

THE CATHOLIC PHILOSOPHER LOOKS AT WORK

RAYMOND SMITH, O.P., AND HUGH McBRIEN, O.P.



VERY problem of the modern day is a problem of the Catholic Philosopher. Since the philosopher is eminently an orderer, the chaotic and confusing conditions of the present world should make him one of its busiest inhabitants. There is a litany of enigmas challenging his intellectual prowess. Although his solutions are limited by the power of natural reason, being a Catholic philosopher, he willingly accepts the aid of the theologian. Consequently, the philosophic inquiry of work treated in these pages, when necessary, calls upon Theology to guide it to a complete and satisfactory conclusion.

Work is as personal an obligation as living. Either man honestly earns what he needs or else he violates the rights of his fellowmen. This violation can happen either by the thief, who robs society of the goods created for its sustenance, or the parasite, who lives off the wealth of others. Just men, wanting to render to each his due, will study the problem of work to discover its dignity, its necessity, its meaning, and the modern crisis of the problem; eventually attaining a solution to the whole question. The purpose of this article is to consider these difficulties in the light of fundamental principles.

Work, as regards man, can be defined as "the application of one's forces of soul and body to the gifts of nature for the development of one's powers by their means." This definition of Pius XI shows forth the three-fold division of work, namely, spiritual, intellectual, and manual. By spiritual labor is meant the work of the interior life by which man is developed and perfected in intimate union with God. Intellectual labor particularly stresses the activity of the mind, not however to the utter exclusion of the work of the hands. When the labor demands primarily the use of the hands but at the same time the direction of the intellect, it is called manual labor.

Common to all these degrees of work is the note of arduousness. Experience shows the difficulty of conquering the vices and passions within us. Nor is anyone unaware of the difficulty in acquiring intellectual knowledge. The fatigue which results from manual labor demonstrates the demands it has exacted from the body. Thus,

through the centuries, work has about it the penance of a just God Who punishes. Matter resists the hands of man, and this stubbornness of material things plus the darkening of man's reason and the weakening of man's will have made work a burden and not merely a pleasure. Radically this disorder can be traced to original sin. Before the fall, Adam, living in the state of Original Justice, perfected his being by the work he performed, the thoughts he conceived, and the glory he rendered to God. There was nothing arduous or disagreeable about his work, because he was master of himself and all creation.

From this one may see that the rôle of work in the life of man has been ordained by God to perfect man. Work was not something new with the Fall of Adam. In the Latin, the word, *operari*, is used to describe the activity performed by Adam in keeping the Garden in order. Since the very essence of the Garden of Paradise consisted in happiness and pleasure, the work performed by our primogenitor must have lacked any disagreeableness. Nevertheless, this activity of our first parent in perfecting himself spiritually, intellectually, or by expressing himself on material things, fulfills the definition of work. The accidental note of arduousness does not enter the idea of work until after the Fall. It was superimposed by God as a punishment and henceforth remains as a property of work. This shows the error of the notion that identifies work with the curse. "By the sweat of your brow" is the scriptural phrase used to describe this new element added to the idea of work, which, however, does not alter the essence of work.

Since it has been stated that an essential note of work is to perfect man, it must be shown how or whether this is true of the three-fold division given above. The beatitude of man consists in the attainment of God, and each activity gains dignity or worth in so far as it leads to this end. The *raison d'être* of the spiritual life is, precisely, this union with God, and it only loses its dignity or value when it degenerates into a false mysticism. The perfection of man in the natural sphere, as St. Thomas establishes in his commentary on Aristotle's first book of the *Metaphysics*, lies in the attainment of truth, which is the object of the intellect. Hence, the intellect being man's highest faculty, one thought is more perfect than all material creation, just as one act of supernatural charity is more sublime than all created natures. When the intellect approves the false for the true, it is then diverted from its ultimate perfection, that is, Divine Truth Itself. St. Thomas Aquinas, the contemplative, exemplifies the dignity of spiritual labor; St. Thomas, the teacher, preacher, and writer,

embodies the dignity of intellectual endeavor. The value and worth of spiritual and intellectual labor is, therefore, manifest.

Manual labor, on the other hand, offers a difficulty. Besides the vagueness of its name, the tendency to frown upon such toil, as did the early Greek philosophers, has endured to our own day. It is popularly expressed by the distinction of skilled and unskilled labor. Further confusion arises from the categorical exclusion of the manual laborer from the field of the artist. Modern industry expresses its position by making the wage the object of the laborer instead of his work. The establishment of the dignity of manual labor, then, has escaped the understanding, if not the consideration, of many modern writers.

