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The Vocation to Work

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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.

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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.

