

## Jonathan Malesic's *The End of Burnout*: Three Critiques and a Response from the Author

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JONATHAN Malesic's *The End of Burnout: Why Work Drains Us and How to Build Better Lives* (2022), seems to have hit the world at just the right time. Articles, books, and podcasts on burnout, which was a burgeoning topic prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, now seem to be everywhere, from *The New York Times* to CNN to TikTok. These sources come from different academic, social, and intellectual perspectives, but they are all zeroing in on a problem many American workers feel, especially in the pandemic's wake. Why does work play such a central role in our lives and our identities? What are the consequences of this valorization of paid work? Malesic, a former professor at the small, Catholic liberal arts college where he was my colleague for more than a decade, has done a deep investigation of the condition, its symptoms, its history, and its effect on workers. The end result is an extensively researched, provocative, timely response to the problem and some thoughtful ideas for building a better system.

Part 1 of the text investigates the term itself and the many ways in which it is deployed. In discussing contemporary culture, Malesic notes that the many different vectors from which burnout theory comes have competing interests: workers, scientists, marketers, academics, and employers all have different perspectives on the issue and whether or not it is a systemic problem. Even if these groups could agree on the problem, it is highly unlikely that they could agree on ways to solve it. Drawing on theology, literature, and the history of science, Malesic then explains and unpacks older terms and conditions that might be thought of as burnout's forebears. These include melancholia and acedia from the ancient and medieval periods, terms that are related but not identical to burnout. Acedia, for example, was thought by medieval Christian thinkers as the "noonday demon" that made monks anxious and distractable when they were supposed to be focused on prayer. Moving forward, the nineteenth century brings us a term that is a bit closer to burnout: neurasthenia, a "state of exhaustion brought on by excessive pressure on the nervous system."<sup>1</sup>

Malesic ultimately arrives at the cornerstone of burnout theory, the 1970s work of two psychologists, Herbert Freudenberger and Christine

Maslach. Freudenberger, who drew on his own experiences as a burned-out clinician, and Maslach, who created the influential Maslach Burnout Inventory, a tool for diagnosing burnout, are the pioneers of understanding burnout as we know it today. They lead Malesic, and others before him, to describe burnout as the condition that results when the gap between working conditions and the ideals that workers bring to their jobs grows too wide. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 then analyze all these elements: what burnout feels like to sufferers, how working conditions have deteriorated, and how expectations and ideals about work have made it more central to our senses of identity. Part I is an effective argument for why the phenomenon of burnout is on so many people's minds these days.

In part II, *The End of Burnout* pivots toward ways of resituating work in our lives to avoid burnout. Using such diverse thinkers as Pope Leo XIII, Henry David Thoreau, and Marxist feminist philosopher Kathi Weeks, Malesic offers theories of life that can help workers loosen work's hold on our imaginations and find our value and dignity in more achievable and sustainable pursuits. To that end, he ends the text with descriptions of communities of workers who are doing just that: Benedictine religious in New Mexico and Minnesota, an anti-poverty nonprofit staff in Dallas, and others who have disconnected their inner worth from work. His conclusion, written in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrates how the shutdowns and working from home have in some cases exacerbated the problem of burnout for workers, leading to mass resignations, and in other cases allowed people a better balance between work and life than they had before.

This forum presents three responses to Malesic's text. First, psychologist Bryan Dik connects personally with Malesic's argument, even though Dik's research on the psychology of vocation gives him an "optimistic bias" on the value work can have in our lives. Dik asks how the idea of a "calling" intersects with the book's claims, noting that calling can have a dark side when workers become overinvested in their work because they feel called to it. Theologian Charles R. Pinches praises Malesic's prose and his historical research, but takes issue with what he sees as the book's failure to do more with two concepts: acedia and leisure (as described by Josef Pieper). For Pinches, *The End of Burnout* leaves us with the idea only that work should be shifted from the center of our lives, when it should also give readers more advice on how we might manage work well. Finally, sociologist Erin Hatton says *The End of Burnout* is "an important contribution to the growing body of research that challenges America's often-harmful love affair with work." She argues, however, that Malesic both leans too heavily into standard notions of "good" and "bad" jobs and dismisses the unpaid work of parenting and caregiving too quickly. In his response, Malesic

carefully considers all these criticisms. Ultimately, though, he believes that each of the three responses demonstrates in its own way how firmly planted the total work mindset is in the American psyche and what a difficult task it will be to loosen its hold on workers and alleviate the epidemic of burnout.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Malesic, *The End of Burnout: Why Work Drains Us and How to Build Better Lives* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022), 43.