

## THE WORKERS' PARADISE: ETERNAL LIFE, ECONOMIC ESCHATOLOGY, AND GOOD WORK AS THE KEYS TO SOCIAL ETHICS

DAVID CLOUTIER

*The Catholic University of America  
Washington, District of Columbia*

I am grateful to Christine Hinze for inviting me to this opportunity, and to Kate Ward, whom I know will offer an excellent response. In writing this, I have been moved in remembering my first teacher of moral theology, Anne Patrick, who delivered the CTSA ethics plenary in 1989; I have felt humbled to follow in her footsteps.

This past year, British anthropologist James Suzman published a book offering a “deep history” of work.<sup>1</sup> Suzman’s book follows a line of inquiry that is not new—namely, that hunter-gatherers were “the original affluent society,”<sup>2</sup> living off the abundance of nature; the move to a more settled life—beginning with agriculture—was a kind of “fall” into economic scarcity. Accompanying this fall was a mythologizing of the goodness of work, aided further in recent centuries by a “scarcity economics,” that provided a stick when the carrot of the myth of work’s value wasn’t enough. Suzman suggests that an analogy to the laid-back economic existence of the hunter-gatherers can now be recovered, thanks to ever-advancing robotics and AI. Historian James Livingston’s recent book *No More Work: Why Full Employment is a Bad Idea* sums up this line more pithily, offering an “indictment” of the “moral universe” in which “meaningful work and the production of goods is somehow better for us than indolent leisure and the consumption of goods.”<sup>3</sup>

Compare this anti-work line of thought with that represented by Swarthmore psychologist Barry Schwartz, whose published version of his TED talk, *Why We Work*, stresses the *importance* of meaningful and satisfying work for any sort of human flourishing.<sup>4</sup> In addition to much empirical research, Schwartz draws on that noted

---

<sup>1</sup> James Suzman, *Work: A Deep History from the Stone Age to the Age of Robots* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> The term is from anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, an earlier exponent of this view. See *Stone Age Economics* (London: Routledge Classics, 2017; orig. 1972). For an instructive early criticism of this line of thought, see Scott Cook, “‘Structural Substantivism’: A Critical Review of Marshall Sahlins’ *Stone Age Economics*,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 16 (1974), 355-379.

<sup>3</sup> Livingston, *No More Work* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2016), x. Livingston’s “brutally simple” refrain is “fuck work.”

<sup>4</sup> Schwartz, *Why We Work* (London: Simon & Schuster/TED Books, 2015).

American philosopher Bruce Springsteen, who argues that houses and TVs are the “booby prize” rather than the true American dream, and that he has to constantly discipline himself to realize that it’s the work of making music that keeps him alive.<sup>5</sup> Springsteen, in turn, might be speaking for the various workers interviewed in Studs Terkel’s 1970’s classic, *Working*. Whether expressing frustration or gratitude for their various ordinary jobs, they invariably return to the presence or absence of *meaningful recognition of their tasks* as the key to working life. (e.g. the steel worker who laments his painful work but wishes the names of all the ordinary laborers who built it were somewhere inscribed on the Empire State building, so workers could point it out with pride to their children).<sup>6</sup> Facing up to the same dynamics of automation, Schwartz ends with a rousing call for a society of “better doctors, lawyers, teachers, hairdressers, and janitors,” whose work is *recognized* and contributes to “healthier patients, better-educated students, and more satisfied customers and clients.”<sup>7</sup>

Should we seek less work or better work? It’s easy enough to raise quickie objections to either one of these views, and each writer does try to take on these objections. But, appropriately for a plenary, I want us to focus instead on how wildly different the basic imagination of the good human society is in these two pictures. How should Catholics approach such radically different proposals?

