

Labor, Solidarity and the Common Good

Essays on the Ethical
Foundations of Management

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The Quest for a Balanced Appraisal of Work in Catholic Social Thought¹

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Men like to work. It's a funny thing, but they do. They may moan about it every Monday morning and they may agitate for shorter hours and longer holidays, but they need to work for their self-respect.

That's just conditioning. People can get used to life without work. Could you? I thought you enjoyed your work?

That's different.

Why?

Well, it's nice work. It's meaningful. It's rewarding. I don't mean in money terms. It would be worth doing even if one wasn't paid anything at all.

David Lodge, *Nice Work*²

Lodge captures well here our conflicting intuitions about work. Often, we see work, if not as a necessary evil, then as a mere instrument for "making a living"; in this mood we may hope for emancipation from work, either as an individual—by, say, winning the lottery—or as a society, by some miracle of automation. At other times, however—perhaps when we contemplate a life devoid of work—we realize that we might

1. I have benefitted from the comments of Ernest S. Pierucci, Charles Stinson, Patrick Downey and the participants of the inaugural Henning Institute Conference on *Labor, Solidarity and the Common Good*; I wish also to thank my indefatigable research assistant, Kevin Walsh.

2. Cited in Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio, *The Jobless Future* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 328.

actually enjoy our work, that we value it even apart from the income, status and power it might bring. As we recall the skills we have acquired at work and the pleasure of exercising them—the obstacles we have faced and surmounted, the projects accomplished, the services rendered—we realize that we find in work a unique source of fulfillment; that work, along with friendship, religion, knowledge, play, marriage and so forth, is a basic good of human life. Indeed, if we consider the amount of time many of us devote to our work (far beyond what is needed to earn our keep), and if we compare this to the amount of time we devote to our spouses, to our children, to our friends, to church or beauty or play, we might have to conclude that in practice we have made work, not just one intrinsic good among others, but actually our *summum bonum*.

Our intuitions about work, in short, range from valuing it as a merely instrumental good, to valuing it as one intrinsic good among several, to valuing it as the highest good. As it happens, the history of the philosophical analysis of work reflects and embodies this startlingly diverse range of evaluations. What accounts for the radically diverse and mutually inconsistent appraisals of the value of work? Why is there so little agreement among so many wise people about the value of work? After briefly surveying a range of philosophical views, ancient and modern, on the value of work, I will ask: What is it about work that makes a balanced appraisal of it so rare? Why, in other words, is work so often undervalued as a merely instrumental good, or overvalued as the highest of goods?

At present, conflicting valuations of work are playing out against the background of a remarkable change. We are now witnessing, both in Catholic philosophy generally and in official Catholic social teaching, the emergence of a balanced appraisal of work. Work is now taking its rightful place among, but not above, the other intrinsic goods of human life—including, but not limited to, marriage, play, religion, beauty, knowledge, and friendship.

The Macrocosm: The Aristotelian-Thomistic Tradition and Its Critics³

From roughly 348 B.C. to A.D. 1983, philosophical reflection on work within the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition had consistently maintained: first, that work has merely instrumental—*i.e.*, lacks intrinsic—value; second, that the good of work is found in the product made and not in the perfection of the maker.⁴ Consider Aristotle's distinction between action (*πρᾶξις*) and production (*ποίησις*): For while production has an end other than itself, action cannot; for a good action is its own end.⁵ Aristotle is clearly right here: productive work does have an external end; work is directed to the provision of some product or service. Nevertheless, in addition to serving its external end, might not work also be an end in itself? Could work, perhaps, prove to be intrinsically valuable even though it issues in a product or service? After all, Aristotle allows that some intrinsic goods—intelligence, sight, certain pleasures, honor—may also be instrumentally valuable.

In fine, Aristotle resists the appraisal of work as a more-than-instrumental good: "Where there are ends apart from the actions, it is in the nature of the products to be better than the activities."⁶ According to Aristotle, what is valuable in production is the product, not the perfection of the producer. On his account, it makes no sense to inquire about the *εὐδαιμονία*—the happiness, well-being, flourishing—of the worker as such, since *εὐδαιμονία* is to be found only in activities that are their own end, and never in activities that are even partly instrumental:

...if some activities are necessary and desirable for the sake of something else, while others are so in themselves, evidently happiness

3. In this section of the paper and in the next, I draw freely from my own previous work on the ethics of labor: cf. *The Moral Economy of Labor: Aristotelian Themes in Economic Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) and "A Natural Law of Human Labor," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 39 (1994), pp. 71-95.

4. I do not suggest that these two theses exhaust the resources of the tradition on the value of work, still less that one cannot employ other aspects of Aristotelian-Thomistic thought in the service of a balanced appraisal of work (indeed, my *The Moral Economy of Labor* enlists Aristotle to just that end). Nevertheless, these theses present an obstacle to any account of the intrinsic value of work which would claim Aristotelian-Thomistic roots.

5. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1140b5 (this and all subsequent citations of Aristotle are from the Revised Oxford Translation, ed. Jonathan Barnes (1984)).

6. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096b15 and 1094a5.

must be placed in those desirable in themselves, not among those desirable for the sake of something else.⁷

Here, Aristotle's analysis of goods is clearly derived from his metaphysical distinction between immanent and transitive activities (*vide, e.g., Metaphysics* 1050a30). Immanent activities, such as seeing, contemplating, experiencing joy, are complete in themselves; by contrast, transitive activities, such as making and dieting, are incomplete until they reach a goal distinct from the activity itself. From this metaphysical premise, Aristotle draws the normative conclusion that, although some immanent activities have intrinsic value, all transitive activities have only instrumental value. As to work, for Aristotle it is a transitive activity directed to something external to the agent; moral action, by contrast, is an immanent activity perfective of the agent. Only what is perfective of an agent can be an opportunity for flourishing. That work is not perfective—is, indeed, destructive—of the agent is evident when Aristotle comments that if we had automated looms, we would not need slaves.⁸ Intrinsically valuable activities—friendship, play, philosophy—are those of which we would deem it odd to wish they were performed for us by slaves or automata.

Curiously, although Aristotle explicitly says, at several junctures, that moral action is “its own end”—that is, is an intrinsic good—he argues in the *Politics* that political and military action are actually but means to a still higher good, to the only good that is complete in and of itself, theoretical speculation. When he says, then, that occupation (*ἀσχολία*) is a means to leisure (*σχολή*), he means that both production and action must be directed to, and subordinated to, the really intrinsic good of leisurely speculation.⁹

Thomas Aquinas follows Aristotle, arguing that productive labor, since it aims at the perfection of an external thing, is not an intrinsic good;

7. *Ibid.*, 1076b1.

8. Cf. *Politics* 1253b36.

9. On political and military activities as unleisurely occupations (*ἀσχολίαι*), cf., e.g., *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177b8, and on *θεωρία* as the one, truly leisurely and complete good, cf. *ibid.* 1177b20; on occupation (*ἀσχολία*) as a means to leisure (*σχολή*), cf. *Politics* 1333a35 and 1337b34. “Leisure is a different matter: we think of it as having in itself intrinsic pleasure, intrinsic happiness, intrinsic felicity. Happiness of this order does not belong to those who are engaged in occupation: it belongs to those who have leisure” (*Politics* 1338a1).

moral action, by contrast, is an intrinsic good, because it involves the perfection of the agent.

The value of an art lies in the thing produced rather than in the artist, since art is right judgment about works to be made. The action of making passes into external material, and is a perfection of the thing made, not of the maker.¹⁰

Aquinas also follows Aristotle by arguing that production is a transitive activity that perfects an object, whereas action is an immanent activity that perfects an agent.¹¹

Among contemporary Thomists, the traditional denial that work has intrinsic value is slowly giving way to a new and more generous appraisal of work, but the traditional orthodoxy remains pervasive. For example, Josef Pieper says baldly: “We work in order to have leisure.”¹² And Yves Simon agrees that “...manual work is a useful, not a terminal, activity.”¹³

The transition to a new appraisal of work is evident in the thought of Jacques Maritain. In his *Art and Scholasticism* (1935), he follows Aquinas closely: “Thus making...relates to the good or to the proper perfection, not of the man making, but of the work produced”;¹⁴ and in *Education at the Crossroads* (1943), he follows Aristotle closely: “...work is not an end in itself; work should afford leisure for the joy, ex-

10. *Summa Theologiae* Ia IIae q. 57, a. 5, ad 1.

11. “Producing (*facere*) and acting (*agere*) differ, as stated in the *Metaphysics* [cf. 1050a30], in that producing is an action passing into external matter, thus to build, to saw, and the like; whereas doing is an activity abiding in the agent, thus to see, to will, and the like” (*Summa Theologiae* Ia IIae q. 57, 4c.).

12. Josef Pieper, *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), p. 27.

13. Obviously, for Simon, terminal activities are higher than useful activities. Thus, “Work is always useful, forever a means to some end. Contemplation, on the contrary, is always an end in itself, and can thus never be useful. In fact, it is better than useful” (*Work, Society and Culture*, ed. Vukan Kuic (New York: Fordham University Press, 1971), pp. 7, 13).

14. Just as Aristotle said that *τέχνη* governs *ποίησις*, while *φρόνησις* governs *πράξις*, so Aquinas and Maritain say that art governs making, while prudence governs doing: Prudence works for the good of the one acting, *ad bonum operantis*; Art works for the good of the work made, *ad bonum operis* (cf. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), pp. 8, 15). M. D. Chenu sees a more dialectical relation between the perfection of the work and the perfection of the worker, the former dominates the latter.” Chenu goes on to observe, “...the activity of work is still the normal vehicle for man's perfection or his undoing” (*The Theology of Work*, trans. Lilian Soiron (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1966), pp. 27, 51).

pansion and delight of the spirit."¹⁵ But by 1957 we find Maritain affirming a more modern view of the intrinsic value of work: "The principle of the dignity and human value of manual work is now in the process of being at last realized by human consciousness."¹⁶