It is true that students of this problem have recognized that work is a relation. Without stating exactly what manual labor is, they argue that men can become saints on an assembly line, just as, by way of contrast, theologians can lose their souls. The relation of man's work to God, a work performed by a will subjected to God's Will, most certainly will lead such a person to his eternal reward. There is no denying that saints can be made in the sweat shops of modern industry, but no one has pointed out a saint who ran such a factory. If the Catholic program for the working class consists in the simple statement that the dignity of work comes from its relation to God, with no further explanation, then the best path for the Church is an abandonment of all social reform. Such a proposition is absurd, since the Catholic philosopher knows well that the Church is the leader in social betterment precisely because it wishes to restore man to his proper place. Likewise, it requires heroic virtue to submit oneself to the bondage of modern industrialism and remain loyal to the teachings of Christ. The ordinary man does not have it. The stressing of the submission of man's will to the will of God as regards manual labor actually ends in dodging the question. Eric Gill relates that a factory owner proudly declared that he was God Almighty in his factory. The reason is obvious. The workers, directed from outside, were performing mechanical tasks, the purpose of which they did not know. To think that God would allow His image and likeness to be so abused, needs more explaining and justification than merely to give work dignity by subjecting it to God's will. The mortifications and strenuous penances of the saints are done under Divine inspiration. The slavery of the factory system is man's creation with diabolical felicitation.

Some maintain that the second relation of work, namely, man's work to his neighbor justifies the monotony and arduousness of his

tasks. These picture men as inspired by the faith they have in their fellowmen and the joy that comes from realizing their own contribution to society. This mode of procedure is closer to Stalin's definition of work: "Work is enthusiasm, enthusiasm, work." If the State is the *alpha* and *omega* of man's existence, this idea of work is accurate. Such not being the case, to reduce man to a mere robot and tell him his efforts are deeply appreciated, is to offer man stones when he is worthy of bread. Man definitely is a social animal and men depend one upon another. Hence a further necessity of work is evident. However, there is a limit to these demands. The limit is reached when man's work becomes comparable to that of the brute animal—not directed by his own reason but utterly subjected to another's.

Actually man should be directing his forces of soul and body to the gifts of nature for the development of his powers by their means, as Pius XI stated. This brings into view the third relation of work. Man ought to imprint, as it were, his personality on the object of his work. The artist does this, whether he be the painter of portraits, or the simple carpenter, like the model of workmen, Christ Himself. The farmer too is an artist in his tilling of the soil. "The artist is simply the *responsible* workman," to quote the pithy definition of Eric Gill. Here then is the crux of the problem. Man, as the reasonable creator, has been omitted from the consideration of manual labor. Unless this work of the hands, as the term nominally signifies, is human, the Catholic Philosopher is unalterably opposed to it. Work must lead man to God. It must lead man to contemplation. Its necessity does not justify its dehumanizing effects. This is the modern crisis of work. The problem can be stated in one sentence, taken from Nicholas Berdyaev: "The machine demands that man assume its image; but man, created to the image and likeness of God, cannot become such an image, for to do so would be equivalent to his extermination." The problem must be faced squarely, and a fearless, direct answer should be given.

The threefold relation flowing from work has now been stated. Overlooking the relation of man to his work has caused much of the modern confusion about manual labor. The emphasizing of the submission of the will to God and of the contribution to society has made it appear that the erroneous notion of manual labor, that is, as a mechanical task, is acceptable. There remains yet, a further factor. Work is a quality which either perfects or impedes man. It is inescapable: every act of man leads him either to or away from his End. Work is so daily an activity that man must of necessity be

sure it is perfecting him, or else face irreparable damage. Work then is a habit which disposes the subject either for a good or a bad operation. Labor worthy of man is a virtue; labor contrary to man's nature, even though not intrinsically opposed, is a vice. The Catholic Philosopher finds that his search for truth also demands that he defend virtue against vice. Hence he must categorize the false mystic, the pseudo-intellectualist, and a system that reduces manual labor below the human strata, as evils to be fought against, at the same time clearly stating the true values.