We are not that well-equipped to do so. For a reality that is as central to human life as work is, Catholic theological ethics has an underdeveloped and fragmented perspective.<sup>8</sup> Despite the fact that the modern Catholic social encyclical tradition is founded on “the worker question,” most of Catholic moral thought over the past century has centered its attention either on questions in sexual and life ethics or on various forms of individual and social provisioning for the poor. Catholic marriage prep? Check. Catholic charities? Check. The Catholic worker? Not so much. Where is work, the dominant reality of most lives? A sample of recent comprehensive works on Catholic Social Teaching (CST) illustrates this: at best, work is given a single chapter in a run-through of topics, sometimes less.<sup>9</sup> Jeremy Posadas recently demonstrated a

<sup>5</sup> Schwartz, *Why We Work*, 89.

<sup>6</sup> Studs Terkel, *Working* (New York: Pantheon/Random House, 1974), xxxii. During the discussion period for this paper at the convention, a questioner helpfully reminded us also of the role of the “Mohawk skywalkers” in many such projects. See Tony Tekaroniake Evans, “How Mohawk Skywalkers Helped Build New York City’s Tallest Buildings,” *History Channel*, May 13, 2021; <https://www.history.com/news/mohawk-skywalkers-ironworkers-new-york-skyscrapers>.

<sup>7</sup> Schwartz, *Why We Work*, 90.

<sup>8</sup> This paper focuses on the modern encyclical tradition. For an excellent, concise overview of resources from scripture and earlier in the tradition, see Elizabeth Rain Kincaid, “Work and Vocation,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Ethics*, ed. Tobias Winright (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 383-390.

<sup>9</sup> The textbooks by Bernard Brady (*Essential Catholic Social Thought*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., [Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017]) and Brian Benestad (*Church, State, and Society: An Introduction to Catholic Social Doctrine* [Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2011]) have a chapter, albeit later in both volumes, rather than in a foundational place. Donal Dorr’s classic study (*Option for the Poor and for the Earth* [Maryknoll: Orbis, 2012]) devotes only three pages to the fundamentals of work, before turning to specific analyses of “indirect employer” and solidarity, both of which he aims at political structures. The recent collection of essays by Gerard Bradley and Christian

similar neglect in the Society of Christian Ethics, noting only nine papers out of 761 sessions, dating back to 1975.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, compared to that other central reality, marriage and family, the categories for the discussion of work are not well-defined. At least in our debates about sex and marriage, some core realities about faithful, loving relationship, mutuality, fruitfulness, and a concern for the good of vulnerable children are ubiquitous. That is to say, Margaret Farley and Janet Smith may not agree on how to understand and apply these terms. But we all recognize that these are the terms of the discussion. Moreover, it is quite easy to see these terms shaping the overarching magisterial documents, whether John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio* or Francis's *Amoris Laetitia*. What is the comparable moral framework for work?

In this paper, I argue for and apply such a framework in three steps. First, I suggest that, like marriage, we need to approach work in terms of Vatican II's core idea of the universal call to holiness. Getting beyond a minimalism of decrying sins and only seeking what I will call "good-enough work," I argue for a vision of work rooted in the vocation to holiness that is shaped by not only natural ends, but also Christian eschatology. Second, such a vision rooted in Christian eschatology requires challenging the "eschatologies" implied in modern approaches to economics. Finally, I conclude by engaging recent public policy proposals, some of which have been predicated on "the end of work" while others more promisingly have sought a reorientation of the economy in favor of work.

### WORK: NAMING FIRST PRINCIPLES AS FINAL ENDS

In Catholic ethics, the common starting point for ethical reflection on work would probably be dignity.<sup>11</sup> Yet starting with dignity throws off the inquiry from the start. If we have learned anything from the revival of Thomistic virtue ethics, it's that moral

---

Bruegger (*Catholic Social Teaching: A Volume of Scholarly Essays* [New York: Cambridge, 2019]) includes chapters on many individual topics in the tradition, but omits work entirely.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Posadas, "Reproductive Justice Re-Constructs Christian Ethics of Work," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 40 (2020), 109-126.