Similarly, until 1983, Germain Grisez and John Finnis excluded work from their lists of the basic goods of human life.¹⁷ Still, change is afoot, even in the *philosophia perennis*: since 1983, Grisez and Finnis have begun to list work as one of the basic, or intrinsic, goods of life, one of the fundamental components of human happiness.¹⁸

There is a curious parallel between the Aristotelian-Thomistic account of the utility of work and the account offered by modern economics. Economic orthodoxy defines work, not as a good, but as a "bad," what the economists call a disutility: as Alfred Marshall put it, a person's desire to work is measured "...by the sum [of money] which is just required to induce him to undergo a certain fatigue."¹⁹ The logic of treating labor as a disutility was developed beautifully by David Ricardo, who, with his usual bluntness, wrote in 1819 that the level of employment in an economy is of no consequence, so long as rent and profits, out of which flow its new investment, are undiminished. In response, the socialist, Simonde de Sismondi, exclaimed:

Indeed, wealth is everything, men are absolutely nothing? In truth, then, there is nothing more to wish for than that the king, remaining alone on the island, by constantly turning a crank, might produce, through automata, all the output of England.²⁰

15. Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), p. 89.

16. Jacques Maritain, "Some Typical Aspects of Christian Education" (1957), in Donald and Idella Gallagher, eds., *The Education of Man: The Educational Philosophy of Jacques Maritain* (Westport, Connecticut: The Greenwood Press, 1976), p. 149. I am grateful to Ernest Pierucci for bringing this passage to my attention.

17. Cf. Germain Grisez and Russell Shaw, *Beyond the New Morality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), p. 69, and John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 90.

18. For an exploration of the significance of this new development, cf. Murphy, *op. cit.* (1994).

19. Cited in Robert Lane, *The Market Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 265. Some contemporary labor economists concede that people work, not just for the pay, but also for some vaguely characterized set of enjoyments called "work conditions"; the latter seem to amount to social life on the job.

20. Cf. Robert Heilbroner's introduction to Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), p. xi.

Sismondi's nightmare was, more or less, Aristotle's dream.

The new appraisal of the value of work, the appreciation of its importance to human flourishing, emerged first in the Scottish Enlightenment, it seems, and was taken up and deepened in German Romanticism. We do not often value things until they are threatened, and it is noteworthy that the first profound insights into the intrinsic value of work came only when many highly skilled trades had been fragmented into degrading routines by the industrial revolution. Observing how the degradation of labor caused a stultification of the laborers, Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith came to appreciate the unique value of skilled work in perfecting the character and intellect of workers:

...the understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments. The man whose life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects, too, are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.²¹

What Smith is saying is that work affords a unique opportunity for self-actualization, but one that can be squandered or corrupted. Work that challenges us to exercise our capacity for invention, work that develops mental and manual skills, will contribute greatly to our well-being; conversely, work that never poses challenges, that requires no real skills, will cause our mind to atrophy. Thus, Alfred Marshall:

For the business by which a person earns his livelihood generally fills his thoughts during by far the greater part of those hours in which his mind is at his best; during them his character is being formed by the way in which he uses his faculties in his work.²²

Instead of entertaining a dichotomy between immanent action that perfects the acting self and transitive action that perfects the world, Hegel

21. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 5.1. Smith goes on to contrast this grim portrait with the varied and more challenging occupations of men in simpler societies, occupations which "...oblige every man to exert his capacity, and to invent expedients for removing difficulties which are continually occurring... Every man has a considerable degree of knowledge, ingenuity, and invention..."

22. Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics*, 1.1.

insisted that the self and the world are jointly transformed in the act of labor: "*Die Arbeit bildet.*" Marx, famously, developed Hegel's new metaphysics of action into a theory of the person's self-realization through labor:

By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway.²³

Considerable empirical evidence supports Ferguson, Smith, Hegel and Marx in the view that work can be morally and intellectually perfective of workers. In a landmark series of studies, for example, Melvin Kohn and Carmi Schooler have clearly demonstrated the profound role of work in either promoting or stunting intellectual growth. By carefully testing the intellectual capacities of a group of men in 1964, then again in 1974, and by measuring the complexity of their job-tasks, Kohn and Schooler found that the cognitive capacities of men with complex jobs developed through their work, while the cognitive capacities of men with simple and repetitive jobs deteriorated.²⁴ Adam Smith's supposition that a worker "... whose whole life is spent performing a few simple operations... generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become" has now been empirically verified. After surveying a vast quantity of literature on industrial psychology, Robert Lane concludes:

...working activities are the best agents of well-being and the best sources of cognitive development, a sense of personal control, and self esteem in economic life, better than a higher standard of living, and, I believe, better than what is offered by leisure.²⁵

In short, we now have a great deal of evidence not just that people value challenging work, but also that such work is objectively valuable to them.

In response to the crushing burden of more than twenty centuries of philosophical denial of the intrinsic value of work, many modern cham-

23. Karl Marx, *Capital* v. I, 7.1.

24. Cf. Melvin Kohn, Carmi Schooler *et al.*, *Work and Personality* (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing, 1982), p. 304. "Exercising self-direction in work—doing work that is substantively complex, not being closely supervised, not working at routine tasks—is conducive to favorable evaluations of self, an open and flexible orientation to others, and effective intellectual functioning..." (Melvin Kohn, "Unresolved Issues in the Relationship between Work and Personality," in Kai Erikson, ed., *The Nature of Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 42).

