

Working for Dignity

BY JOEL SCHWARTZ

A job's goodness is not measured by salary, benefits, and 'intellectual' rather than manual labor, but by how well it preserves the dignity of workers and contributes to their fulfillment. This standard lends value to some jobs, particularly involving manual labor, that many disdain.

When my students discuss the goals of their college education, they often say they are preparing for a “good job,” and for many of them, the goodness of the job depends almost entirely on a high salary, generous benefits, and how much of it involves “intellectual” rather than manual labor. But do such things as compensation and type of work really make a job “good,” or is there more to consider?

Another way of evaluating the goodness of work is to ask how well it preserves the dignity of the worker. This shifts the focus to the person doing the job and to how performing the work fulfills the worker as a person. It is the approach adopted by Pope John Paul II in the encyclical *Laborem Exercens / On Human Work* (1981).¹ I will follow his lead in this essay and explore what is involved in respecting human fulfillment through work. The answer, as we shall see, can lend value to some jobs that many people today (like my students) do not consider to be good and dignifying of the worker, particularly some jobs involving manual labor.

Laborem Exercens begins with some clarifying definitions. Given that “the primary basis of the value of work is man himself,” discussions about whether a certain sort of work is dignifying must focus on the human person and how that work contributes to dignifying the person. A person is defined as “a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency to self-realization” (§ 6). Of course, not all work is dignifying; it is sometimes toilsome, injurious, and in some circumstances, even unjust (§ 1). It is tempting to identify bad

work simply with the kind that produces significant toil and suffering, but John Paul II redirects our attention to the potential of work to diminish the human person. In other words, the negative effects of work are not only physical, but may be spiritual in their harm.

While it is not always appropriate to read content from pre-papal writings onto papal encyclicals, it is worth noting that Karol Wojtyla, before he became Pope John Paul II in 1978, often wrote about the dignity of the human person. He believed that human dignity is not simply a static reality (a property or status that the person possesses), but also a teleological calling on the individual (a goal for the person to understand, embrace, and grow toward).² This has an important implication for how we treat ourselves and others: to respect persons' dignity does not mean that we permit them to act as they desire because they possess a special property of dignity; rather, treating them with dignity includes encouraging and assisting them to develop into the fullness of their humanity, which they may or may not fully grasp for themselves. On this view it makes sense for an activity to "dignify" persons by enabling them to become more fully human. We should see this distinctive understanding of human dignity, which is explicit in the Pope's pre-papal writings, as undergirding the arguments and claims of *Laborem Exercens*.

Jobs that diminish rather than dignify workers, then, are not limited to those that treat people in (what is typically agreed to be) sub-human ways, but include those that prevent, distract, or disorient people from pursuing the *telos* of becoming fully human.³ (For simplicity, I shall refer to work as "undignifying" if it either treats persons in sub-human ways, or simply prevents, distracts, or disorients them from recognizing, embracing, and pursuing their *telos*.) Of course, a complete discussion of undignifying work must identify and condemn sub-human treatment that occurs in the workplace. Such conversations are of first importance, because arguably we must acknowledge and, if possible, resolve those circumstances that ignore human dignity before we can really consider the many other situations that inhibit the fulfillment of people's humanity. However, if we do not continue on to such teleological conversations, we will miss a significant factor in explaining why people are dissatisfied with their work and why they discredit jobs as "beneath them."

HOW WORK CAN FAIL TO DIGNIFY A WORKER

Where do things go wrong with regard to work, whether it involve largely intellectual or manual labor?⁴ The first way is in the objectification of the worker, which occurs when the worker is seen as valuable primarily as an object of use as opposed to a person. The worker can be seen as a cog in the machine, replaceable with another cog, not offering anything significant, and not requiring any special consideration apart from the fact that the worker's role must be filled for the machine to work. One might think that manual labor is especially exploitable in this way, as typically little to no

specialized education is necessary to hold those jobs; white-collar jobs, on the other hand, often require some kind of education that may make it more difficult to replace the worker. However, this does not prevent these white-collar jobs from being equally exploitive of the dignity of workers.⁵ Indeed, some white-collar workers exploit themselves, offering themselves as a commodity for sale, willing to do whatever the job requires for the right price. Regardless of whether the job requires intellectual or manual labor, it can treat the person as a means of production rather than the subject of work (*Laborem Exercens*, § 7).

A second way in which work can diminish workers involves their perception of their labor. Dignifying (or undignifying) work cannot be reduced to the quantity of *external* goods like pay, working conditions, and benefits the worker receives from the employer. Certainly, such factors play a significant role, for without external goods, work cannot dignify workers. However, there are also *internal* goods of realizing and appreciating that one's work is dignifying. To lack this experience of joy in their work may be just as detrimental to the dignity of workers.

