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What Work Is Really For

By **Gary Gutting** September 8, 2012 3:00 pm

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Is work good or bad? A fatuous question, it may seem, with unemployment such a pressing national concern. (Apart from the names of the two candidates, “jobs” was the politically relevant word most used by speakers at the Republican and Democratic conventions.) Even apart from current worries, the goodness of work is deep in our culture. We applaud people for their work ethic, judge our economy by its productivity and even honor work with a national holiday.

But there’s an underlying ambivalence: we celebrate Labor Day by not working, the Book of Genesis says work is punishment for Adam’s sin, and many of us count the days to the next vacation and see a contented retirement as the only reason for working.

We’re ambivalent about work because in our capitalist system it means work-for-pay (wage-labor), not for its own sake. It is what philosophers call an instrumental good, something valuable not in itself but for what we can use it to achieve. For most of us, a paying job is still utterly essential — as masses of unemployed people know all too well. But in our economic system, most of us inevitably see our work as a means to something else: it makes a living, but it doesn’t make a life.

What, then, is work for? Aristotle has a striking answer: “we work to have leisure, on

which happiness depends.” This may at first seem absurd. How can we be happy just doing nothing, however sweetly (*dolce far niente*)? Doesn’t idleness lead to boredom, the life-destroying ennui portrayed in so many novels, at least since “Madame Bovary”?

Everything depends on how we understand leisure. Is it mere idleness, simply doing nothing? Then a life of leisure is at best boring (a lesson of Voltaire’s “Candide”), and at worst terrifying (leaving us, as Pascal says, with nothing to distract from the thought of death). No, the leisure Aristotle has in mind is *productive activity enjoyed for its own sake*, while work is done for something else.

We can pass by for now the question of just what activities are truly enjoyable for their own sake — perhaps eating and drinking, sports, love, adventure, art, contemplation? The point is that engaging in such activities — and sharing them with others — is what makes a good life. Leisure, not work, should be our primary goal.

Bertrand Russell, in his classic essay “In Praise of Idleness,” agrees. “A great deal of harm,” he says, “is being done in the modern world by belief in the virtuousness of work.” Instead, “the road to happiness and prosperity lies in an organized diminution of work.” Before the technological breakthroughs of the last two centuries, leisure could be only “the prerogative of small privileged classes,” supported by slave labor or a near equivalent. But this is no longer necessary: “The morality of work is the morality of slaves, and the modern world has no need of slavery.”

Using Adam Smith’s famous example of pins, Russell makes the solution seem utterly simple:

Suppose that, at a given moment, a certain number of people are engaged in the manufacture of pins. They make as many pins as the world needs, working (say) eight hours a day. Someone makes an invention by which the same number of men can make twice as many pins: pins are already so cheap that hardly any more will be bought at a lower price. In a sensible world, everybody concerned in the manufacturing of pins would

take to working four hours instead of eight, and everything else would go on as before.

We are, Russell thinks, kept from a world of leisure only by a perversely lingering prejudice in favor of work for its own sake.

But isn't Russell making an obvious mistake? He assumes that the only reason to continue working eight hours a day would be to make more pins, which we don't need. In modern capitalism, however, the idea would be to make better pins (or perhaps something even better than pins), in that way improving the quality of our lives. Suppose that in 1932, when Russell wrote his essay, we had followed his advice and converted all gains in productivity into increased leisure. Antibiotics, jet airplanes and digital computers, then just glimmers on the horizon, would likely never have become integral parts of our lives. We can argue about just what constitutes real progress, but it's clear that Russell's simple proposal would sometimes mean trading quality of life for more leisure.

But capitalism as such is not interested in quality of life. It is essentially a system for producing things to sell at a profit, the greater the better. If products sell because they improve the quality of our life, well and good, but it doesn't in the end matter why they sell. The system works at least as well if a product sells not because it is a genuine contribution to human well-being but because people are falsely persuaded that they should have it. Often, in fact, it's easier to persuade people to buy something that's inferior than it is to make something that's superior. This is why stores are filled with products that cater to fads and insecurities but no real human need.

It would seem, then, that we should increase leisure — and make life more worthwhile — by producing only what makes for better lives. In turn, workers would have the satisfaction of producing things of real value. (For a recent informed and vigorous defense of this view, see Robert and Edward Skidelsky, *How Much Is Enough?*)

But this raises the essential question: who decides what is of real value? The capitalist system's own answer is *consumers*, free to buy whatever they want in an

open market. I call this capitalism's own answer because it is the one that keeps the system operating autonomously, a law unto itself. It especially appeals to owners, managers and others with a vested interest in the system.

But the answer is disingenuous. From our infancy the market itself has worked to make us consumers, primed to buy whatever it is selling regardless of its relevance to human flourishing. True freedom requires that we take part in the market as fully formed agents, with life goals determined not by advertising campaigns but by our own experience of and reflection on the various possibilities of human fulfillment. Such freedom in turn requires a liberating education, one centered not on indoctrination, social conditioning or technical training but on developing persons capable of informed and intelligent commitments to the values that guide their lives.

This is why, especially in our capitalist society, education must not be primarily for training workers or consumers (both tools of capitalism, as Marxists might say). Rather, schools should aim to produce self-determining agents who can see through the blandishments of the market and insist that the market provide what they themselves have decided they need to lead fulfilling lives. Capitalism, with its devotion to profit, is not in itself evil. But it becomes evil when it controls our choices for the sake of profit.

Capitalism works for the good only when our independent choices determine what the market must produce to make a profit. These choices — of liberally educated free agents — will set the standards of capitalist production and lead to a world in which, as Aristotle said, work is for the sake of leisure. We are, unfortunately, far from this ideal, but it is one worth working toward.

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