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BOOK REVIEW

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Is Your Job a Waste of Time?

MICHAEL GALDO

David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (Simon and Schuster, 2019).

In *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, anthropologist David Graeber proposes that there is a vast swath of jobs (anywhere from 30–60%) that should not exist and, should these all suddenly disappear, no one would care. In fact, the world would probably be a better place: “I am a corporate lawyer, I contribute absolutely nothing to this world and I am miserable all the time,” shares one such employee about his job. Graeber defines a “bullshit job” as “a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence, even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case.” The healthcare industry, middle management, academic administration, banks, and large corporations, among others, are particular targets of Graeber’s criticism.

Graeber collected over 250 responses to an essay written in 2013 on the subject of bullshit jobs—an essay he submitted in reply to one publication’s query whether he had anything “on the edge” that others may not be willing to publish. Based on the responses to this “edgy” piece, Graeber came up with five categories of bullshit jobs:

1. Flunkies: underlings kept around to make a superior look important;
2. Goons: those that deceive or manipulate others;
3. Duct-tapers: those who fix problems that shouldn’t exist in the first place;
4. Box-tickers: paper-pushers who make it look like a company is doing something when they are actually doing nothing; and finally,
5. Taskmasters: middle management who just tell people what to do even though they don’t need to be told.

In response to Graeber's theory, at least one follow-up study ("Alienation Is Not 'Bullshit': An Empirical Critique of Graeber's Theory of BS Jobs") found that his claims were far overstated. Other reviewers lean towards the entertainment value of his work and dismiss his claims as exaggerated. His evidence is largely based on the responses he received (i.e., 250 seems well below a substantial sample size), and many of the anecdotes workers sent him border on complaint rather than constituting an objective evaluation of labor. This makes a good portion of his book difficult to digest if you don't find it entertaining.

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And yet, Graeber's theory is much more than a compilation of complaints, and to dismiss his book because he may exaggerate or lack data is to miss the value in *his* work. As an anthropologist, Graeber is really making a claim about humanity. His work is full of insights regarding the historical developments of labor, the psychological implications of meaningless work, and the cultural value of labor and the crisis that results from a lack thereof. He explores some of the darker sides of humanity, from greed to apathy, and critiques both sides of the political spectrum.

Graeber also questions why meaningful jobs tend to be poorly paid. He cites school teachers, nurses, and artists as examples. He points out that people tend to be willing to do meaningful work for less money. This fact is compounded by what Graeber calls "moral envy": those trapped in bullshit jobs tend to resent those who have meaningful work. As an example, he cites the 2008 financial bailout and the sanctions placed on auto assembly line workers who had union contracts which "allowed them generous health and pension plans, vacation, and \$28 per-hour wages." The higher-ups in the companies and bankers, who, according to Graeber, had "actually caused the problems"—and presumably have bullshit jobs—were never sanctioned. Yet the lower income workers on the floor of the factory were. Why? "American autoworkers...played such an essential role in creating something their fellow citizens actually needed...this was precisely what others resented about them. They get to make cars!" Moral envy leads to the sentiment that you can either have meaningful work or you can be paid well, but you can't have both.

Graeber's analysis of bullshit jobs covers a wide range of topics. In a historical context he likens the structure of the modern corporate world of middle management to the feudal system and demonstrates how bullshit jobs may have proliferated because of the industrial revolution. From a political standpoint, he critiques government for its role in perpetuating and maintaining bullshit jobs. He analyzes how we value work for its social and economic impact, critiquing both capitalism and socialism for their inadequacies. He examines the role of religion, in particular the negative effects of the Puritan work ethic, and even argues that pointless employment is really a form of spiritual warfare.

However, Graeber's broad analyses fall short in a few key areas. There is an unresolved tension between the usefulness of labor and the enjoyment of labor. Graeber's whole premise is founded upon the fact that the worker himself is the only one apt to define his job as bullshit. There is no objective measure outside the worker. Unfortunately, with this standard, when the worker views his work as meaningless and also dislikes it, it becomes bullshit, even if the job *could* be made meaningful and enjoyable. For example, from Graeber's collection of

stories, one employee complains about his job sitting at a desk in a dorm, doing nothing all day but greeting students as they come in and out. Contrast this “bullshit” mentality with the story of Saint André Bessette, whose job greeting visitors at the door of the Collège Notre-Dame affected the lives of countless people to such a degree that a million mourners came to view his coffin at his burial.

Furthermore, in his critique of the role of religion, Graeber, perhaps unwittingly, lumps Catholic tradition with a broader Christian worldview, which is more accurately characterized as Puritan. In this worldview, “[t]he Judeo-Christian God created the universe out of nothing” and, by his labor, man is “cursed to imitate God in this regard” when he produces goods. Furthermore, work is suffering and it is transformative in that it instills virtue; it keeps young boys out of trouble. At this point in his theological discussion, Graeber includes a quote from the first paragraph of John Paul II’s encyclical *Laborem exercens*:

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...Only man is capable of work, and only man works, and at the same time by work occupying his existence on earth.

In what follows, Graeber never unpacks Catholic theology or clearly demonstrates how the concept of man’s “capacity for work” is a “curse to imitate God.” If Graeber were to read any further into the encyclical he would have found that God’s command to “subdue” and have “dominion” over the earth came *before* the fall of man. In this Catholic understanding of work, it is part of man’s very nature to labor. As John Paul II states later in *Laborem exercens*, “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 fulfilment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes more a human being.” John Paul II also makes a very important distinction between the “heavy toil” that accompanies work and the work itself, noting that the burden sometimes felt in work is the result of the fall, yet it does not alter the inherent goodness of labor. Graeber comes very close to assigning inherent dignity to work, but he can never quite articulate it. At the same time, he struggles with the frequent unpleasantness of work and puts the blame on Christianity. Furthermore, he gets caught up in equating the value of work with its utility and seems to forget that it is also possible to enjoy useful work.

Although leisure is never mentioned, the implications for it are to be found everywhere in the book. In 1930, Maynard Keynes predicted that technology would advance to such a point that the 40-hour work week would be reduced to 15 hours. This notion is always lingering in the background of Graeber’s theory, the idea that we all work too much, that those who have meaningful work should share it with those who don’t and rid ourselves of bullshit jobs. Then, we would have more time for leisure.

While Graeber falls short when he turns to broader definitions in his writing, his exploration into the world of “bullshit jobs” is a worthwhile read. His examination of the human condition and the value of labor is applicable to any work relationship, whether it be boss to employee, teacher to student, or parent to child. Graeber perhaps tries to do too much in the book for it to have completely coherent conclusions, but that may be what gives the book its charm. A reader unafraid to explore “bullshit jobs” alongside the unfettered mind of an anthropologist will have an interesting read and much to think about.

Michael Galdo is the Director of Sacred Music at St. Francis de Sales parish in Purcellville, Virginia and tends a small herd of sheep and goats at his home in nearby Lovettsville with his

wife Carla and their six children.

