

NEH ENDURING QUESTIONS PROGRAM

Enduring Question: Why Work?

Jonathan Malesic

King's College / Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

Intellectual rationale and teaching value. A paradox of modern working life is that we see work as a necessary evil but expect to find fulfillment in it. Answers to the enduring question—“Why Work?”—emerge from the highest human ideals, yet they reflect the most concrete concerns about providing for oneself and one's family. All workers, at all levels of education, can give an answer to this question, though most can also give good reasons *not* to work. Our deep ambivalence toward work makes serious reflection on its place in our lives imperative.

This ambivalence has prompted a fascinating array of questions. Is the purpose of work primarily to acquire goods for oneself, or to contribute to one's community? Does each person have a kind of job for which they are naturally suited? What kinds of activities count as work? What is the relationship between work and pay? Are the liberal arts necessarily opposed to economic understandings of work? Does religion contribute to or thwart the expansion of work into people's lives? How are work and leisure related? Is working for anyone other than oneself always alienating? Or is a job just a job, and fulfillment something to seek elsewhere? We often think of work today in terms of the national economy; we expect that economists, politicians, and businesspersons alone can solve problems like unemployment, wage stagnation, and job creation. But questions about work far predate the discipline of economics and have persisted through tremendous economic change. Greek philosophy, after all, emerged from a circle of leisured men gathered around the gadfly Socrates, who, though not engaged in what most would recognize as work, discoursed about the proper division of labor in the just city.

College students are in a unique position to consider why to work, as they are both preparing for professions and gaining the skills and knowledge appropriate to leisurely reflection

on life. This is evident at King's College, which was chartered to educate working-class students in the liberal arts. My students often say that education's value is in the job it can help them attain, but few have seriously considered work's wider ethical significance. This course, then, should hook students' interest through the enduring question, helping them answer it through investigating and arguing with classic philosophical, religious, literary, and social scientific texts.

Envisioned course design. The course would be offered in the core undergraduate curriculum, open to all students. Most would be sophomores or juniors, at a stage where career plans are solidifying and the prospect of work is coming increasingly into view. Students will therefore likely come to the class with answers to the central question. To take advantage of this, on the first day of class I will assign them a short essay answering the question, "Why work?" They will answer it again on the final exam, drawing from several sources they studied, providing a clear means to assess student learning by comparing these two responses.

Anticipated readings are at a level that should push students' interpretive skills. Fifty to 100 pages of often dense and unfamiliar reading per week will be reasonably challenging. To encourage thoughtful reading, I will distribute questions to accompany readings and frequently give a quiz based on these questions at the start of class. (In course evaluations, my students frequently name the quiz series as a particularly helpful aspect of my courses.) Class will meet for 75 minutes, twice a week, for 14 weeks. The class will be capped at 18 members to encourage discussion and will feature frequent small-group exercises, in which students will discuss short, key passages from the texts. Each student will be responsible at least once for selecting a passage for small-group discussion and offering an interpretation for the entire class.

Readings will be divided into four units, covering four broad historical periods. The course focuses entirely on Western culture, which gave rise to today's dominant economic

systems. The first unit will examine texts from the ancient Mediterranean world. In addition to providing a wide range of views of work's significance to the individual, society, and cosmos, these texts are background for readings in all of the later units. In the first four chapters of Genesis (6th-5th c. BCE) God does the "work" of creation, takes a day of rest, imposes labor on Adam and Eve as punishment for their sin, and shows favor to the product of Abel's herding rather than Cain's farming, leading to Abel's murder. The book of Ecclesiastes (4th-3rd c. BCE) reflects on the apparent futility of "toil" and the fleetingness of pleasure in a life that can only end in death. In the Gospel of Matthew (80-90 CE), Jesus summons followers off of their work sites, teaching in parables drawn from labor customs of his time, showing ambivalence toward work and wages. In Plato's *Republic* (4th c. BCE), the just city is one in which each person does exactly the work best suited to his or her nature (with women restricted to communal child-rearing), suggesting that the individual works in order to contribute to society. While the stoic philosopher Epictetus does not explicitly write about work in his *Handbook* (early 2nd c. CE), his philosophy of detachment can be evaluated as a means to cope with the necessity and even misery of work, including being enslaved (as Epictetus had been) or unemployed.

Concerns about work changed as new social classes emerged in medieval and early modern Europe, the subject of the second unit. As a group, these sources are more optimistic about work than are the ancient ones; considering reasons why will encourage students to think historically. The Catholic monk Benedict of Nursia's *Rule* (early 6th c. CE) establishes work and prayer as the major foci for monastic life. The Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (late 14th c.) depicts a catalog of late medieval characters, including members of trade guilds and a merchant class, defined by the work they do. Chaucer's narrator praises work that serves others without enriching oneself as the most worthwhile. John Calvin, a Protestant theologian seeking

to establish an ideal Christian city in Geneva, argues in his *Institutes* (1536) that work is a calling from God, and that when one works in one's vocation, both the person and God are pleased. Here we see the modern idea that work should provide a form of fulfillment for the worker.

