Work: A Hard Ethic to Break

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IT IS EXCITING TO SEE the journal *Zeal* begin its life at King's College. I'm honored to have my book considered in this forum in the journal's first issue. I wish my former colleagues who serve as its editors the very best in their effort to host conversations across intellectual disciplines.

When I taught at King's, I developed a course called, "Why Work?" Every semester, I would ask the students if they thought school was their job. Nearly all did. They explained that school was the main thing they were doing in their lives. College was also difficult and time-consuming, and the whole point of it was to improve their standing in the job market. Some argued that they needed to go to college so they could get a high-paying job and thereby afford to pay off the loans that they took out in order to go to college in the first place. Their outlook was a closed circle; work was the means and end of college at every step.

The students were right to recognize both the high cost of attending college and the high wage premium accorded to college graduates. And they did have to put in considerable time and effort to do well. I don't begrudge their desire to earn a decent living. In twenty-first-century United States, college offers the clearest path toward financial security.

But, I would reply to students, if school is their job, then it's a pretty weird job. For one thing, the "worker" pays for the privilege to do it. For another, a professor, unlike a boss, can't "fire" a poor-performing student, only fail them. I wanted my students to put effort into their studies, but not because their "productivity" would earn me a promotion. If they didn't do their homework, I would certainly be disappointed, but it was ultimately their loss. And while students do learn economically productive skills, the college doesn't profit from their exercise.

Add up these disanalogies, and college doesn't seem like a job at all. It's something else. On the first page of *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, a book I inflicted on hundreds of King's College students, Josef Pieper points out that our word *school* comes from the Greek *skole*, meaning leisure.[1] Intellectual activity, including school, is for Pieper a space apart from the world of "total work" that otherwise dominates life in the industrial age. Because the intellect touches upon transcendent reality, it is not fully reducible to economic laws.

To say college isn't a job seems to diminish its importance. That's because total work has so constrained our moral imagination. In our culture, paid work is indisputably good. A good worker's value is not just economic, but ethical. And we reason from that belief to the principle that any human activity we want to call meritorious must be a type of work. So, we tell children from early grades that what they're doing is work, that school is their job. The lesson sticks.

To beat back burnout culture, we need to insist that paid employment is merely one among many worthy human activities and certainly not the worthiest. We need to see learning, raising children, being a spouse or friend, becoming physically and mentally healthy, developing spiritually before God, and finally dying as good not because they resemble jobs but on their own terms. Leisure might not be the right word for all these activities, but neither is work.

I am grateful for the attention the three critics paid to *The End of Burnout* and for their kind words about it. It is gratifying to see a sociologist, a theologian, and a psychologist find it readable, relevant, and provocative. Ending burnout culture will be a collaborative and sometimes conflicted effort, and I'm glad these readers are up for the task. At the same time, their critiques point to the difficulty of dislodging the total work mindset that contributes to burnout culture. All three readers, in one way or another, reproduce the assumptions about work's value I am trying to challenge.

For example, Erin Hatton contends that by asserting that parenting has a value irreducible to economics, I "reify the longstanding construction of women's unpaid domestic labor as inherently distinct from—and less valuable than—wage work." It's true, of course, that domestic labor has economic value; after all, some people hire nannies and housecleaners to do work that most parents, and most of them women, do without pay.

But I want to question the notion that economics is the best way to assert an activity's value. On this point, I follow not just Pieper but Kathi Weeks, author of *The Problem with Work*. On Weeks's view, arguments like Hatton's fail "to challenge the dominant legitimating discourse of work." If the industrial-era work ethic is part of an unjust political economy, as Weeks contends, then it is more important to change the system than to assert the economic value of women's unpaid labor within it. Weeks asks, then, "How might feminism contest the marginalization and underestimation of unwaged forms of reproductive labor, without trading on the work ethic's mythologies of work?"[2] Yes, in *The End of Burnout*, I equate "work" with paid employment. But I do so to isolate it and ultimately knock it from its moral perch.

