Harvey Goldman

Good work, from Homer to the present

Work has long been understood as an ethical practice within a more comprehensive moral economy. Yet students of the modern professions have often ignored the ethical aspects of work. One can therefore only applaud contemporary reform efforts like the GoodWork Project that attempt to understand the specific moral economy of the professions. Effective projects for the reform of work have generally needed to acknowledge not only professionals' ideologies and practices, but also the social institutions and forces that inform them. Only in this way have reformers been able to determine the genuine nature of the problems that undermine good work.

In modern times especially, the challenge of work goes deeper than the moral formation of single individuals. As Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber well understood, we moderns live in a social climate that increasingly and systematically takes control over the conditions of meaningful and responsible work from those who work – even within the professions. One implication of their theories is clear: unless the social climate is transformed, merely exhorting students in professional schools to 'do good' is not likely to produce truly good work.

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Advice on how to do good work has been part of Western culture since at least Hesiod's *Works and Days*. The Greek notion of 'excellence' – *areté* from Ares, the Greek god of war – dates back to Homer and an era when aristocrats, the *aristoi*, or 'best,' assumed that they alone were excellent in the profession that mattered most, that of arms. On the basis of its martial virtue, the Homeric aristocracy justified its superiority to itself and to the common people whose labor sustained its power and wealth.

Aristocratic power and self-conceptions did not go unchallenged, however, as economic growth and technological developments enabled the lower classes to assume an ever-more important role in the waging of war and the defense of society. During struggles over the arbitrariness of aristocratic rule in

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the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., another ethical conception emerged among the Greeks, associated with *diké*, or justice. The new ideal introduced a conception of responsibility that went far beyond the tribal loyalty at issue in Homeric *areté*. *Diké* became a social rallying cry, changing the relations between the traditional ruling classes and those they administered.

Yet, despite the tradition that put justice ahead of all other ethical excellences, Greek conceptions of the ethically good persisted. As an ethical achievement, such goodness remained possible only outside the sphere of ordinary work, that is, possible only for those who did not have to work for a living, but were, rather, nurtured in the sphere of privileged leisure. No idea of excellence or of a higher good attached to other kinds of work could emerge.[1]

In the fifth century, Plato famously took up in a number of his dialogues the question of ethics and the proper role of craftsmen and workers. Plato stressed repeatedly the value of professional expertise for gymnastic instructors, navigators, physicians, and other workers, and it was this model that guided the training of rulers for the city he imagined in the *Republic*. At the same time, in keeping with the spirit of Socrates, who was called by the oracle at Delphi to query his fellow citizens in a search to find a wiser man than himself, Plato cast his philosopher-kings as the first professional elite to justify their rule over others on the basis of their wisdom and moral excellence. Drawn out of the cave of common opinion and toward the light of true knowledge, Plato's philosopher-king is compelled to return to that cave in order to provide his fellow citizens with the expert guidance and wisdom they need. Thus, the philosopher-king's calling links the acquisition of expert knowledge with a moral responsibility to apply this knowledge justly and without regard to personal gain.

But the disparagement of most forms of work was not confined to the Greco-Roman world: the Hebrew Bible makes work part of Adam and Eve's punishment for their disobedience of God's restrictions in the Garden. Further, the Hebrews never thought of work as a calling through which excellence or any other high concern could be pursued.

The work that mattered most to the ancient Hebrews was religious observance. Yet interestingly, even though the Hebrews had an established priesthood, a sacred book, complex ritual practices, and, later, a rabbinate, they did not associate most forms of religious work with any sacred call, despite the enormous cultural significance of religious professionals among them. Only the biblical prophets identified such a call – and God's call to them was a narrowly religious mandate to the very specific social and political task of bringing the Hebrew people back to the path marked out by their covenant with Him.

Thus, whether as a product of aristocratic supremacy or philosophical vision, or as a consequence of a particular form of monotheism, ideas of work in the ancient world were subject to social and religious forces that tended to deny any deeper meaning or ethical value to most forms of worldly work.

The early Christian fathers, from Paul to Augustine, inaugurated a change in attitude toward labor in the West, counseling believers to perform their worldly work obediently within the orders that God had established; but the religious

1 Claude Mossé, *The Ancient World at Work*, trans. Janet Lloyd (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969).

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work of Church leaders was conceived as the highest form of work – the only *vocatio*, or calling.

The concept of a calling in anything like its modern sense dates back to the early-sixteenth-century intellectuals of the Renaissance and Reformation, to Ficino, Petrarch, and Erasmus.[2] Erasmus defended the choice of one's own way of life (*genus vitae*) based on one's true nature and abilities, reflecting the humanist belief that society and history were made by human labor. Yet it was a reaction to both the practices of the Church and the ideals of the Renaissance that produced the first recognizably modern approach to thinking about what constitutes truly good work.

