

Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of this World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work*
Introduction and Chapter One

Introduction

1. In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert N. Bellah, et. al., claim that at the heart of any recovery of our common life (“social ecology”) there must be a change in the meaning of work. xiv

We need a “reappropriation of the idea of vocation or calling, a return in a new way to the idea of work as a contribution to the good of all and not merely as a means to one’s own advancement.” xv

2. Contemporary attitudes toward work are infused with the spirit of modern individualism which comes in two basic varieties:
 - Utilitarian individualism: those who locate the meaning of their lives in the public world of work (hard working, competitive, excellence, sacrifice for the sake of personal success measured financially).
 - Expressive individualism: those who locate the meaning of their lives in private life—personal relationships, leisure activities, lifestyle enclaves, etc. (away from harsh realities of world of work).

Both groups, however, live primarily for the self, either on the job (1) or off it (2).

3. Alternative attitudes toward work are available in the republican and biblical traditions, esp. the English and American Puritans who advocated a perspective on work as a form of mutual service for the common good in the context of calling or vocation.
4. The *Fabric of this World* is an attempt to help revitalize this biblical concept of work as vocation or calling as developed in the Reformation tradition. Work, neither excessively vilified (as if it were animalic) or glorified (as if it were apotheotic), extends God’s creative activity in the world and makes us God’s representatives on earth, His stewards entrusted with the tasking of developing the rich resources of the earth for the benefit of the human community to the glory of God.

5. Whereas most evangelical works on work are written within the framework of modern individualism and never question the overall framework itself, FOTW will examine that framework and offers a new kind of socio-economic structure that make work a genuine service to others through the responsible use of our talents and abilities.

Chapter One: Work--Divine Prerogative or the Burden of the Beast?

Introduction:

6. Going to college and getting an education or training is largely an attempt to avoid being saddled with unpleasant, uninteresting, non-lucrative “burger-flipping” jobs. Hence, there is a keen focus on work, yet we rarely if ever reflect on its meaning in our lives despite the fact that we spend more time at work than at home, church, or virtually anywhere else.
7. Key questions on work: pages 4-5
8. While it would seem that most Americans loathe their daily work (and would rather be off pursuing a favorite leisure activity), at the same time work has benefits (financial) and psychological implications (self esteem, sense of identity, purpose in life, talents and skills, social orientation, recognition, stimulation, etc).

The Greek Solution

9. The Greek attitude toward work: “work was a curse and nothing else,” an unmitigated evil to be avoided at all costs.
10. Why this Greek vilification of work? Because the Greeks associated work with the endless cycle of activity forced upon us by bodily existence (work to eat, eat to work). Like animals (brutes), humans must work to survive and yet eventually die, passing into oblivion without having left a mark, made a difference, and with little hope for immortality.
11. The same sense of emptiness and vanity about work is stated in the OT book of Ecclesiastes (1: 3, 9, 11, 14; 3: 19-20). But whereas the Hebraic (OT) response to the problem of labor is an encouragement to enjoy and find satisfaction in it while fearing God (see Eccl. 3: 13, 22), the Greeks sought to escape work altogether and attempted to live so as to imitate the activity of the gods (practical, political, and military endeavors) in a quest for immortality (like Solon, Pericles, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, etc.). In this way, one could overcome the anonymity of the obscure working masses.

12. How could one find time to pursue practical, political, philosophical, and military activities? SLAVERY—which allowed the wealthy independent slave-holder time to pursue the life of honor via the accomplishment of some noble deed.
13. Aristotle argued that slavery is rooted in the order of things, that some people (dumb, incapable of rational thought, with slightly stooped bodies) were “natural slaves” (*Politics* I.v.8) who were to engage in productive work so as to enable the rich members of the leisure class to pursue a life of political activity within the polis. Hence, this undemocratic idea of slavery facilitated the immortality of the few at the expense of the many.
14. Yet there is a higher domain still over that certainly of slaves and even practical, political men, namely, that of the philosophic or contemplative life, the life of rational thought and theoretical speculation. Since the highest capacity in man was reason, the life of leisure was not to be spent in the pursuit of physical pleasure as animals do, but rather in pursuit of the philosophic life. This form of life is most like the gods conceived as pure, self-sustained mental substances. It is this view of the gods that led to this certain self-understanding and this view of life and work. The life of the gods and of the thinker is the truly happiest life. Hence, there are three levels of human existence:
1. Philosophic life
 2. Practical life
 3. Productive life
15. The activity of levels 3 and 2 are what make the activity of 1 possible. When the needs of the encumbering body are met by 3, and the social stability and political order are provided by 2, then 1 can achieve the bliss of pure rational thought which is most divine.
16. Plato’s view was essentially the same as Aristotle’s, though they came to these conclusions via different understandings of the relationship of body and soul. For Plato, the body was the prison-house of the soul, and is a philosophical encumbrance. Death is liberation for the philosophically purified soul.

The Medieval Continuation

17. The basic Greek attitude toward work and its place in human life is carried over in both thought and practice of the Christian Church in the middle ages. The early church fathers and medieval theologians basically interpreted the Christian faith within a Greek framework engendering this outcome. Not until the Reformation were these categories questioned and overthrown.
18. Because the Greek definition of man as a rational animal was retained, the highest human activity was the contemplative, rational activity of the mind, and

salvation was conceived in intellectual terms culminating in the beatific vision, or intellectual knowledge of God apart from the demands of the body.