25. Robert Lane, *op. cit.*, p. 335.

pions of work were not content merely to insist that work is an intrinsic good, a fundamental opportunity for human flourishing on a par with the other goods of marriage, friendship, play, religion, beauty, knowledge; implicitly or explicitly, rather, they insisted that work is the highest human good. Martin Luther's description of a person's work as his vocation tends to elevate work above, say, play or art, friendship or family. Yet, regarded as distinct and incommensurable goods, play or beauty, knowledge or friendship, are as suitable candidates for a vocation as is work. Similarly, the Protestant work-ethic suggests an unduly privileged status for work, unless accompanied by a play-ethic, a beauty-ethic, a friendship- and marriage-ethic, *etc.*

The Protestant work-ethic yields the anthropology of *homo faber* in, for example, Benjamin Franklin, who first defined man as a tool-making animal. Karl Marx cites Franklin twice, once to poke fun at what he takes to be a characteristically Yankee anthropology, and once with evident approval.²⁶ Of course, it is no less one-sided to define man as a maker than it was to define him as a knower. *Homo sapiens, homo faber, homo ludens*: man is all these and more. Marx develops his own *homo faber* anthropology, in which work is the principal arena for human self-realization—looking forward in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* to the day when "... labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want."²⁷

But the most explicit and extravagant claims for the superlative value of labor come from Thomas Carlyle, who declares, "It is, after all, the one unhappiness of a man, that he cannot work; that he cannot get his destiny as a man fulfilled."²⁸ Carlyle emphasized the spiritual value of work: "On the whole, we do entirely agree with those old Monks, *Laborare est Orare.*"²⁹

Finally, Simone Weil eloquently describes what she takes to be the special place of work in modern spirituality:

Our age has its own particular mission, or vocation—the creation

26. Cf. Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 65.

27. Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, I, 3.

28. "All work, even cotton-spinning, is noble; work alone is noble.... Blessed is he who has found his work; let him ask no other blessedness." Cf. Carlyle, *Past and Present* [1843], ed. Richard Altrick (New York: New York University Press, 1977), III, 4 and III, 11.

29. *Ibid.*, III, 12: "All true work is sacred; in all true work, were it but true hand-labor, there is something of divineness."

of a civilization founded upon the spiritual nature of work. The thoughts relating to a presentiment of this vocation, and which are scattered about in Rousseau, George Sand, Tolstoy, Proudhon and Marx, in papal encyclicals and elsewhere, are the only original thoughts of our time, the only ones we haven't borrowed from the Greeks.³⁰

Weil rightly points to the radical contrast between ancient and modern appraisals of work, but in denying that work has merely instrumental value, why insist that it is (virtually) the highest good? Shouldn't civilization be built also upon the spiritual nature of play? of beauty and knowledge? marriage and friendship?

*L'Entracte: Labor as a Bonum Arduum*³¹

I know of no other human good whose evaluation by major thinkers ranges from the merely instrumental to the *summum bonum*. Why is a balanced appraisal of work so rarely achieved? I suspect it is because work, paradoxically, is an arduous good, a good that is often experienced as an evil. Every European language has two words for this good, work and labor; and each language uses one of them to convey toil, pain, exertion: *πόνοϛ*, *labor*, *Arbeit*, *travailler*. Don't say to a woman in the pangs of child-birth that labor is a good. Work at its worst ranks among the most inhuman of the cruelties and exploitations known to man: the deliberate destruction of body and spirit through slave-labor, forced labor, child-labor—achieving apotheosis in the Nazi obscenity, “*Arbeit macht frei*.”

The book of Genesis (3:17) treats labor as a punishment for sin: after the fall, work takes on the character of toil. No wonder we all feel at least some degree of disinclination to work. St. Paul did not need to admonish, “He who does not play, enjoy beauty, make friends or marry, neither shall he eat.” Even work at its best is an exacting master: when we work, we must submit to a rigorous discipline, to an arduous learning process, to painful exertion. Henri de Man eloquently describes the inescapable elements of toil and pain in work:

30. Cited in Alasdair Clayre, *Work and Play* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), p. 1.

31. Pope John Paul II describes work as a *bonum arduum* in his encyclical, *Laborem exercens* (n. 9).

Work inevitably signifies subordination of the worker to remoter aims, felt to be necessary, and therefore involving a renunciation of the freedoms and enjoyments of the present for the sake of a future advantage. Every worker is simultaneously creator and slave.³²

“And yet,” as Pope John Paul II reminds us, “in spite of all this toil—perhaps, in a sense, because of it—work is a good thing for man.”³³ From the Christian perspective, of course, the toil and hardship of work have a penitential and redemptive dimension. By enduring the toil of work, each Christian collaborates with the Son of God, carrying his or her daily cross for the redemption of humanity.

