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More Than Just the Paycheck: The Dignity of Work

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“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.

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[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), 178–79.

[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.

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