Hatton is right, though, to point out a problem with what I say about my job as a parking lot attendant. It was a mistake to say the job did not offer dignity. As I argue elsewhere in the book, in a total work society, every job offers dignity construed as the right to "count," to claim full social citizenship. In fact, the problem in such a society is that having a job is the *only* way to "count."[3] And it's true that I was happy in the time I worked there in part because the job was temporary. What made it a good job, then, was partly subjective. But the point is, it *was* a good job in important ways, despite its low status. The pay was decent. The job didn't make total claims on my time or identity. When my shift ended, I could go about my life without being exhausted or warped. Few jobs at any income level allow workers that freedom. To honor workers' inherent human value, more jobs should.

Most burnout research focuses on highly educated workers in health care, education, or administration. That doesn't mean elite workers are the only ones who burn out, just that researchers need to expand the scope of their studies in order to understand the specific ways they do. Truck drivers, for instance, work under tremendous physical and mental stress, not to mention constant surveillance.[4] They are good candidates for burnout. Researchers have found that truckers who exhibit a feeling of inefficacy—one of the three dimensions of burnout—are more likely to intend to quit.[5] As Hatton suggests, workers' common susceptibility to burnout—what I call in the book their common status as "burnouts-in-the-making"—is grounds for greater solidarity.[6]

But not everyone is a worker, so we should also look for our common humanity in the more universal experience of leisure. (We should also think of leisure as a human right.) What does leisure look like, though? To Charles Pinches, it looks like the Sabbath. In his reflections, Pinches quotes a few sentences from the last page of *The End of Burnout* in which I speculate about how people might spend the free time they would gain in a possible post-work society. He claims that my vision of people playing tennis and staring at the sky with their kids "sounds more like self-indulgence than leisure, an endless weekend rather than the Sabbath."

This is a serious misreading. I described cloud-gazing as a shared, family activity. In addition, Pieper, whom Pinches draws upon to correct me, cites the contemplation of natural objects like a rose—"to open one's eyes receptively to whatever offers itself to one's vision"—as a paradigmatic example of leisure's effortlessness.[7] And Pinches skips over a sentence sandwiched in between the ones that mention tennis and contemplation: "Pray without ceasing."[8] Is prayer self-indulgent, too? A trivial "weekend" activity? This oversight illustrates how Pinches ignores major arguments that address his tendentious concerns.

For example, Pinches also claims that my book "gives little indication of how we might live *and work* in light of" an unconditional recognition of human dignity. But in two whole chapters, I profile communities, workplaces, and individuals who put dignity at the center of their lives and work. For the Benedictine monks of the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, that means laboring for three hours a day and then "getting over it" when the work remains undone, because communal prayer is more important. For the Dallas nonprofit CitySquare, it means publicly recognizing the contributions of coworkers and giving a struggling employee space to figure out the next phase of their career. Why don't these profiles count?

Pinches seems to question whether burnout even exists as a distinct condition. For him, acedia is the more important exhaustion disorder. But while acedia is a historical antecedent of burnout, and we can learn something about burnout culture from acedia's cultural rise and fall, the two problems are significantly different. Acedia cannot encompass burnout, because acedia is an internal state: a "bad thought" or "deadly sin" that causes the person to give up on spiritual goods. Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung writes that, for the monastic theologian John Cassian, the "physical inactivity or lack of effort" by someone in the grip of acedia "is *an effect or expression* of one's inner condition."[9] Burnout, by contrast, is not only internal; as I state ad nauseum in the book, it's about the relation between you and your job. By suggesting that burnout "reflects [acedia] on a new scale," Pinches overlooks the role that working conditions play in burnout. And if the true problem with work in the postindustrial U.S. is not burnout but the sin of acedia, then workers' inward suffering is ultimately their own fault. Employers are off the hook.

Pinches also fails to reckon with my critique of the total work mindset. Following DeYoung's analysis of acedia, Pinches calls accepting "who God made you to be…work, but good work that will transform us. This is the work acedia resists." But why call it work? Again, when you call every worthy activity work, you risk concluding that only difficult activity, or paid employment, is worthwhile. The gospels propose that work and worth have nothing to do with each other. Jesus' invitation is, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest…. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light" (Matt. 11:28, 30 New American Bible).