We enjoy the internal goods of working when we are being dignified by our work and we appreciate this. The lack of these goods can take two important forms: first, we may mistakenly think that we are being dignified in our work, but the actual goods are contrary to this experience; or second, we may think that we are not being dignified in our work, even though we have all the goods necessary in order to be dignified in work. In the first situation, there is a dual failure: the work is actually contrary to the fulfillment of our humanity, and furthermore we fail to recognize it as such. In the second situation, there is a single failure in our perception to understand what we require for fulfillment. In both situations the problem lies ultimately in our distorted perceptions, but our culture (or even our employer) often plays a significant role in shaping those misperceptions.

While workers in many jobs lack the internal goods of working in one or both ways, I want to look at how manual laborers might fail to enjoy their work. This will help us understand how manual labor can be dignifying and what must be done to ensure that it is dignifying for workers.

Though it is not the norm, some workers may be subject to undignifying work, but due to personal lassitude or the extreme limitations of their circum-

Jobs that diminish workers are not limited to those that treat people in sub-human ways, but include those that prevent, distract, or disorient people from pursuing the *telos* of becoming fully human.

stances (for example, they desperately need the money or benefits, there are limited or forced options about where to work, and so on), they do not make a change in their work; rather they attempt to make the most of it, to see the good in it, and to enjoy the work they do. These workers may even convince themselves that the work is not contrary to their dignity, despite being undercompensated, involving avoidable risk to their bodies, being treated in a demeaning way, and so on. They may even think they have a wonderful job, find meaning in it, and take pleasure in the work they do.⁶ What started as a conscious strategy to cope with their bad job may evolve into a genuine but mistaken belief that their job is dignifying.

As an aside, it is worth noting an important distinction between a job being dignifying and a job having true meaning or purpose in one's life. Workers sometimes can find meaning or purpose in undignifying work. It may be like other forms of suffering that have meaning in one's life while being an undignifying experience. Indeed, being able to draw purpose from suffering that one cannot avoid, or that is a necessary means to achieving an important good, is a noble endeavor. In finding true purpose in undignifying work, workers are fighting against the undignifying nature of their work while still recognizing that the work is contrary to their fulfillment as human beings. While some may argue that workers should always leave undignifying jobs, the reality of their situations may not permit them to leave a job because they need the income for a good reason, or cannot find or do another job. This does not mean they should resign themselves to being undignified in their job, but that they should look for ways to help the work be more dignifying for themselves and their coworkers with whatever influence they have, even if the work remains ultimately undignifying.

In the first situation described above, when workers delude themselves about being dignified in their work, they are at fault for believing the job to be dignifying when it is not. Their employers, however, are more at fault for creating or allowing a work environment that is contrary to the dignity of the workers. In permitting such an environment to exist, one could argue the employers are doing their own work in an undignifying way, acting contrary to the fulfillment of their own humanity. Theirs is likely to be an even greater failure of moral vision than in the workers, because they are either failing to perceive the dignity of their workers as human persons or failing to recognize why the environment in which they toil is undignifying. Given the role that recognizing and promoting the common good plays in fulfilling one's own humanity, employers who act contrary to the good of their workers are also working against their own good, whether they realize it or not.

In the second situation mentioned above, the workers have all the goods necessary for their own fulfillment, yet they do not enjoy that experience because they fail to understand what they require for fulfillment. For example, while working at a job that requires hard physical work, they might mistak-

only think this is undignified. Even though they are fairly compensated for both the work and the toll it takes on their bodies, they may be dissatisfied with their manual labor and convinced they should be doing a white-collar job instead. They perceive their job as “beneath them,” perhaps because they have internalized society’s general disdain for manual labor or their employers’ low opinion of the particular job, even though the employers provide the support necessary for it to be fulfilling. Because they perceive the value of their work to be minimal, they long for something more than what they have, believing that a different job, greater compensation, improved benefits, and so on, will provide the dignity they lack. Yet, this might not provide the joy they seek, and may only feed their misperceptions of their work. They do not appreciate how their work contributes to their own well-being as persons and to their society’s survival and flourishing.

In *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul II provides a concrete illustration of this second sort of situation with regard to the treatment and respect of those who work in agriculture for a living (§ 21).⁷ Farming is not easy; it is physically demanding and, in certain seasons, requires constant effort and attention. Of course, the importance of agriculture for the survival and flourishing of society cannot be overstated, as through it the world’s people are fed. Yet society tends to look down on those who do agricultural work, inadvertently encouraging those in the profession to look for ways to escape it and find work that is more respected. When farmers leave their land, there is often set in motion a dehumanizing process: the absentee landowners who gain control of the agriculture tend to be more disconnected from the farm laborers and thus less concerned with properly dignifying the laborers’ work. The landowners are more likely to believe farm laborers are replaceable units with minimal impact in productivity, and there is little profit to be made by giving them opportunities for development in their jobs and as human beings. “In many situations,” John Paul II concludes, “radical and urgent changes are...needed in order to restore to agriculture – and to rural people – their just value *as the basis for a healthy economy*, within the social community’s development as a whole” (§ 21).

