

# Consumer Culture and the Deformation of Work

BY DARBY KATHLEEN RAY

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One of my favorite ways to begin a class, workshop, or discussion about work is to ask this question: Would you work if you didn't have to? That is, if you had enough money, good healthcare and retirement options, and adequate opportunities to be with other people, would you still want to work? Despite posing this question in a wide range of settings and to diverse audiences, I almost always get the same response: a resounding "Yes." Those who are dissatisfied with their current work situation sometimes take a moment or two to reflect, but before long they tend to make their way to a clear affirmative answer.

What is it about work, or about this particular moment in the history of work, that makes it an apparently indispensable dimension of what it means to be human? In other words, what work is work doing for us these days? In this essay I begin by considering the meaning-making functions of work in our day. I suggest that work is a powerful source of livelihood, purpose, individual agency, social place, and connection to the divine, among other things. Then I sound a warning, arguing that work's ability to confer these positive meanings is threatened by the dynamics of today's consumer culture.<sup>1</sup>

To begin, let us establish a theological foundation for our discussion. In biblical tradition, God is first and foremost a worker. God shapes the world with intelligence and care, patiently attending to both high-level concept and nitty-gritty detail, and taking great satisfaction in both the process and

the outcome of the work. In the book of Genesis, God's primordial labors bring order out of chaos, breathe life into the heretofore lifeless, and connect diverse life forms to each other in a complex, interdependent whole. At the climax of this world-making drama, God singles out one life form, humanity, and declares it has been created in God's own image. This is a stunning move with profound implications not only for humanity but for all creation.

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Among other things, the story tells us that humanity's work is intended to mirror God's work, which is to say it is intended to be fundamentally life-giving: a means of establishing our place in a complex and chaotic world; an opportunity to act on the world—shaping, building, growing, and delighting in it; and an avenue for connecting generously and responsibly to the diverse others with whom we share the world. The picture of

work set forth in Genesis—work intended as a life-giving pursuit—is underscored in numerous other biblical texts and forms a backdrop against which we can consider our own culture's attitudes toward and practices of work.

What is it that work accomplishes for us today, and how does that square with the biblical notion of work as God-given and life-giving? For most of us, work is necessary for existence itself, for the provision of food, shelter, clothing, and other essentials of everyday life. Beyond survival, work gives our daily lives structure and purpose. Whether paid or unpaid, work serves as a kind of mandate for waking up and applying ourselves, a routine that helps demarcate and order time, a discrete space we occupy in the world. Through work we provide for ourselves and, ideally, for those who depend on us. In a sense, then, work shapes and organizes our world, providing existential coherence where otherwise chaos and fragmentation might reign. Those without work in today's world tend to lack not only the foundation for survival but also the routine and purpose necessary for coherent existence. As sociologist William Julius Wilson notes, "In the absence of regular employment, a person lacks not only a place in which to work and the receipt of regular income but also a coherent organization of the present—that is, a system of concrete expectations and goals."<sup>2</sup> Without the purposive effects of work, the world can be a strange and hostile place.

In addition to its survival and world-structuring functions, work in today's world is part of the bedrock of individual and social identity. The

first question we often hear when we meet someone is, "What do you do?" The assumption is that work is self-defining: if I know what you do for work, I will have a window onto your very being – not just how you spend your time, but who you really are. Those without work, whether unemployed or retired, can find themselves struggling for self-respect: who am I if I don't have work? In today's world, work is an important means of self-definition and self-respect. It also confers social place, positioning us in relation to others in the world. Our work connects us to others – coworkers, for example, but also to the larger socioeconomic and civic whole of which our work is a part. Through work, we put ourselves on the map, take our place in society. We also, importantly, contribute to the world around us.

Work not only positions us within society but is a primary means for shaping the world in which we live. Through our work, we leave our mark, have an impact, make a difference. We are actors in and on the world, and this is true not only for those with relatively high-status work where individual autonomy and creativity can be plentiful, but also for those whose work is lower on the socioeconomic pecking order. Witness, for example, the sense of individual agency and social impact articulated by a low-paid seamstress in Boston's Chinatown garment district: "There are three things that each person needs – food, house, clothing – and we take care of one of these. The clothes we do are everywhere, keeping the children, the grown men and women, warm and well."<sup>3</sup> For this worker as for many others, work is a means of self-efficacy, a way to act on and shape one's world.

For some people, work provides opportunities not only for self-assertion but also for self-actualization. In this scenario, it is through work that we reach our full potential and maximize our gifts. Work becomes a vehicle of self-expression, self-fulfillment, and personal growth. We don't simply tolerate work or periodically enjoy it, we love our work! It is our passion, our calling. While this almost magical symbiosis between self and work was once the exception to the rule, in recent years it has become a cultural ideal, the standard to which we aspire and against which all work is measured. When our work is a calling, we identify with it and give ourselves to it fully. For many, this means working an overabundance of hours and never really getting away from work. Studies show that especially for white-collar workers, work is increasingly "greedy" – outcompeting other institutions, including family, for workers' time.<sup>4</sup> Increasingly, we stay at least virtually connected to work around the clock, no matter what the cost to individual health, family and friend relationships, or civic involvement.

