

THE NATURE OF WORK

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



THE PHILOSOPHER attains his acme as the metaphysician. In this role he is, as it were, the doctor of essences. His task is to understand the very nature of the object under consideration. The purpose of this article is to treat of work in this manner. For accomplishing this end, it is necessary to state the definition of work and to explain its parts. Then application of the notion of work can be made to the various types of labor. Finally the obligation of work must be discussed.

In a previous article work was defined as an arduous activity perfecting man while he exercises himself by imposing this activity on himself or the powers of nature. Because it is an activity, it is impossible to compose a perfect definition. The essence of any mobile thing, as such, escapes the capacity of our understanding. Unlike material things, it lacks composition of matter and form. Activity has not the specification or determination the metaphysician demands for definition. Hence we must be content with an analysis of the definition mainly by description.

The stated definition contains three parts: Work is an activity; work is a perfection of man; the term of work is either man himself or the powers of nature. What is meant by activity is obvious. Its opposite is rest. In general, activity refers to the modification of an object. The object may be man himself or it may be something extrinsic. When man exerts activity within himself, he performs an immanent action. A man willing a good or understanding a truth is performing such an action. The action as regards man remains within him. It is man who receives the modification imposed by the activity of his intellect and will. What actually has taken place is this: the two rational faculties of man were reduced from potency to act. Prior to their willing and understanding, the will and the intellect were in potency to their objects. By their proper activity, that is, by the determination of their objects, these powers of man's soul were reduced into act. The will desired and the intellect understood. Work of this kind is called spiritual and intellectual.

Man also performs an activity which terminates not in himself but in something outside of man. This is called a transient action. Such an activity, for example, is manual labor. In this instance, man

modifies an object existing in the world outside of him. The words "the powers of nature" express this aspect in our definition.

Also included in the essence of work is the important element of perfecting man. This is evident in spiritual work. It is no less clear in intellectual labor which is directed towards true knowledge. The case of manual labor would seem just the opposite. By manual work man goes out to specify the object. It is man who imposes a form, a new nature, on the material things. Hence manual labor actually perfects the object and has, it would seem, no effect upon man other than the effort required of him in producing the artifact.

The solution to this difficulty is quite apparent. Prior to the actual production of the thing outside, the idea of that thing existed in the mind of the worker. Man gave intentional existence to the product. He conceived the idea. This idea was then the exemplar by which the worker directed his activity in producing the likeness of the idea in the external order. Hence in manual labor there is a two-fold activity: the immanent action of the mind and the transient action of the body directed by the mind. Man is perfected through the intellectual operation. The object is perfected through the transient activity of the worker. It may well be that the worker's body also receives a certain perfection. Well-developed muscles and a good posture are often the fruit of certain types of manual labor. Such perfection, however, is accidental. Man is primarily a thinking creature. His perfection lies in the development of his intellect and will. Just condemnation is sometimes leveled at that manual labor which is devoid of intellectual requirements. When man ceases to need his reason in the performance of his work, that work is no longer human. All human acts are human only insofar as they proceed from the reason and the will.

The third essential characteristic of human labor as posited in the definition, is the term of the work. This element has already been noted in the division of activity. Man may direct his action either to himself or the powers of nature. Man is the term of all immanent action, and the exterior world is the term of all transient action.

Because man's work terminates either in himself or in something exterior to him, it must not be understood that work is the ultimate end of man. The very nature of human labor is to serve as a means. Man naturally seeks happiness. God alone can satisfy the desires of the human heart. God alone is man's ultimate end. Thus all spiritual exercises, intellectual pursuits, and manual undertakings are directed to God. The spiritual life is the practice of the supernatural virtues for the purpose of attaining union with God. It can also express

itself outside the individual by one who seeks to win souls for God in an active apostolate. Thus is spiritual labor ordained directly to God.

