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Work For Its Own Sake

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Russell Muirhead, *Just Work* (Harvard University Press, 2004).

“Like their fathers, they hear the muffled call of work that wishes to be done.”

—Charles Péguy: “The Honor of Work”

In *Basic Verities*, a collection of elegant essays that deftly critiques elements of modern life, Charles Péguy decries the manner in which bourgeois industrialist society in the nineteenth century had begun dismantling laborers’ traditional relationship with their work. Work, from caning chairs to erecting cathedrals, was once done and loved for its own sake. Even in the midst of life’s difficulties, work was for these laborers a source of “joy itself and the reason of their being.” The bourgeois ethic, however, treated work as if it were a commodity on the stock exchange, a matter of material trade between owner and worker. This system, Péguy laments, corroded the worker’s joy in his task. It suppressed the desire to work by stifling the promise of its fulfillment.

The issues that Péguy raised have become only more complicated and entrenched in post-industrial countries. Yet, as Russell Muirhead notes in his thoughtful little book, *Just Work*, Americans still take work seriously. Even with all the problems associated with it, work still seems to promise fulfillment. We see our jobs as a means of personal expression, meaning, and satisfaction. We associate our achievements with dignity and pride. In this way, work invokes

for us an ideal, a vision of the “the kinds of people we would like to be...and the sort of life we take ourselves to deserve.” *Just Work* aims to take this expectation of fulfilling work seriously.

Even as he engages the issue of fulfilling work in contemporary terms, Muirhead actually raises the age-old philosophical question of the good: in what way is work a human good? How does it satisfy man as he engages in it? How does it relate to human flourishing? One of the refreshing aspects of *Just Work* is the manner in which Muirhead challenges the more facile notions of work’s goodness held by modern society. Current economic discourse often presents work as a merely utilitarian activity by which we satisfy our needs or a pleasure hunt in which we indulge our desires. Muirhead, however, attempts to promote a more robust discussion of work as a human activity that is good in and of itself.

In this way, Muirhead implicitly engages with the *bonum honestum*—or true good—of the philosophical tradition. A genuine good is not something dependent on man’s use or pleasure. It is rather desired for its own sake because its intrinsic goodness fulfills man as he attains it. We read a great work of literature, for example, not because it is simply useful for teaching or because it brings us pleasure (although it may do both), but because it is good in itself, and we become more human for knowing it. Work done for its intrinsic worth promotes man’s development and expresses his dignity. It allows man to realize his full potential because it not only fulfills his nature but also properly relates him to others. The most important philosophical question in contemplating questions about labor, therefore, is what work is good for human beings to do. As Muirhead focuses on the activity of work itself, *Just Work* provides a valuable contribution to the contemporary discussion, even if Muirhead’s limited metaphysical range prevents him from developing a fully adequate notion of work’s intrinsic goodness and the way it fulfills man.

Just Work is at its strongest in its exploration of contemporary views that diminish the intrinsic goodness of work. For instance, Muirhead’s most substantial chapters explain how the Protestant work ethic and its secularized offshoots have helped form the current American approach to work: both provided a reason to view work as fulfilling, yet neither took into account the actual work being done. The Protestant work ethic upheld work as worthy of devotion because a person could give glory to God through one’s calling. As it did so, it actually “failed to locate anything in the activity of work itself connected to the transcendental purposes work was meant to express, thereby placing an enormous burden on faith.” As faith disappeared, the Protestant ethic increasingly gave way to one in which material reward became the primary justification for work. Even within this secularized ethic, however, Americans still tried to find meaning in their work. Only now, they connected fulfillment to a working life of a particular sort. For instance, feminist Betty Friedan upheld white-collar careers as the means to realize life’s highest purposes, although she often ignored the actual content of this type of work. Indeed, faced with evidence that the very executive careers that she espoused were often experienced as alienating or stifling, Friedan pivoted, ultimately naming any work freely chosen as the epitome of good work.