The irony is plain to see. The more we find fulfillment in our work, the more power work has over us. The modern work ideal is self-actualization, but in reality we seem to be losing ourselves. How did we arrive at this point? If we pan out from this picture of twenty-first century work, we can see that work's horizon is not what we might expect. It is not a vision of prosperity for all, nor even a *laissez-faire* individualism; it is certainly not

the kingdom or reign of God—life abundant for all creation. Rather, it is consumer culture that is the driving force behind work in our day. Put simply, we work so that we can buy. To be fair, humans have always worked in order to get what we need to live. In modern times we have worked for money and then spent that money on the things we need. The difference is that today we spend our money at unprecedented rates and on things we often do not need. Work is still a significant activity in today's society, but buying is even more significant. It is how we integrate into society, how we participate in today's world. Work remains important, but primarily because it is the precondition of consumption.

Under the impress of contemporary consumer culture, the life-giving potential of work—its potential to provide life's necessities and to be an avenue toward existential coherence, self-respect, social integration, individual agency, and civic contribution—is deformed and diminished. As work's primary purpose becomes the fueling of consumerism, its multiple intentions and life-affirming functions are undermined in worrisome ways. Take survival, for example. In a culture in which having the latest consumer goods is a prerequisite to social acceptance, the real necessities of life are often sacrificed for the sake of "keeping up." We might assume this is especially true for low-wage workers whose paychecks are barely enough to cover the basics of life, but the more affluent among us are no less likely to spend disproportionately on vanity items, putting other priorities at risk. "It is not simply a matter of keeping up with the Joneses or mimicking refined tastes," writes William Greider. "The consumption is required to keep up with American life itself." Thus, even those in poverty "are trying—struggling heroically, one might say—to remain good consumers and thus avoid public shame."<sup>5</sup> What was historically work's first priority, the provision of life's necessities, now too often takes a back seat to consumerism's superficial desires. We should also consider the role consumer culture plays in the widening gap between rich and poor, the increasing difference between minimum wage and a living wage, and other contemporary threats to work as a means of survival in today's world.

Another of work's traditionally life-giving functions is its conferral of structure and purpose on human existence. Just as the creator God fashions order out of chaos, so can human work bring routine, discipline, reliability, and integrity to life. However, consumerism's exaltation of instant gratification and short-term gain can easily destroy work's world-structuring impact. The lifeblood of consumer culture is incessant desire—desire for things we don't yet have, desire for a newer or different version of something we already have, desire for more of what we already have. The "health" of our economy depends upon our perennial dissatisfaction with what we already have and our constant, often frantic search for the next best thing. This craving for novelty changes our relationship to time and undermines our horizon of meaning.<sup>6</sup> Under the influence of consumerism, we are

always on the move, in a certain sense, always on the lookout for new and better products and opportunities. Instead of being framed by a long-term horizon, our days and desires focus on the short-term, on what is just around the next bend or in the next advertisement.<sup>7</sup> Loyalty to the “old,” whether a car, a job, a marriage, a community, or the religion of our upbringing, is seen as a liability. Long-term commitment will simply slow us down. We are more mobile than ever, and although we have hundreds, sometimes thousands, of “connections” and “friends,” there are precious few who know us deeply.

Work was once a site of long-term investment and return, a place where loyalty, craft, and quality were valued and rewarded. By contrast, today’s workers can expect to change not only jobs but careers multiple times, reinventing themselves again and again and developing loyalty not to the company or team but to their own self-advancement. To keep up with consumer demand, work must be flexible, mobile, off-shore, and just-in-time—a far cry from the world-structuring promise work once held.

Not only does consumer culture diminish work’s ability to provide stability and existential coherence to twenty-first century life, but it also undermines work’s function as a font of individual identity and self-respect. The flip-side of widespread and incessant consumer craving for new products is an economy focused on the promotion of cheap goods—goods that are inexpensive enough that all citizens can aspire to be consumers of them, and

goods that are designed to last or satisfy for only a short time so that they must be replaced by a newer model or item. Where workers could once take pride in the quality of products or service their labor helped create, more and more jobs today focus on the production or sale of cheap goods or spurious services no one really needs. Workmanship and craft are pointless in such an economy. Even in

“knowledge industries” like

medicine and education, intense market pressures are squeezing out meaning and quality. For example, patient quotas mean doctors must hurry through examinations, while the linking of teacher pay to students’ standardized test performance encourages “teaching to the test.” In industry after industry, work that serves the ends of contemporary consumer culture is diminished in its ability to cultivate meaning and self-respect.