But even from a purely philosophical perspective, we can see why the irksomeness of work is inextricably intertwined with the goodness of work. Like all intrinsic goods, work offers a unique mode of human self-realization, albeit a mode considerably less spontaneous and pleasant than that, say, of play. Here, Aristotle's account of the metaphysics of self-realization throws light on the arduous goodness of work. Aristotle emphasizes the priority of act to potency, of activity to passivity, of doing to having. For Aristotle, every virtue—and every intrinsic good—involves the transformation of power (*δύναμις*) into disposition (*ἕξις*), and of disposition into activity (*ἐνέργεια*): human beings flourish by actualizing their potential in the development of complex skills. As John Rawls describes this Aristotelian principle: “Other things being equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater the complexity.”³⁴ What makes work a fundamental mode of human flourishing is that it affords us the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge from the challenge of solving problems and overcoming obstacles. Meeting the challenges, solving the problems, overcoming the obstacles: all this is difficult, strenuous, frustrating—as well as liberating and rewarding. As Leibniz observed, “*L'inquiétude est essentiel à la félicité des créatures*.” The deep rewards of self-actualization, of the mastery of complex skills, cannot be had but through arduous tedium, the painful exertion of work. The good of work, then, often appears as an evil, because work demands sacrifice in the present for merely possible

32. Henri de Man, *Joy in Work*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1929), p. 67.

33. *Laborem exercens*, n. 9.

34. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 426.

future rewards, and because work brings mastery only if we submit to arduous discipline. Such a paradoxical good is bound to generate conflicting appraisals.

Microcosm: Official Catholic Social Teaching

What we find in official Catholic social teaching over the past century is a recapitulation of the bewildering range of evaluations we noted in the more than twenty centuries of philosophical reflection on work. Even more remarkably, we find in the development of these appraisals the like general pattern: from a merely instrumental good, work rises to an intrinsic good—perhaps to the highest good—and finally settles into a balanced appraisal as one among several intrinsic goods. Thus, official Catholic social teaching appears as a true microcosm of the wider universe of thought on labor.

In the encyclical, *Rerum novarum* (1891), of Pope Leo XIII, we find a very clear and emphatic assertion of the traditional Thomistic view that labor has merely instrumental value. But whereas Aristotle and Thomas treat work principally as a means to an artifact, Leo XIII treats work principally as means to the support of the worker and his family. He declares, "...when a man engages in remunerative labor, the very reason and motive of his work is to obtain property, and to hold it as his own private possession."³⁵ Indeed, for the Pope, the possession of private property is undoubtedly a higher good than labor.³⁶ Of course, the mere fact that labor is a means to the acquisition of property does not imply that a laborer can be treated merely as a means to the profit of his employer. Leo XIII denounces the exploitation of workers by their employers with great passion.³⁷

In other words, the Pope condemns the degradation of the laborer rather than the degradation of labor. He condemns the long hours, the

harsh conditions, the brutal physical exhaustion imposed on men, women and children by rapacious employers.³⁸ He almost never mentions the degradation of work itself into mindless routine, the imprisonment of each worker in a simple, repetitive task, or the complete separation of the conception of tasks by managers from the execution of those tasks by workers. Such abuses destroy the intrinsic value of work for the worker; they make what could be a self-perfective, into a self-destructive, undertaking. Of course, the degradation of labor through its detailed division ultimately entails the degradation of the laborer, but this consequence is not what Leo XIII condemns. His target is, above all, employers' proclivity to exploit the desperation of poor workers by paying them too little and working them too hard.³⁹ He does not directly criticize their related proclivity to remove all thought, judgment and discretion from workers, making them into mindless drudges.

To be sure, the Pope teaches, "...there is nothing to be ashamed of in seeking one's bread by labor"—but the fact that labor is not shameful does not make it worthy. On the matter of worth, Leo XIII insists, "...the true dignity of man lies in his moral qualities, that is, in virtue; that virtue is the common inheritance of all, equally within the reach of high and low, rich and poor..."⁴⁰ Although many skilled craftsmen might well find in their craft a real source of dignity and virtue, Leo distinguishes labor from the dignity of the moral virtues. As we shall see, one of his successors will claim that labor properly embodies, not just intellectual, but also moral virtue.

Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo anno* (1931) generally proceeds on Pope Leo's premise that labor has merely instrumental value. Thus the labor contract, like any exchange, must meet the standard of just price (in this case, just wage); again, the evil of capitalism is identified mainly with exploitative wages, as "...one class is forbidden to exclude the other from a share in the profits."⁴¹ Revealingly, when Pius XI recommends that, where feasible, employers invite employees to become part-owners of a shared enterprise, he seems to do so not by way of enabling workers to

35. *Rerum novarum*, n. 4. This and all subsequent texts of official Catholic social teaching are drawn from David J. O'Brien and Thomas J. Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992).

36. Thus, *ibid.*, n. 30: "It must be borne in mind that the chief thing to be secured is the safeguarding, by legal enactment and policy, of private property."

37. E.g., *ibid.*, n. 16: "Religion teaches the rich man and the employer that their work people are not their slaves....that it is shameful and inhuman to treat men like chattels to make money by..."