The key figure was Martin Luther. He recast each form of worldly work as a task uniquely commanded by God. Luther's conception turned every form of worldly work into a *vocatio*.[3] In Luther's view, God called the individual to pursue a specific line of work, and the believer's obligation was to fulfill that calling, whatever its demands, and to do so in a spirit of obedience to all earthly authorities, as well as to God. What mattered about doing one's work was the faith in God it demonstrated. Indeed, there were two kinds of calling: an 'inner' religious call to salvation and an 'outer' worldly call to pursue a specific vocation. Max Weber thought the linking of these two callings was Luther's greatest innovation – "the valuation of fulfillment of duty within the worldly callings as the highest content that the ethical activity of the self could generally receive."[4]

In many ways, of course, Luther's conception remained traditional – Luther's God was interested in obedience, not in achievement. Nor was there any question of personal autonomy or of personal satisfaction, but rather a feeling of gratification in God's employ.

Later, Calvinism's idea of predestination and the elimination of the traditional Catholic means for dispelling the feeling of sin led believers to seek a sense of certainty about the call to salvation, even though they could do nothing either to win grace or to lose it once it was given. Since success in a calling was thought to be bestowed only on someone who was an agent of godly purposes, the successful individual was entitled to think of himself as being in a state of grace.

Still, by the seventeenth century, discussions of calling in the Protestant West described it more and more in terms of the profit and advantage of individuals, and less and less in terms of God's plan. Increasingly the issue of one's personal calling in the world received more attention than one's general call to salvation. Rapid economic change and growing class conflict in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries further undermined conceptions of work as a sacred calling that entailed a sense of responsibility to the good of society as a whole. It was primarily in learned professions like law and medicine that the concept of work as a special

2 See Richard Douglas, "Talent and Vocation in Humanist and Protestant Thought," in Theodore K. Rabb and Jerrold Seigel, eds., *Action and Conviction in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Memory of E. H. Harbison* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 261 – 298.

3 Klara Vontobel, *Das Arbeitsethos des deutschen Protestantismus, von der nachreformatorischen Zeit bus zur Aufklärung* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1946), 4.

4 Max Weber, "Die Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1920), 69. See also Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, vol. 2, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Allen & Unwin, 1931), 561 – 569.

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kind of ethical calling survived. In most other lines of work, material concerns increasingly displaced the spiritual orientation implicit in treating work as a calling.

An awareness of the potential costs of untrammeled economic growth led Hegel to argue that the ethical narrowness of even the highest forms of work in modern market societies could never be resolved by the market itself; that narrowness could only be overcome by integrating workers within a commonwealth under the rule of law, in order to transcend class divisions and foster an ethics of solidarity.

Marx, of course, rejected the idea that the rule of law could do any such thing. In his earlier writings, he saw labor as the key to the fulfillment of humankind's needs, and argued that putting an end to production based on the exploitation of wage labor would make possible a new meaning for work. In a truly just society, production would be organized by workers themselves and based on need. In this manner, social ideals would give new meaning and gratification to work.

Beyond that, Marx hoped that the eventual expansion of production would eliminate the most burdensome forms of work that had dominated most of humankind throughout its history. This would make possible for all humankind the highest kinds of activities – from sport, to self-fashioning, to art – that had traditionally been undertaken as ends in themselves, and in which only the privileged had historically been able to engage. Contrary perhaps to his earlier idealization of labor, Marx now believed that ultimate human development and gratification were to be found in forms of self-development rather than through any calling as normally understood.

Interestingly, something similar emerged from more conservative intellectuals like Nietzsche. His hopes for society also concerned the activities and forms of self-assertion that only aristocrats had traditionally been able to undertake. But unable to imagine that such self-assertion was possible for anybody besides the elite, Nietzsche opposed socialism and even equality, proposing constraint, if not slavery, for the working masses. Nietzsche's views were partly a reaction against the challenge that the advent of mass education – introduced to accommodate the new demands of the modern economy and state – posed to classical ideals of self-development. For Nietzsche, there could be no resolution of the conflict between traditional education and professional or technical education. Ultimately, the primary difference between Marx's and Nietzsche's conceptions of self-development beyond work concerned whether that undertaking could be pursued by all or only by a small elite.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the French Republican intellectual Émile Durkheim proposed an ethical reform of work that would strengthen the solidarity and sense of social responsibility that market societies tended to undermine. To Durkheim, Marx had been mistaken in his long-term prognosis: work was not condemned to be a meaningless mastery of technical tasks, but held out the hope of fusing individual meaning and social well-being, excellence and ethics. Individuals were ennobled by their callings, as long as they could grasp the structure and imperatives of their roles and of their contribution to the social whole. Durkheim hoped to see technical interdependence strengthened even more through the division of labor, and to see an educational campaign that

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would teach individuals about their functions in the larger social whole. In this vision of the future, everyone would become a professional with both excellence and ethics as guiding values.