Through these examples, Muirhead provides helpful insight into a current predicament. When we no longer see how the activity of work is good for us, then it is free choice which becomes the primary criterion for judging work. As Muirhead notes, the current trend in the discussion on work is to focus entirely on issues of personal freedom. In hopes of resisting this tendency, he insists that good work “cannot be molded exclusively after the liberal ideas of ‘freedom’ and ‘equality.’” That is, the goodness of work cannot be reduced to the willingness to enter into a contractual relationship. In our liberal economic system, we often let the willingness to freely enter a contract override considerations of the quality of the work itself, as Muirhead shows in a chapter on contracted domestic service. Liberalism’s insistence on freedom as the highest

good in work manifests itself even more recently in contemporary proposals for a universal income. For proponents of a universal income, even the freedom to choose whether to work or not to work should be available to all. In this line of thought, work is not an intrinsic good for man. It is simply an expression of personal desire, and we need not consider either its necessity or content in relation to human development. Through these chapters, Muirhead offers a rebuttal to liberal democracy's notion of the "unencumbered self" as the subject of work. He rightly insists that there is a goodness to work that shapes and engages man's freedom and should be considered when society judges and promotes work.

How, then, should we consider work good? In the last section of his book, Muirhead offers one way forward: the theory of "practice." Practice focuses on the "internal goods" of work, those goods that are linked to work's actual activity and are distinct from external goods such as money or fame. Internal goods are "goods of character," born of a persistent and respectful engagement with work. They alone provide true self-expression and fulfillment because they allow the worker to become a certain type of person, one who manifests a true and satisfying human dignity.

While *Just Work's* evocation of practice provides a good starting point, Muirhead's proposal only partially accounts for the full goodness of work. "Practice" grounds work's goodness in the "subjective" dimension of man, in the internal goods of virtue. Like most contemporary treatments of work, however, Muirhead still has not fully considered the "objective" dimension of work; in other words, he does not adequately develop work as a meaningful engagement with an objective reality before us.

Truly fulfilling work, however, must be premised upon the worker's fundamental openness to and relation with a reality that precedes him and his intentions. In work, the worker engages with something objective, and the best work consists of ordering this thing to its proper end, its highest fulfillment, its deepest beauty. It is the difference between raising a chicken in a chicken mill or raising a chicken to thrive according to the requirements of its nature (even if its fully realized goodness eventually provides meat to eat). This type of work is satisfying because the worker brings himself and the object of his work into communion with a goodness that fulfills them both. In this careful attention to the good of the thing before him, man's labor actually becomes a work of love.

If we don't see work as a relation to an objective good outside of ourselves, we will find ourselves mired in inescapable conflicts. In *Just Work*, for example, Muirhead deems both individual fulfillment and the social good necessary conditions for fitting (or good) work, but he never successfully resolves the conflict between them. Work that is rooted in an objective good, however, is good both for the worker as an individual and good for the worker as he is a social being, for the radiation of this transcendent goodness promotes a harmony or common good between them. Likewise, as Muirhead rejects the idea of man's nature as an oppressive concept, he cannot claim work as a naturally objective good for man that shapes his freedom. Instead, he must root the necessity of work in the political order, writing that the "liberal political regime, which, if it maintains freedom, also asks certain things of its citizens. One of the requirements is work." Although Muirhead does critique liberalism in places, he does not have a notion of the good intrinsic to things themselves. Thus, the *summum bonum* in Muirhead's work becomes the liberal political order, which decides on what is good for society. A recent example of this in our time is marriage.

When the philosophy of work pays true attention to the objective goodness of reality, however, it opens us up to truths that have already been proffered by the Catholic Church in its meditations on work over the last century or so. The affirmation of the objective goodness of

things refers to a transcendent source, a Creator who bestows an absolute goodness upon the reality man encounters, a reality that is never simply subject to man's intentions. At its heart, the purpose of work is found in man's being created in the image of a God whose activity brings the entire cosmos into existence and directs it to its highest end. In this way, as *Laudato Si'* maintains, it is man's highest service to know the good inscribed in all things and co-operate with God to "continue the work of creation" (par. 39). As man does so, he fulfills the wondrous possibilities found within those things upon which he works—and within himself.

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