19. Hence, productive work was of no religious or eternal significance; it was temporal value only. Even the practical or active life of service to fellow human beings was considered an encumbrance to the higher, solitary life of the contemplative (note the reversal of these ideals today where we value the active over the contemplative life). The need for the active life is temporary, and thus the active life is of temporary value as well. Only the contemplative life is of eternal value as a foretaste of the life that is to come.
20. The ideal of the contemplative life found embodiment in the medieval institution of the monastery via a renunciation of marriage, property, and worldly activity in order to mortify desires and discipline the mind in the hope of justification before God (works salvation). The goal was “that a man might achieve that detachment from created things [what would Schmemmann say about this?] that prepare him for the supreme encounter with God.” 19
21. Through an involved understanding of the economy of salvation (including contrition, confession, penance, acts of supererogation, veneration of relics, the Scala Sancta, indulgences, confraternity, etc.) was the means of eternal salvation. In the monastic setting, work itself was not wholly despised, but was considered an ascetic act and means of purification. Work was not valued in itself, but as a means to a spiritual end (control of desire, for example).
22. Hence, it was concluded that “the Christian life could only be lived fully in the cloister and that a serious religious commitment meant becoming a monk” (today, it means becoming a missionary). Thus, two ways of life were presumably advocated by the Church: (1) the one of the monk above nature and beyond common human living devoted to the service of God; and (2) the secular life of the lay person in nature, more humble, human which permits men to marry, work, bear and raise children, own property, etc.
23. Hence, there is a medieval ranking of human beings and activities: common people at the bottom who provided for the necessities of life, and the contemplative life of the monks at top. This is very similar to the Greek order of things. The two domains of practical life were political and ecclesiastical and monks occupied the place the philosopher did. The entire edifice was supported by tenant farmers, lay brothers, craftsmen and serfs. These worked that the others might pursue the religious life, but these did not directly participate in religious life, but received grace via the sacraments of the Church.

The Renaissance Reversal

24. A different concept of God in the Renaissance (Divine Artificer, Supreme Maker, Mightiest Architect) led to a different self understanding and idea of work. It led to a complete reversal at the hands of several leading Ren. thinkers. God not only created minds, but also hands that could make and build what the mind conceived. According to Giordano Bruno and Marsilio Ficino, work does not bind us to nature and reduce us to animals, but is the means of expression, creativity, freedom, enabling us to achieve divine status. Work is now man's essential activity in which human capacities are not thwarted but developed.

Marx: Self-Realization Through Work

25. Karl Marx, the philosopher of labor *par excellence*, stands within this renewed Ren. tradition regarding labor seeing it as the activity by which we distinguish ourselves from animals, and as the means of finding true fulfillment as human beings, though such fulfillment is prohibited by the private ownership of the means of production and the degradation of labor which becomes "alienated." Hence, people turn to other things outside of their jobs (eating, drinking, procreating, in one's dwelling and in personal adornment). What is required is a communist revolution in which labor and life would again be enjoyed as capitalism capsizes and a communist state is installed. Work is glorified to the point of self realization and divinization.

Freud: Work as a Form of Self-Denial

26. Yet Marx's vision has failed miserably, and his glamorization of labor is a farce. True human fulfillment, the average worker seems to say, is not in, but outside of work, not in making but in spending money, not in production, but in reproduction. Work is good only as a means to leisure activity and to consumption.

27. Sigmund Freud viewed work as an inescapable but tragic necessity. Human beings are primarily pleasure-seeking organisms, esp. the convulsions of our physical being. Hence, work is necessary to ensure the possibilities of pleasure against the encroachments of nature (disease, overexposure, starvation, etc.). We must work to create a civilization that provides security in a threatening world and work to make enough money to take advantage of civilization's benefits. But two things make people happy: sex and violence. By limiting sexual activity and converting unused erotic energy into a lukewarm love for others, human social life will emerge as this process is superintended by the superego that engenders guilt if erotic or aggressive urges are present. In this way civilization is created securely, but at the expense of the two primary human drives. So to experience some pleasure, we must submit to the restrictions of civilization which it provides for us.

Summary and Transition: The Promise of the Concept of Vocation

28. Extremes of seeing work as self-denial and work as self-fulfillment are seen in this historical survey. Both these positive and negative aspects of work are incorporated into a larger vision within Protestantism and its concept of vocation.

Phil 3304 Christian Worldview
Summary of views on Work:

Viewpoint	View of God	View of Man	View of Labor
Greek View	Pure, self-contained, mental substances	Rational, thinking Creatures	Work as animal-like: Slaves, Practical man, Philosophers; Elevates contemplative over active life
Medieval View	God is spirit, Trinitarian	Imago Dei/rationality Intellectuality	Tenant farmers, Priests/lay brothers, Monks; elevates contemplative over active life
Renaissance View	Divine Artificer, Supreme Maker, Mighty Architect Free,	Man the Maker Intellect & hands productive	Expression of our essence as free creative, and sovereign beings achieving divine status
Marxist View	-----	Ability to engage in free productive labor	Work the self objectified and is the god-like means of true self fulfillment
Freudian View	Divine attributes transferred to technology creating a "prothetic god."	Dominated by pleasure (body-convulsions) and violence	Work necessary to insure viability over against a hostile world by creating civilization that allows the experience of some pleasures within limits.