38. Cf. *ibid.*, nn. 16, 27, 29, 33, 34.

39. Leo XIII says of the employer (*Rerum novarum*, n. 17), "His great and principal obligation is to give to everyone that which is just.... To defraud anyone of wages that are his due is a crime..."

40. *Rerum novarum*, n. 20.

41. *Quadragesimo anno*, n. 57; for the lengthy analysis of just wages, cf. nn. 56-75.

protect the dignity of their work, but by way of enabling them to secure their fair share of profits.⁴²

However, the Pope sows the seeds of a recognition that work may perfect—or degrade—the soul of man; he allows, subtly, that labor may offer an opportunity for human flourishing:

...very many employers treated their workmen as mere tools, without any concern for the welfare of their souls.... And so bodily labor, which was decreed by Providence for the good of man's body and soul even after original sin, has everywhere been changed into an instrument of strange perversion: for dead matter leaves the factory ennobled and transformed, where men are corrupted and degraded.⁴³

This passage invites an immediate question: What is the source of the degradation the Pope laments? Are workers degraded by the mindless tedium of their tasks, or by the external conditions of work? From the context, it seems that Pius XI here traces the degradation of workers to the sexual license promoted by overcrowded housing and by the mixing of the sexes at work.⁴⁴ Hence, we cannot conclude that Pius recognizes the link between the degradation of work itself and the degradation of the worker. Still, whatever its author's intent, this passage will come to fruition, thirty years after its writing, in John XXIII's new appraisal of work.⁴⁵

The first clear recognition of the intrinsic value of work to be found in the series of social encyclicals appears in John XXIII's *Mater et magistra* (1961). At many junctures, Pope John echoes the traditional concern for the just remuneration of labor,⁴⁶ but in a few passages he strikes quite a new note. Consider:

42. "...we deem it advisable that the wage contract should, when possible, be modified somewhat by a contract of partnership.... For thus the workers and executives become sharers in the ownership or management, or else participate in some way in the profits" (*Quadragesimo anno*, n. 65).

43. *Quadragesimo anno*, n. 135.

44. Thus, *ibid.*: "The mind shudders if we consider the frightful perils to which the morals of workers (of boys and young men particularly), and the virtue of girls and women are exposed in modern factories..."

45. John XXIII cites this passage in *Mater et magistra* (1961), n. 242.

46. E.g., *Mater et magistra*, n. 68, "Our heart is filled with profound sadness when we observe... great masses of workers who, in not a few nations... receive too small a return from their labor"; cf. also, n. 18.

Justice is to be observed not merely in the distribution of wealth, but also in regard to the conditions under which men engaged in productive activity have an opportunity to assume responsibility and to perfect themselves by their efforts.⁴⁷

For the first time, to my knowledge, here is a recognition that work has the intrinsic potential to perfect workers, and that to the degree that a worker has some responsibility for the conception as well as for the execution of his tasks. Indeed, John XXIII goes further and—again, for the first time—condemns as unjust the fragmentation of work into monotonous routines, even if workers are otherwise justly compensated.⁴⁸

Whereas Leo XIII had ascribed to labor the value of an instrument for acquiring property, John XXIII explicitly says that professional skills are more valuable than property: the skills of work shape who we are, while property is merely what we have.⁴⁹ At the same time, Pope John recognizes that work is not the only intrinsic good and that provision must be made to free up time for play and family.⁵⁰

John XXIII's reflections on the intrinsic value of work are developed and clarified in the Second Vatican Council's statement, *Gaudium et spes* (1965). Here we find the Hegelian theme of the joint articulation of world and self in the act of labor:

For when a man works he not only alters things and society, he develops himself as well. He learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside of himself and beyond himself.⁵¹

47. *Mater et magistra*, n. 82.

48. *Ibid.*, n. 83, the Pope writes, "...if the human organization and structure of economic life be such that the human dignity of workers is compromised, or their sense of responsibility is weakened, or their freedom of action is removed, then we judge such an economic order to be unjust, even though it produces a vast amount of goods whose distribution conforms to the norms of justice and equity." Moreover, John says (n. 92) that from the need for efficient management "...it by no means follows that those who work daily in... an enterprise are to be considered merely as servants, whose function is to execute orders silently..."

49. Thus, *ibid.*, nn. 106-107: "It sometimes happens in our day that men are more inclined to seek some professional skill than possession of goods.... This clearly accords with the inherent characteristics of labor, inasmuch as this proceeds directly from the human person, and hence is to be thought more of than wealth in external goods. These latter, by their very nature, must be regarded as instruments."

50. *Mater et magistra*, n. 250: "...it is right and necessary for man to cease for a time from labor, not merely to relax his body from daily work and likewise to refresh himself with decent recreation, but also to foster family unity..."

51. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 35.