To aid in ascertaining the correct point of view towards labor, a definition can here be formulated. Human work may be defined as an arduous activity perfecting man while he exercises himself by imposing this activity on himself or the powers of nature. The note of arduousness is not of the essence of work but is so closely connected with it that it seems better not to be omitted. Thus, when a person claims his work is a pleasure to perform, he does not deny the difficulty of it. One whose ideals are high enough to abstract from the limitations of fallen nature, to rise to the heights of freedom once man's, has a trait worthy of imitation. Such a person is performing his penance joyfully and has supernaturalized it, if the ideal in mind is directed to God. This applies to students at study as well as farmers on the land. All work can lead to God by preparing one for contemplation.

Work has been seen in its relations, as a quality, and in its definition. Finally it is maintained that the division of labor, spiritual, intellectual, and manual is a legitimate one. It embraces all the possible activities of an arduous nature perfecting man as an individual or as regards his obligations to society. This is also the order of eminence. Spiritual labor is superior in that it directly and immediately seeks union with God. Intellectual and manual endeavor are less proximate, with the intellectual holding higher rank since it is produced by man's highest faculty. Further, there is a hierarchy within these divisions. Saints and works on the mystical life give the division of spiritual labor; the purgative way, the illuminative way, and the unitive way. It would be outside the scope of this article to go into a more detailed explanation of these. Intellectual labor is distinguished according to the division of the speculative and practical intellect. The speculative intellect is concerned either with knowledge of first causes, the understanding of first principles, or conclusions from less than primary causes. The practical intellect expresses itself in directing actions which do not go out to exterior matter, and this direction is called prudence. When the practical in-

tellec is engaged in making things, when it goes out to work on exterior matter, its work is then called art. Here again the difficulty of distinguishing manual and intellectual labor is plain. To make manual labor specifically distinct from intellectual labor by reducing it to a mere mechanical exercise is to cease to consider it as human. Manual labor is a third division really of convenience but become one of necessity, since it avoids the confusion which would arise were intellectual and manual labor to be identified. It would be too lengthy a digression here to discuss the various types of intellectual and manual labor. Generally it can be maintained that intellectual labor is that which constantly demands from the worker the vigilant use of intellect in order to keep his work of a high grade. Such is the labor of the artist, doctor, professor, etc. Human manual labor exacts intellectual direction but due to its simplicity easily becomes habitual and almost mechanical. Such is the work of the common laborer or unskilled worker of any kind. Hence, even the manual labor of a typist will be human only so long as he not only uses his faculties for the mechanical process of typing, but also sees the purpose of his work other than as a means to a salary. This may sound a strong statement. So warped has become our sense of values, that the monotonous and inhuman fatigue experienced by millions of workers is accepted as inevitable, and the cause of labor is turned into one of wages and hours instead of the work performed.

Yet, one may object to all thus far contended: Were it not for modern industrialism, civilization would not be at the advanced stage it is today. Distance has been spanned; the radio has united cultures; methods of preserving food will prevent famine; to mention but a few things which have made this age one of the most remarkable of all time. Ignoring the horror of war as a distortion of scientific progress, it must be agreed that in material progress our era has no peer. Man has abused the machine. He has unmanned man in making man man the machine, to use the pun of a modern author. Actually, there is no intrinsic incompatibility to today's technical advancement with the aims of the Kingdom of Christ on earth.

If a revolution is needed, it is a spiritual one. As for labor itself, the solution is quite prosaic, an evolution as the Holy Father, Pope Pius XII has suggested. It is the task of the Catholic Philosopher to explain the meaning of work to the people; to show that a Worker's Paradise is an impossibility, a state which ended when Adam sinned. Likewise, he must point out that a dehumanized society is too high a price for any material comfort, however attractive it may seem. The workers themselves must be taught and must com-

prehend their own responsibilities. Their God-given talents should be developed in preference to work that would pay well but stifle self-expression. The call to contemplatives issued by Father Vincent McNabb gains weight with consideration of the truths enumerated. If men can live more abundantly on small farms, then farm life should be advocated. Cities will have to be depopulated to a great extent before human conditions can flourish everywhere.

Note that it is not advocated to turn back civilization, but rather to vitalize it. Industry must use every means to reduce the pure monotony of work done by factory "hands." Besides good pay, shorter hours, and decent living conditions, it should be the aim of industry to make, and the desire of the worker to be, a free man. Eric Gill's "the artist is not a special kind of man, but every man is a special kind of artist," must ring true before the Catholic Philosopher rests his case.