ready to live differently than most, so as to recover an essentially human way of life. Carr does not draw out some of the important ethical implications of his largely accurate cultural assessment. A more minor complaint: *The Glass Cage* lacks any clear structure and reads more like a series of essays. Its breezy style will please some and bother others. Regardless, one cannot help but admire Carr's capacity to raise profound questions about technology in such an accessible way.

John Laracy is a PhD candidate at the John Paul II Institute, soon to complete his dissertation on love as "event" in Hans Urs von Balthasar's Trinitarian theology.

Keep reading! The next article in this issue is, [Do We Need to Re-Think Modern Economics?](#) by Roy Peachey

Do We Need to Re-Think Modern Economics?

ROY PEACHEY

Hadas, Edward, *Human Goods, Economic Evils: A Moral Approach to the Dismal Science* (ISI Books, 2007).

Edward Hadas is a journalist and financial analyst who has worked for Reuters Breakingviews, the Financial Times, and Morgan Stanley. However, as he is keen to point out in the very opening words of *Human Goods, Economic Evils*, he is “not a trained economist”. Having a certain distance from the professional world of economics and yet knowing a great deal about it enables him to write critically about the very basis of the subject and, more importantly, about the presuppositions that many economists bring to their work. *Human Goods, Economic Evils* is, therefore, a book with big ambitions: in attempting to “combine economics with philosophy and theology”, Hadas is trying nothing less than to create a wholly new approach to economic analysis.

There are many advantages to his moral approach. The most important of these is his perception that the fundamental problem with a great deal of economic analysis is anthropological at its root. He argues that “nine bad ideas about human nature” underpin most economic texts: 1) the transcendental is not relevant to economics; 2) economics has nothing to do with morality; 3) all economic ties are contractual; 4) men’s economic behavior follows physical laws; 5) the economic life is a constant struggle; 6) perfection is within reach; 7) economic freedom is a good found in free choice; 8) the good economy is controlled by the beneficent state; and 9) economics rules.

Hadas is surely right to argue that one of the most important questions of our time—possibly the question of our time—is what it is to be human. Not only is this a vital question but it is increasingly one that polarises opinion. What G. K. Chesterton wrote

over 100 years ago in *What's Wrong with the World?* is even more obviously true today: “We do not disagree, like doctors, about the precise nature of the illness, while agreeing about the nature of health.” Instead, we no longer agree about what health is: we no longer agree on what it is to be human. This anthropological confusion disfigures debate in all sorts of areas, including economics.

Hadas is also right to argue that without a transcendental understanding of humanity, there is no hope of coming to correct anthropological (and, therefore, economic) conclusions. As the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council expressed it in *Gaudium et spes*, we cannot possibly understand man without God: “Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”

Hadas’s willingness to rethink the very basis of economics therefore allows him to skewer some real problems. He has a particular loathing of utilitarianism and writes passionately about the various ways in which “human economics” must necessarily build on a broader, and ultimately more realistic, base than any post-Benthamite philosophy. Put simply, not everything that has value can be measured. It simply isn’t true that only what is measurable has meaning.

This understanding becomes especially significant when Hadas looks at the world of work. He argues strongly against the idea “that wages should be trusted to indicate the value of labor” and criticizes “a ‘market’ model of economic organization. According to that model, labor is always traded for money, and money is the only standard of value”. He then seeks to create a new “typology of labor that is based on what the labourer is actually doing—simply being, working with things, working with people, working for no purpose, working to destroy.” By reassessing the varied nature of work, he is able to move towards a more human vision of economics than we are used to seeing.

However, there are some disadvantages to Hadas’s approach as well. In his determination to start afresh, he adopts a combative tone throughout, arguing, for instance, that “most of the founding notions of the discipline are wrong and most of the supposed laws and rules are some combination of wrong, misguided, and meaningless.” Economists themselves are also routinely criticised: “these are massive intellectual errors”, he writes, while summarising one of his arguments, “so large that the only possible explanation for their wide and sustained popularity among so many intelligent men is a misunderstanding at the most basic level.”

This combativeness sometimes generates what Hadas himself admits is "a sketch, ignoring nuances and internal disputes." His account would be more convincing if he engaged more directly with individual thinkers. The work of Chesterton, Belloc and E. F. Schumacher, for example, is largely relegated to an endnote. St. John Paul II's work and Catholic social teaching is discussed in more detail but, even here, there is little by way of a developed engagement. Hadas writes that "if I had to recommend one economic text to a noneconomist it would be John Paul II's 1981 encyclical *Laborem exercens*" but he does not give space to *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* or *Centesimus Annus* (other than in a few endnotes).

This is a shame because the book could have been much more convincing, both within and without Catholic circles, if Hadas had entered into a more profound dialogue with the economists and philosophers he criticises. Perhaps this is clearer to us now in 2017 than it was to him in 2007 when *Human Goods, Economic Evils* was published. If it was true then that economists worked with the assumption that "economics has nothing to do with morality"—and I have my doubts—then it certainly isn't true now, as Tomáš Sedláček's hugely influential *Economics of Good and Evil* has convincingly shown. What is more, both the distributist ideas of Chesterton and Belloc and the broader field of Catholic social teaching have made something of a comeback in the political arena. I am thinking here of Phillip Blond's *Red Tory* and the Blue Labour movement here in the UK, as well as John Milbank and Adrian Pabst's recent examination of *The Politics of Virtue*.

There should be no doubt that we have an extremely rich social and economic tradition on which to draw and that distributism and Catholic social teaching still have a great deal to offer us in the 21st Century. Our task, then, is not necessarily to start afresh but to deepen the tradition. If we can do this, as Hadas suggests and many other writers have shown, we may just find that economics need not be a dismal science at all and that human economics may still have the capacity to inspire and transform.

Roy Peachey teaches in the south of England. He is currently a doctoral student at the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family, Melbourne.