Pope John's elevation of skilled labor above property is reaffirmed:

...this kind of growth [from work] is of greater value than any external riches which can be garnered. A man is more precious for what he is than for what he has.⁵²

From its observation that work affords a unique opportunity for human flourishing, the Council exhorts employers to design jobs that promote the perfection, rather than the degradation, of workers: "The opportunity should also be afforded to workers to develop their own abilities and personalities through the work they perform..."⁵³

In every statement of official Catholic social teaching save one, consideration of the labor process itself, of the intrinsic value and dignity of work, is limited to a few paragraphs scattered through a wide-ranging discussion of many issues in social, political and economic life. In *Laborem exercens* (1981), Pope John Paul II, alone among the modern pontiffs, makes work the focus of an analysis of modern social and economic life.⁵⁴ His profound speculative and phenomenological exploration of the meaning of work for modern society represents a radical break with the whole Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. Indeed, John Paul II's forceful assertion of its high intrinsic value leads him to treat work virtually as the highest human good. He repeatedly insists that work cannot be reduced to an instrument:

It [labor] is not only good in the sense that it is useful or something to enjoy; it is also good in the sense that it is worthy, that is to say, something that corresponds to man's dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it.⁵⁵

While Aristotle and Aquinas argue that work is not perfective of man, the Pope insists that work *is* perfective of man. Indeed, in large measure, the Pope adopts Marx's theory of human self-realization through work:

Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Ibid.*, n. 67.

54. Indeed, John Paul claims that "...human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question..." (*Laborem exercens*, n. 3).

55. *Laborem exercens*, n. 9.

to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes "more a human being."⁵⁶

Recall that, for Aquinas, making is governed by craft (*ars*), an intellectual virtue, while acting is governed by prudence, a moral virtue; art works for the good of the thing made, while prudence works for the good of the one acting. John Paul II's radical break with St. Thomas is nowhere more evident than in his bold claim that work stems from a moral virtue⁵⁷—namely, industriousness. This virtue, for John Paul II, involves moral dispositions to patience, perseverance, conscientiousness and efficiency. Work is now taken to be perfective both of man's intellect and of his character.

The burden of *Laborem exercens*, that on the labor process—on work—turns the question of human dignity in the modern era, leads John Paul II to a radical critique of the degradation of labor under both capitalist and communist regimes. For all their differences, both regimes tend to design labor processes that deprive workers of autonomy and discourage their initiative.⁵⁸ The Pope challenges employers to design jobs consistent with the principle that "work is for man, man is not for work."⁵⁹ Work is for man in the sense that the subjective dignity of the worker—not the pay, nor the productivity, nor the value added—is the measure of work. To be *for man*, work must be designed to respect each worker's capacity for self-direction and self-development. Instead of seeking to habituate workers to the degrading tedium of their jobs—jobs too small for the human spirit—we must seek to redesign jobs as vehicles of the human quest for self-realization.⁶⁰

56. *Ibid.*, n. 7. As John Finnis said to me in conversation, had the Pope been a better Thomist, he never would have written *Laborem exercens*.

57. Apart from recognizing that, through work, man becomes "more a human being," John Paul writes, "It is impossible to understand the virtue of industriousness, and more particularly it is impossible to understand why industriousness should be a virtue: for virtue, as a moral habit, is something whereby man becomes good as man" (*Laborem exercens*, n. 9). For St. Thomas, by contrast, *industria*—far from being a moral virtue—was the amoral capacity for cleverness (Aristotle's *δεινότης*), a capacity employable indifferently for good or evil; cf. *Summa Theologiae* Ia IIae q. 21, a. 2 ad 2, and IIa IIae q. 47, a. 13 ad 3.

58. On John Paul II's comparison of the degradation of labor under capitalism and communism, cf. *Laborem exercens*, n. 13.

59. *Laborem exercens*, n. 6.

60. *Ibid.*, n. 7: "Man is treated as an instrument of production, whereas he—he alone independent of the work he does—ought to be treated as the effective subject of work and its true maker and creator."

Like other champions of the value of work, John Paul II tends to appraise work as the highest—one might almost say, the only—human good. He begins *Laborem exercens* by extending the name “work” to “...any activity by man, whether manual or intellectual, whatever its nature or circumstances...” But so expansive a usage makes every human activity, even play, a kind of work. Even though we often say that we are “working” on our marriage, or on a friendship, we also understand that the activities whereby we enjoy such goods as marriage, play or friendship hardly qualify as work. Aristotle and Aquinas are right to insist that work, as work, has a transitive dimension, that it must be directed, at least in part, to an external result. Not all human activities are kinds of work, and neither are all human goods the good of work.

John Paul II asserts that “...from work it [man’s life] derives its specific dignity” and that “human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question....”⁶¹ But such claims could, just as plausibly, be made on behalf of other intrinsic goods, on behalf of marriage or friendship, for example, or on behalf of religion. Moreover, the Pope claims that, in a way, “work is a condition for making it possible to found a family” and that “work and industriousness also influence the whole process of education in the family....”⁶² These claims suggest that work is the necessary precondition for enjoyment of the other goods of human life, which may be true in an economic sense, but hardly in a logical sense. Finally, John Paul claims, “Man must work both because the Creator commanded it and because of his humanity, which requires work in order to be maintained and developed.”⁶³ Of course, if every human activity proves to be a kind of work, this claim is true, but trivial; if, however, work is but one of several intrinsic, incommensurable human goods, then the claim is misleadingly one-sided.