The work of the intellect is ordered to the acquisition of truth and ultimately to Truth Itself. When directed upwards to God, intellectual labor resolves itself into spiritual labor. In its own plane, it is concerned with acquiring knowledge. It is possible that such activity remain purely immanent. This occurs in arm chair philosophers whose speculation is founded on pride and whose sole purpose in reasoning is the intellectual thrill derived from speculation. Most frequently, thinking leads to practice, and the result is a whole host of doctors, lawyers, teachers, artists, and skilled laborers. In this application, intellectual labor tends to manual labor.

As regards manual labor, we note with St. Thomas,* four reasons constituting its purpose.

1. Manual labor is ordained to procuring food.
2. Manual labor is ordained to take away the idleness from which evils come.
3. Manual labor is ordained to restrain concupiscence.
4. Manual labor is ordained to procuring the means for giving alms.

Let us consider the first. Flowing from the commands of God and the law of nature, there is the obligation upon man to live justly. When circumstances arise wherein man cannot obtain licitly the needs of life without his own manual labor, it becomes of precept that he use his hands. This is obvious when it is recalled that the first law of nature is self-preservation. In cases where others will provide the goods obtainable through manual labor, the individual is freed from any commandment to this type of work. The basic reason for this is that precepts pertaining to the good of many do not oblige each individual. This is known as a collective duty as distinct from an individual obligation.

Before continuing our remarks on manual labor, it seems well to consider here the obligation of spiritual and intellectual work and thus treat all three in one place. Works of virtues are of precept. In other words, men are obliged to strive for perfection and the attainment of God. The law of God is written in the hearts of men. With intellectual labor the precept cannot be stated so dogmatically. Yet man by his nature is a rational animal. This means he is a reasoning

* S. T., II^a II^{ae}, q. 187, a. 3.

creature. There is in man a power to think. Every power when not used remains in potency to the act for which it was created. The intellect is the highest power of man. Unless he uses it, the potency remains imperfect. Yet men are obliged to seek their perfection. Therefore we can conclude that it is an obligation on man to use his reason to the best of his ability. To fail in this, is to fail to be man. Such would be a perversion of nature. Yet, there is no precept on man to pursue higher studies. Such could only happen by one's choice of a state of life. Thus the doctor is under serious obligation to learn all about medicine lest he be the instrumental cause in a patient's death.

Returning to manual labor, we note that the second and third reasons may be considered as physical and psychological. They presuppose a certain feature in the type of work. It is not enough to merely remove idleness. The work performed must serve some purpose which the laborer can perceive. Otherwise he will desist from the work as vain. The work must also occupy the mind of the worker. It has to distract him from foolish thoughts and remove day-dreaming. Unless the manual labor can do this, it is merely perpetuating under a new atmosphere the condition sought to be removed.

In order to restrain concupiscence, the manual work must be something laborious. The energies cooped up in the body seek release. Unless physical exercise is employed, these energies may become for the manual laborer an occasion of sin. Of course, ultimately it is virtue through God's grace which checks the appetites. It would be superficial reasoning to argue that physical exercise can alone inhibit concupiscence. It is, nevertheless, a valuable adjunct for the manual laborer, who, unlike the intellectual worker or the contemplative, does not have these energies removed with the fatigue of mental activity.

The fourth reason given by St. Thomas refers to the dispensing of alms. This flows especially from the charity which should abound in all men. In the pursuit of his manual labors, a man may gain a superfluous amount of goods. Under the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man, such surplus should be given to those in need. Man by nature is a social animal. He requires the aid of others. It is but just and natural he should help those unable to help themselves.

The explanation of the definition of work is now complete. To leave it at this point is to abandon it in a static condition. Little application of our findings has been made. There remains to be considered the present condition of human labor. The evils arising from industrialism continue to challenge the plans of men. Unemployment, unrest in labor, the fate of the "irresponsible factory

hand," are items high on the list of problems for tomorrow's world. Once the nature of work has been grasped and the dignity given it by the labors of Our Lord appreciated, only then will a genuine solution be found to many of the modern social problems.