The Enlightenment opened up new ways of thinking about society just as a nascent industrial capitalism was creating new ways of working and producing wealth. The third unit explores tensions between the economic and moral purposes of work in this new economy. To John Locke, whose theory of private property as articulated in his *Second Treatise of Government* (1689) is rooted in an interpretation of Adam's work in Genesis, we work to improve nature, putting our stamp on it, and thus making it our own. Acquiring monetary property is the focus of Benjamin Franklin's essay, "The Way to Wealth" (1758), in which ingenuity and efficiency are the principal moral virtues precisely because they are the surest path to riches. The virtues of an industrial economy become, in Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901), the path to earning self-respect for people for whom the memory of *being* white people's capital was still very recent. Washington urged African-Americans to work in practical trades to foster self-sufficiency and an appreciation for work's inherent dignity. Franklin is the paragon of the Protestant ethic Max Weber analyzes in *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism* (1905), which argues that work as a moral enterprise became secularized over time, as the Calvinist desire to please God became locked in the "iron cage" of the desire for profit.

Capitalist and industrial economies have dissenters, of course; these will be the subjects of the final unit. For them, working within industrial capitalism and demonstrating virtue are decoupled. Henry David Thoreau and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels agree that working for others is alienating, but they have vastly different responses to this problem: while Thoreau, in *Walden* (1854), narrates his leaving society to work for himself in relative isolation, Marx's and

Engels's *Communist Manifesto* (1848) calls for a revolution in political economy to give workers collective ownership of the means of production. In these two readings we return to the question of whether work should primarily benefit oneself or one's community. William Blake's poems (late 18th-early 19th c.) depict an innocent, childlike humanity corrupted by the dangerous, dirty work of the industrial age's "dark satanic mills." Blake's poetry and painting—as works themselves—offer an alternative view of work as human craftsmanship that machines cannot accomplish. The Jewish rabbi and scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel meditates in *The Sabbath* (1951) on work and leisure as ways of using time, with the Sabbath day of rest standing as time's organizing principle, giving all other time its meaning. This unit will illustrate how much disagreement there can be among authors presumably on the same side of a given debate.

Matthew Crawford's essay, "The Case for Working with Your Hands" (2009), will round out the readings. Crawford, a Chicago Ph.D. and motorcycle mechanic, explains how searching for fulfilling work led him to step out of the knowledge economy and put manual skills to work on immediate, mechanical problems. Reading this essay will bring the issues to a conclusion in the present day and return us to the central paradoxes of work.

In addition to the readings, students will view a film about working life and visit an art museum outside of class time. The Philadelphia Museum of Art has a strong collection of work by the late 19th-early 20th century American painter Thomas Eakins, who specialized early in his career on scenes of leisure but later painted many portraits of professionals with the tools of their trades. I find that evaluating a film or artwork in light of written works can be a challenging and rewarding essay assignment for my students; doing so will be their major research project.

Another written assignment will involve relating readings to information gathered through two interviews with workers: one with a family member and one with someone doing

the kind of work the student hopes to do. This project will foster cross-generational discussion of the enduring question and bring the working world into direct contact with the course.

To assess the course, in addition to the abovementioned student responses to the enduring question, a veteran professor at King's will observe the class on at least two occasions, review student evaluations, and consult with me on the course's effectiveness. I will gather course-evaluation data from the students at the midpoint and end of the course.

Plan of work. I will spend the summer of 2011 studying the primary and secondary sources and developing the syllabus, reading questions, and written assignments, as well as integrating the films and museum trip into the course. I will teach the course twice between Fall 2011 and Fall 2012.

Faculty preparation. My training as a scholar of religion has attuned me to the ways people have constructed meaningful lives within and against religious traditions. In my research, I explore how Christian thinkers have wrestled with the ambiguities of their religion's place in the public culture of their times. Political issues were prominent in my book, *Secret Faith in the Public Square*, but I have so far not written about work.

In teaching theology, I like to bring religious texts into contact with both secular writing and other academic disciplines. In my "Faith, Morality, and the Person" course, for example, students address enduring ethical questions through reading religious autobiographies, paying attention to the texts' literary character and historical contexts as ways of discovering or challenging their religious claims. I have also taught about the relation between humans and nature by putting scientific, religious, and philosophical texts in conversation. The economic-based material in the "Why Work?" course would expand my intellectual range considerably.