At the same time, Durkheim argued that specialized vocations required giving up the older hope of self-realization cultivated by liberal education. He argued that "In higher societies, our duty is not to spread our activity over a large surface, but to . . . contract our horizon, choose a definite task and immerse ourselves in it completely, instead of trying to make ourselves a sort of creative masterpiece, quite complete, which contains its worth in itself and not in the services that it renders." But Durkheim also argued that inequalities in society that were the result of the arbitrary factors of birth or wealth, rather than of natural differences and abilities, had to be eliminated if society's rules were to be just, and "for that, it is necessary for the external conditions of competition to be equal."[5]

While Durkheim believed to the end of his life that the competitive system of French education was the best way of carrying out social reform, his call for equality of external conditions flew in the face of the power and interests of traditional elites as well as of the new industrialists. As a result, Durkheim's project for the ethical reform of professions remained unfulfilled. He was forced to recognize that his proposed ethical program would require a level of alignment between professional practitioners and clients that went far beyond the teaching of occupational morality to a professional elite. If the moral reform of work was to succeed, it would have to overcome any inequalities of wealth and power that were the product of an unjust social system.

It is not surprising that the other modern social theorist who proposed a thoroughgoing ethical reform of the professions was Max Weber, inspired as he was by the social significance of the Protestant conception of work as a calling.

Weber believed that without a higher call to an object of service – to an object that could acquire a power analogous to that which Christians associated with God – modern societies would be left without forms of meaningful work that could overcome the potentially corrosive implications of the modern scientific understanding of the world. One reason was that a reformed concept of work as a vocation might enable modern individuals to transcend petty self-interest: "With every task of a calling, he to whom it is assigned has to restrict himself and to exclude what does not belong strictly to the *object*, and most of all, his own love and hate."[6]

For Weber, however, the calling was not only important for defining a selfless relationship to one's work. In the earlier world of classical education, the elite had been able to recognize each other, even in the absence of criteria of birth, through their ethical formation and the ideals they embodied. But in the world of mass professional and technical education, this was no longer the case. Here the only formal credentialing system was rooted in the academic degrees earned in higher education, which by themselves revealed nothing about ethical qualifications, authenticity, or capacity. In this scenario, the visible effects of a calling might serve as a sign by which

5 Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. George Simpson (New York: Free Press, 1964), 401 – 402, 407.

6 Max Weber, "Der Sinn der 'Wertfreiheit' der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften," in Weber, *Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann (Tübingen, Germany: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1982), 494.

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one could distinguish genuinely 'called' individuals from those who were entirely self-serving.

Good work in this sense was not for Weber merely a matter of birth, technical degrees, position attained, or any other outward sign of status. Only work that grew out of an inward sense of vocation – an express conviction that one answered to a higher calling – could be regarded as truly good. For Weber, the calling became a badge as well as a source of direction and strength.[7]

But was Weber's conception of work as a calling really viable? Elsewhere, Weber rejected the idea that ethical schemes devised by intellectuals had any chance of becoming adopted widely in the absence of numerous preexisting social and other conditions. Would a modern renaissance of the older sense of a 'duty in a calling' be feasible outside an elite university lecture hall?[8] Weber died before he could judge for himself the feeble practical results of his famous 1919 lectures "Science as a Vocation" and "Politics as a Vocation."

In its orientation toward the training of professionals, the contemporary American university recapitulates many of the contradictions that Durkheim and Weber faced at the turn of the century. The question is whether the contradiction at the heart of the social system between economically rewarding and morally responsible work is any more capable of a resolution today than it was then. As long as the goal of the dominant economic actors, as David Landes once put it, is to "privatize profits and socialize costs," then those actors will replicate the contradiction inherent in the current training and credentialing process, wrapped in an ideology of 'liberal education' and self-determination.

Any serious effort to reform the professions must be augmented by extensive social and educational reform. As Robert Bellah and the other authors of *Habits of the Heart* observed twenty years ago, it is hard to imagine how the problem of ensuring good work within the professions can be resolved unless we can increase the number of social stakeholders and enlarge the stakes for professionals as well.

A skeptic might even wonder if the preoccupation with the morality of individual professionals grows, in part, out of a concurrent sense that politics is a hopeless arena for serious social reform, especially the reform of the moral economy of the professions. In the America of George W. Bush, it is increasingly a question of how to cultivate one's own garden. Like the Stoics of the ancient world who tried to live ethically under an empire they were powerless to reform, the contemporary advocates of good work risk resigning themselves to, rather than changing, the economic and social conditions that systematically put ethics into conflict with self-interest. Regrettably, only broad political and cultural efforts can create an environment of trust and enforcement that can protect society, which may be the biggest ethical task we face today.[9]

7 Ernst Gellner, "Trust, Cohesion, and the Social Order," in Diego Gambetta, ed., *Trust: Making and Breaking of Cooperative Relations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988). See also Adam B. Seligman, *The Problem of Trust* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

8 See Harvey Goldman, *Politics, Death, and the Devil: Self and Power in Max Weber and Thomas Mann* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

9 See Steven Brint and Charles S. Levy, "Professions and Civic Engagement: Trends in Rhetoric and Practice," in Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina, eds., *Civic Engagement in American Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1999), 163 – 210.

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