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Increasingly, the value of work is reduced to a paycheck or, more accurately, to the buying power that the paycheck represents. Thus, it is less and less our work that puts us on the social map or gives us a place in the larger whole and more our ability to participate in consumer culture, to acquire the goods and services that one simply “must have” to avoid social shame. Even social responsibility is being redefined, as when today’s leaders sug-

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gest that the best way to respond to national catastrophe or crisis is to go shopping. Apparently civic duty and social impact are as easy as the swipe of a credit card. Meaningful opportunities to shape the world through one’s work are similarly delimited by consumerism, which reduces “the world” to Walmart and Wall Street and invites us to leave our mark not through creative effort or hard work but by investing our money, time,

and energy in the consumer market. Work is still important, but its main value is its bankrolling of that investment.

Where does this sad story of work’s deformation leave us? Quite a distance from the notion of work as a God-given, life-affirming pursuit! As we have seen, work can be a person-forming, meaning-making, world-sustaining activity, but under the impress of consumerist values it can also be powerfully destructive to human personhood and community. What can people of faith do to contest work’s deformation and reclaim its life-giving potential? For one, we can stop acting like economic versions of meaning and value are the only ones that exist or matter. We can contest the assumption – almost universally held in our day – that the economic sphere is where meaning and selfhood reside, and we can give witness to other spheres of meaning.<sup>8</sup> In truth, however, our witness will be hypocrisy unless we ourselves nurture nonconsumerist ways of seeing and being. Doing that will require hard work, stubborn persistence, and a community of support, for the market’s version of reality and value is pervasive and deeply ingrained.

As we set our sights on the recalibration of priorities and the refocusing of desire, we can look to religious tradition for wisdom and inspiration. One such source is the life and thought of Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430). According to Augustine, the key to understanding both the pathologies and the promise of human existence is desire.<sup>9</sup> We are fundamentally creatures of desire, and the challenge of faithful living is the proper ordering of our

multiple and complex desires. In his own life, Augustine struggled mightily to come to this insight and to enact it in his daily life. He craved worldly recognition and sexual pleasure, and he pursued these cravings at the expense of other, more life-giving desires such as personal integrity and love of God. Even though he knew in his heart that he was wasting his life chasing after what he called “lesser goods,” Augustine was loathe to change his ways because of the pleasure those lesser goods brought him. What he finally learned, however, was that such pleasure is fleeting and unreliable; human desire cannot be sated by finite goods or temporal values – only the infinite love of God can satisfy our deepest yearnings. The key to human fulfillment, then, is not to deny the competing desires with which we are confronted but to learn how to prioritize them so that lesser goods are subordinated to higher goods. And what are those higher goods? According to Augustine, they are the values, actions, and things characterized by and aiming toward God’s eternal love.

Augustine could not have conceived of the complexities and challenges posed by today’s consumer culture. Yet his conviction that we are creatures of desire for whom authentic living requires the prioritizing of higher goods over lesser goods could not be more relevant. If we want to have lives and work that are not enslaved to consumerism, then we will have to become nonconformists. This means training our hearts and focusing our desires on the most worthwhile things – the love that endures, the work that gives life – and allowing those things to take priority over everything else. The reformation of work in our day will require that we open our eyes to and speak out against wages that are too low to support life’s necessities, corporations that focus on short-term gains at the expense of long-term well-being, work that trades human dignity for higher profits, and other work practices that fly in the face of God’s intentions for creation. Contesting work’s deformation means raising our children and committing ourselves to say “Enough” when we have enough, rather than continually grasping for the next new thing. It means learning a craft, taking the time to develop skill and even mastery, and having the patience and foresight to teach the next generation. Finally, work’s reformation will require that we work not primarily for the buying power our work produces but for the “higher” goods work can confer on human life – things like livelihood, purpose and structure, self-definition, social connection, and civic responsibility. May it be so.

## NOTES

1 For a more thorough consideration of the arguments and ideas in this essay, see Darby Kathleen Ray, *Working*, Compass Series: Christian Explorations of Daily Living (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011).

2 William Julius Wilson, “Jobless Poverty: A New Form of Social Dislocation in the Inner-City Ghetto,” in Amy S. Wharton, ed., *Working in America: Continuity, Conflict, and Change*, third edition (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 178.

3 Cited by Paula M. Rayman, *Beyond the Bottom Line: The Search for Dignity at Work* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 94.

4 See, for example, Juliet B. Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

5 William Greider, *The Soul of Capitalism: Opening Paths to a Moral Economy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 17.

6 For a discussion of the impact of consumer culture on the experience of time, see Darby Kathleen Ray, "It's About Time: Reflections on a Theology of Rest," in Darby Kathleen Ray, ed., *Theology That Matters: Ecology, Economy, and God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 154-171.

7 For an insightful study of the impacts of short-term thinking in contemporary culture, see sociologist Richard Sennett's *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998).

8 See especially Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005).

9 Augustine's autobiography, *Confessions*, offers a compelling articulation of his position.

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