John Paul II also develops a theology and spirituality of work in *Laborem exercens*. Central to both is the principle, “Man, created in the image of God, shares by his work in the activity of the Creator....”⁶⁴ True, even profoundly true; but man shares in the activity of God through all of the intrinsic goods of human life. The Pope’s theology of work centers around an analogy between God’s creation and human production: by working, we share in God’s creative activity. Is God’s creation of the

61. *Laborem exercens*, nn. 1, 3.

62. *Ibid.*, n. 10.

63. *Ibid.*, n. 16.

64. *Laborem exercens*, n. 25.

world out of nothing analogous to craftsman’s imposition of form on matter? Augustine thought not:

By what means did you make heaven and earth? What tool did you use for this vast work? You did not work as a human craftsman does, making one thing out of something else as his mind directs.... Nor did you have in your hand any matter from which you could make heaven and earth, for where could you have obtained matter which you had not yet created, in order to use it as material for making something else?⁶⁵

Again, it seems just as plausible to suppose that we participate in God’s creative activity through marital procreation, or even through play. John Paul II’s theology, like his philosophy, of work—though full of marvelous insights—ultimately lacks balance.

List des heiligen Geistes?

Still, nothing succeeds like excess. There is reason to believe that it took John Paul II’s sometimes extravagant argument for the intrinsic value of work to defeat the Thomistic orthodoxy. Even after the rather strong claims made on behalf of work’s intrinsic value in *Mater et magistra* and *Gaudium et spes*, major Catholic philosophers were still omitting work from their lists of intrinsic goods, of basic opportunities for human flourishing.⁶⁶ After the very forceful restatement of Church teaching in *Laborem exercens*, these philosophers quietly revised their lists to include work.⁶⁷

After more than twenty centuries of evaluations—ranging from mere instrument to *summum bonum*—we now witness for the first time, in the wake of *Laborem exercens*, the emergence of a balanced appraisal of work, both in the wider Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition and in official Catholic social teaching. Philosophers Germain Grisez and John Finnis now rank work as one among several intrinsic, incommensurable human goods. The American bishops, in their pastoral letter on the economy

65. Augustine *Confessions*, XI 5. The Hebrew word for God’s creative activity (*bara*) is carefully distinguished in the Scriptures from the words for human production.

66. Cf. Grisez and Shaw, *loc. cit.*, and Finnis, *loc. cit.*

67. Cf. Germain Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles* v. I (1983), p. 124, and G. Grisez, Joseph Boyle and John Finnis, “Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends,” *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 32 (1987), p. 107.

(1986), after affirming John Paul II's teaching on the intrinsic value of work, add this subtle, but crucial, corrective: "Leisure, prayer, celebration, and the arts are also central to the realization of human dignity and to the development of a rich cultural life."⁶⁸

Thus, in both the wider currents of philosophical reflection and the narrower stream of official Catholic social teaching, we find a parallel development in the appraisal of work: from merely instrumental good, to highest human good, to one among several intrinsic goods. Astonishing is that these parallel developments converge—again, in the wake of *Laborem exercens*—on a remarkably balanced appraisal of work. Such a convergence, and the achievement of such an appraisal, are signs of hope for our times.

68. U.S. Catholic Conference, *Economic Justice for All* (1986), n. 96.

Homo Reflectens: A Response to James B. Murphy

Patrick Downey

In the light of Professor Murphy's paper, and of the other papers presented here, I feel a bit like Diogenes at the siege of Corinth. When asked by the citizens of the city why he was trundling his tub back and forth across the square while the rest of the city prepared for war, he replied that he did not want to be the only idler among so many industrious citizens. Industrious Professor Murphy's paper certainly is, and I have little to add to his erudition and thoroughness, apart from a few—perhaps, trifling—rolls of my own tub.

Perhaps I should begin with the simple, central word—"balanced." When I think of balance, two images come to mind. One is that of mathematical masses opposed to one another on either side of a fulcrum: when both masses are equal, as measured by the abstract quantity of weight, the system has achieved balance. The second image is that of a gymnast, who is balanced so far as she can do all of her jumps and stands without a fall or misstep. Professor Murphy impressively brings out the parallel development through which the macrocosmic philosophical, and microcosmic Church, teachings on work have converged, and he notes—with some satisfaction—the additions this change has stimulated in the moral philosophies of Finnis and Grisez. What I question, however, is whether this movement in the realm of philosophy, on the one hand, and of Catholic social thought, on the other, has been a development between opposed extremes, leading to a healthy balance in the middle. Might it, instead, be a case of having lost one's feet, and taken that extra step that indicates balance has, in fact, been lost?

Consider what is, perhaps, only a comment Professor Murphy has made in passing, but one which has immense implications for his notion of balance.

Of course, it is no less one-sided to define man as a maker than it was to define him as a knower. *Homo sapiens*, *homo faber*, *homo ludens*: man is all these and more.

Man is indeed all of these, but the question is whether he can be defined by all of them. For, a definition is adequate only if it succeeds at includ-