Jesus called his first disciples *away* from the work they were doing by the seashore, but that has not stopped Christians from viewing their secular labor as a calling. That vocation is the subject of Bryan Dik's research and, based on his reflections here, a matter of great personal concern for him. In his view, Max Weber's influential account of Christian vocation and the work ethic misunderstands Calvinist theology. That may be, but Weber

nevertheless got the moral psychology of the twentieth and twenty-first century worker exactly right. At its bottom is status anxiety. Because not only workers' livelihoods but their moral worth depends on being a "good worker," and because that status is so precarious, they labor often to the point of exhaustion to assure themselves of their status. Dik suggests this ethic is a form of idolatry; I call it demonic. Either way, there is something unholy about work in present-day capitalism.

To preserve a sense of vocation in the precarious world of postindustrial work, Dik proposes a "creative service narrative" as a replacement for the noble lie that drives burnout culture. I agree with Dik that work is often a site of social life and service. In fact, I have recently written about how the people you see at work are, for better or worse, a big component of your human community.[10] But as we have seen during the disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic, including the growth of remote work, the relation between work and social life is not fixed. Work is a default setting for social engagement in the U.S. partly because civic institutions have weakened. Working-age adults, especially men, who are out of a job often suffer low self-esteem and don't have great options to serve their communities.[11] With stronger institutions, we might be able to take some pressure off our workplaces to be our main site of social engagement.

Despite the creative service narrative's appeal, I don't think it will be enough to "redeem" work from burnout culture. The narrative only operates on one side of the chasm between our ideals for work and the reality of our jobs. The ideal of creative service might be better than the ideal of dignity, character, and purpose earned through work. But if working conditions don't improve accordingly, then service can become a form of martyrdom.

Many workers already bring ideals of service to their jobs but are burning out anyway. Think of the social workers and free-clinic staff fighting the "war on poverty," in whom burnout was first identified in the 1970s. Or think of nurses. Their professional ethic of service meant that they were prepared to travel from all over the U.S. to New York City in the early days of the pandemic. But even before the pandemic, burnout was "alarmingly prevalent among U.S. nurses," according to leading researchers.[12] The service ethic did not protect nurses en masse from burnout then, and it certainly did not during the pandemic. Now, many nurses are leaving the profession altogether.[13]

Employers across the economy have largely failed to meet the high ideals promised by the traditional work ethic with adequate conditions. Are they more likely meet an ideal of creative service? It seems likely that trading one lofty ideal for another, without improving the working conditions that make it possible for workers to live out that ideal, will leave burnout

culture in place. Even as workers demand greater material rewards from their employers, they need to expect fewer spiritual ones from work.

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[1] Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 19.

[2] Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 13.

[3] Jonathan Malesic, *The End of Burnout: Why Work Drains Us and How to Build Better Lives* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2022), 116–117.

[4] Robin Kaiser-Schatzlein, “How Life as a Trucker Devolved into a Dystopian Nightmare,” *The New York Times*, March 15, 2022, online at https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/15/opinion/truckers-surveillance.html; Benjamin H. Snyder, “Dignity and the Professionalized Body: Truck Driving in the Age of Instant Gratification,” *The Hedgehog Review* 14/3 (2012): 8–20.

[5] Stephanie P. Thomas, Sara Liao-Troth, and Donnie F. Williams, “Inefficacy: The Tipping Point of Driver Burnout,” *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management* 50/4 (January 1, 2020): 483–501.

[6] Malesic, *The End of Burnout*, 15.

[7] Pieper, *Leisure*, 26.

[8] Malesic, *The End of Burnout*, 230.

[9] Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 84.

[10] Jonathan Malesic, “What It Would Take to Make Us Love Our Jobs Again,” *Vox*, April 11, 2022, online at https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/22977672/future-of-work-good-jobs-career.

[11] Allison J. Pugh, “What Does It Mean to Be a Man in the Age of Austerity?” *Aeon*, December 4, 2015, online at https://aeon.co/essays/what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-man-in-the-age-of-austerity.

[12] Liselotte N. Dyrbye et al., “A Cross-Sectional Study Exploring the Relationship between Burnout, Absenteeism, and Job Performance among American Nurses,” *BMC Nursing* 18/1 (November 21, 2019): 57.

[13] Theresa Brown, “Covid-19 Is ‘Probably Going to End My Career,’” *New York Times*, February 25, 2021, online at https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/25/opinion/nursing-crisis-coronavirus.html.