We can generalize from John Paul II’s discussion of the problematic results of society misperceiving the value of agricultural labor. First, whenever society fails to recognize the value of a profession, the treatment of workers in that field can become dehumanizing. Furthermore, this can inadvertently encourage workers to leave the profession, undermine the work done within the profession, and thereby hurt not just those workers but all the people who depend on the work they do. Mike Rowe sheds light on these phenomena in his television shows *Dirty Jobs* and *Somebody’s Gotta Do It*.⁸ As he explores (and participates in) the jobs society disdains but desperately requires, he reveals why those jobs must be done and the hard work that goes into them. Hopefully, this instills in his audience both a greater understanding of these jobs and gratitude toward the workers who do them.

Rowe has taken the next step by creating a foundation that encourages people to go into skilled manual labor fields that lack the workers necessary to keep up with demand.⁹

Just as society's undervaluing of a profession can have these deleterious effects, in a similar fashion so can workers' personal, unjustified disdain for

Employers should remember that work is for the worker, not the worker for work, and then treat themselves (for they are workers, too) and their employees by this standard.

their work. The undervaluing of one's own job can lead to severe dissatisfaction that spills over into other parts of one's life, hurting not just oneself but one's coworkers, family members, and friends. Often the misperception may be traced to a lack of tangible evidence of constructive accomplishments from one's labor, which can lead to self-

doubt. Of course, this lack of tangible, valuable results afflicts all sorts of work, and may even be most prominent in white-collar jobs within impersonal organizations. No one is immune from the dangers of undervaluing their work.

HOW WE CAN MAKE WORK MORE DIGNIFYING

The "radical and urgent changes" required to make jobs more dignifying for workers must occur at the three levels of society, employers, and employees. There is interaction among these levels, but for clarity I will treat them separately.

First, society should properly value the goods that various forms of work bring about for the society and for the workers. While certain jobs, such as road maintenance and trash collection among others, may not require as much skill or encourage as much personal growth in workers as other jobs, they produce significant goods for society, and for this reason they command appropriate appreciation for those who do them. This appreciation may take many forms, such as an attitude of respect, better working conditions, and greater compensation for those workers.

Employers should remember that work is for the worker, not the worker for work, and then treat themselves (for they are workers, too) and their employees by this standard. Employers should recognize the value of their employees, and show their appreciation by providing fitting benefits and working environment. They should encourage workers to develop knowledge, work skills, and leadership that make them more valuable and less replaceable in the workplace. Their actions should be guided by the fact that the worker is a subject and work is also for the well-being of the worker.

Workers can help themselves by fully appreciating the goods for society, their employers, and themselves that they are accomplishing through work.

Most importantly, they can attend to how their work is helping to bring about the fulfillment of their humanity. Even when their employers and society present the opposite view, workers need to recognize the good that their work brings about and value their role in producing it. If workers fail to do this, they will not be dignified in their work, regardless of what others do on their behalf.

NOTES

1 Pope John Paul II, *On Human Work: Laborem Exercens* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 1981). This encyclical is available online in English translation at w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html (accessed June 1, 2015). Further references to sections of this encyclical will be in the text.

2 Karol Wojtyła, “The Dignity of the Human Person,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1993), 179.

3 The *telos*, or proper end, of a human being can be understood rather broadly here; it need not be a specific, pre-determined set of behaviors. Wojtyła argues for self-determination as an important part of one’s *telos*. By this he means not merely the modern (and largely negative) conception of autonomy (as having free choices), but the intentional direction of oneself toward one’s *telos*. This self-direction requires one to recognize one’s *telos*, which may be instantiated in multiple ways, depending on the situations and opportunities in one’s life. One’s teleology is about one becoming a kind of person rather than doing specific actions.

4 John Paul II often refers to work generally, noting that the following discussions apply to both intellectual and manual labor. See *Laborem Exercens*, §§ 1, 14, 17, 24, and 27. I shall follow his lead and use “work” to refer to both dimensions of labor.

5 The movie *Office Space* offers a humorous, too-true-to-life take on the dehumanizing life of a cubicle worker. Mike Judge, director, *Office Space* (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1999).

6 Examples of this situation range all the way from the “happy” slave to those abused office workers, demeaned sex workers, and endangered laborers who have convinced themselves they are happy.

7 The rest of the paragraph draws from this section of the encyclical.

8 *Dirty Jobs* aired on Discovery Channel from 2003 to 2012. *Somebody’s Gotta Do It* began on CNN in 2014.

9 For more information about mikeroweWORKS Foundation and its scholarship program “for qualified individuals who are interested in learning a skill and mastering a trade,” see www.profoundlydisconnected.com (accessed June 1, 2015).



JOEL SCHWARTZ

is Visiting Professor of Philosophy at Bethel College in Mishawaka, Indiana.