

How Ethical is the Work 'Ethic': reconsidering work and 'leisure time'

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Did you ever wonder why your parents act so disoriented when it comes to ‘leisure’ activities? Why they start one little hobby, and either fail to follow through with it or become pathologically obsessed with it... even though it doesn’t seem to have anything to do with their lives? Maybe they seek to lose themselves in gardening or following the exploits of some basketball team. Maybe your father buys all sorts of fancy tools (the kind of tools many men his age have), but only uses them for a few days before setting them aside — and then buys a lot of skiing equipment the next month. Or perhaps they just spend their time trying figure out how to pay off the debt they owe for that wide screen television they spend the rest of their time watching.

And — have they ever been honest with you about their jobs? Do they enjoy them? Is their work the most fulfilling thing they could be doing, are they able to achieve every goal they always wanted to? Do they feel heroic or proud every day as they return home — or are they exhausted? Do they turn that wide screen television on as soon as they come in the door? Do they have the energy to do anything else?

Did you ever wonder if there might be a better way for them, for you?

What is ‘Work’ Like?

Because of ‘division of labor’, most jobs today consist of doing very specific tasks, over and over, with very little variety. If you are a dishwasher, you wash dishes: you don’t get to interact with people or solve complicated problems very often, and you never get to leave the dishroom to run around in the sunlight. If you are a real estate agent, you never use your hands to make anything, and you spend most of your time thinking about market value and selling points. Even jobs that include a certain amount of variety can only remain interesting and challenging up to a point: for we work forty hours a week on average, and at least five out of the seven days. That’s a lot of our lives to spend working. Work is the first thing we do on most of the days of our lives, and we don’t get to do anything else until we’ve been at work for quite a while. When we spend most of our time and energy working on one task, or even ten different tasks, eventually we will feel bored and desperate for variety... even if we are conditioned not to realize this.

On top of this, because of the spread of large businesses and the consequent decrease in self-employment and small businesses, most of us do not have much voice in what our responsibilities at work will be. It is hard to start your own business or even find a friend or neighbor to work for. We often must get a job to survive in which we follow the instructions of a manager who probably doesn’t have much more control over his job than we have over ours. Since we don’t get to decide what we are doing, chances are that we will feel alienated from our work, disinterested in the quality of our labor; we may even feel that the projects we are working upon are unimportant.

Indeed it is easy to feel that most of the jobs available today are unimportant — for in a certain sense, many of them are. In a purely capitalist economy, the jobs that are available will be determined by which products are in the most demand; and often the products that are in demand (military technology, fast food, Pepsi, fashionable clothes) are not products that really make people happy. It’s easy to feel like all your labor is wasted when the products you work so hard to sell just to survive seem to do nothing for the people you sell them to. How many people really are cheered up by the soggy french fries at McDonalds? Would they perhaps be happier eating a meal prepared by a friend of theirs or a chef they knew who owned his own cafe?

In short, “work” as we know it tends to make us unhappy because we do so much of it, because it is so repetitive, because we don’t get to choose what we do, and because what we are doing is often not in the best interest of our fellow human beings.

What is Leisure Time Like?

We come home from these jobs exhausted from having invested all our time and energy in a project we may not have even been free to choose, and what we need most is to recover. We are emotionally and physically worn out, and nothing seems more natural than to sit down quietly for a while and watch television or read the daily paper, while we try to gather our strength for the next day’s labor. Perhaps we try to leave behind our exhaustion and frustration by concentrating on some hobby or another; but as we are not very used to directing ourselves in the workplace during the day, we often don’t know what we really want to do when we are free at home. Certainly some company or another will have some suggestions for us, whether we receive them from advertising or watching our neighbors; but chances are that this company has their profits in mind at least as much as our satisfaction, and we may discover that playing miniature golf is strangely unfulfilling.

Similarly, of course, we don’t have much time or energy left over from work to consider our situation or participate in any rewarding activity which requires much time and energy. We don’t like to think too much about whether we enjoy our jobs or our lives — besides, that might be depressing, and what can we do if we don’t enjoy them, anyway? We don’t have the energy left to enjoy art or music or books that are really challenging; we need our music to be soothing, our art nonthreatening, our books merely entertaining.

In fact, we come to associate having to expend effort and do things with our work, and associate relaxing and not doing anything with leisure time. So, because many of us don’t like our jobs, we tend to associate having to do things with being unhappy, while happiness, as far as we ever know it, means... not doing anything. We never act for ourselves, because we spend our whole days acting for other people, and we think that acting and working hard always leads to unhappiness; our idea of happiness is not having to act, being on permanent vacation.

And this is ultimately why so many of us are so unhappy: because happiness is not doing nothing, happiness is acting creatively, doing things, working hard on things you care about. Happiness is becoming an excellent long-distance runner, falling in love, cooking an original recipe for people you care about, building a bookshelf, writing a song. There is no happiness to be found in merely lying on a couch — happiness is something that we must pursue. We are not unhappy because we have to do things, we are unhappy because all the things we do are things we don’t care about. And because our jobs exhaust us and mislead us about what we want, they are the source of much of our unhappiness.

What is the Solution?

You don’t have to work at those jobs, you know. It is possible to get by without all the Pepsi, all the expensive clothes, the wide screen television and the expensive interior decorating that all those paychecks go to pay for. You can try to start your own business doing something you care about (although this still involves the danger of having too little variety in your work), or

you can try to find a job in today's marketplace (good luck!) that you actually enjoy... and that leaves you enough time and energy to do other things in your life that you also enjoy. The most important thing is to arrange your life so that you are doing things because you want to do them, not because they are profitable — otherwise, no matter how much money you make, you will be selling your happiness for money. Remember that the less money you spend, the less you will have to worry about getting money in the first place... and the less you will have to work at those dehumanizing jobs. Learn to use all your 'free' time, not to vegetate or spend money on entertainment, but to create things and accomplish things — things that no one would pay you to make or do, but that make your life (and perhaps the lives of others) better anyway.

Some will argue that the system we live within would break down if we all were to walk away from our jobs — so much the better. Haven't we built enough automobiles, enough shopping malls, enough televisions and golf clubs, enough fucking nuclear weapons already? Wouldn't we all be better off if there was a shortage of fast food and a surplus of unique home-cooked meals? If playing music is more rewarding than working in an assembly line, why do we have so few good bands and so many transistor radios? Of course a 'work-free' world is a dream we will probably never see come true; but as always, the challenge is to make this dream a part of your world, as much as you can — to liberate yourself from the chains of mindless consumerism and mind-melting employment and live a more meaningful life.

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