<sup>11</sup> A quick aside on the question of what counts as "work." Oliver O'Donovan's recent treatment of it provides a possible baseline. O'Donovan (*Entering Into Rest* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017], 102-134) suggests that work begins at the point others come to depend on our activity. He contrasts someone who chooses to prepare a dinner party for their friends this coming weekend with a chef running a restaurant. It's not so much the financial compensation that separates the cases, but that the chef's customers and employees depend on her showing up and undertaking the activity. I do assume that, short of a radical reorganization of society, most adult persons of both sexes will spend a significant chunk of their lives on "work" that involves significant training, accumulated experiential expertise, and some degree of remuneration, as opposed to "dabbling" or a "hobby." I do think the rise of a gig economy and an extensive online market means more people will undertake work that does not conform to a certain framework. Finally, I do think that questions must be raised about various forms of household and community care work, historically women's work, that are evidently "work"—indeed, are certainly so by O'Donovan's definition—but are not recognized and remunerated as such. {I can't add a "comment" to footnote, but there seems to be a word missing in this sentence; but I also could be misreading it.}

first principles are matters of *final ends*—of “happiness,” of teleology. Marriage and family arguments are teleological. Dignity can tell us something about the *basic conditions* that should hold for respecting persons, but in all persons and in all situations, not just work. Yet it doesn’t tell us what work is *for*.

Immediately, we meet another challenge: the notion of heavenly *rest* tempts us to view work instrumentally—just as sexuality was long viewed largely in instrumental terms, since, after all, there is no marriage in heaven, either (Mt. 22:30). So just as marriage was viewed primarily in terms of reproduction of the species, so too work aims merely at survival. Indeed, at worst and erroneously, some in the tradition viewed work as merely a punishment for sin, as some viewed marriage simply as a remedy for lust.

There is an undeniable element of truth in such eschatological asceticism—St. Paul remains unmarried (1 Cor. 7:7, 26), or Jesus points to the lilies of the field (Mt. 6:28). Yet, in light of the universal call to holiness, I take it that all sides of Catholic debate have wanted to repudiate such limited understandings of sexuality. So too must we repudiate a simply instrumentalized conception of work. Instead, we must start by *affirming* the goodness of work—and its goodness in eschatological terms, in terms that display how work is partially constitutive of what is ultimate. We must come to see work, as we have come to see marriage, in light of Vatican II’s universal call to holiness, and especially in light of our vocation to self-gift.<sup>12</sup> I think Catholics should fundamentally opt for the side of Schwartz (better work) rather than Suzman (less work)—probably not a surprise, given I wrote a book against luxury!<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> See John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (May 1, 1991), 41, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_01051991\\_centesimus-annus.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html) (hereafter cited as CA), where he re-describes alienation in capitalist societies in terms of “forms of social...production and consumption” that “make it more difficult to offer this gift of self and to establish this solidarity between people.”

<sup>13</sup> Cloutier, *The Vice of Luxury: Economic Excess in a Consumer Age* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015). Jeremy Posadas, “The Refusal of Work in Christian Ethics and Theology,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 45.2 (2017), 330-361, outlines effectively what could be understood as the Christian anti-work position, one that explicitly defends the “refusal to work” and raises suspicions about the whole tradition. It would take a whole article to respond to Posadas’ precise claims. One should note two key things about his article. First, its advocacy for “less work” is predicated on the core idea that work is *not* an intrinsic element of our humanity. If Posadas is correct, then the basic claim (not just the details) of *Laborem Exercens* is simply false. Second, in his postulates at the end of the article, he (presumably intentionally) equates work with “the earning of wages” or the activity that supports those who earn wages. It is true that God does not “work for wages,” but (in quite different ways), neither does the small-business owner and neither do I. I certainly don’t write plenaries and articles “for wages.” It seems that Posadas’ claims here seek to emphasize (a) his basic suggestion that the connection between work and daily necessities should be severed, and (b) the unjust conditions of a particular (not insignificant) group of workers. I (not Posadas) might define that group in terms of those whose wages offer little or no room for economic flexibility and whose labor is directly tied to hours worked. Those who work long hours in a tech company, a law firm, or a university are presumably choosing this, or at least they have other options for their lives. Posadas insists that we not treat work in the abstract, but should always make it particular. I agree—and the very wide range of particularities of work in an advanced economy suggest an analysis more complex than the one he offers!

How should we describe work in light of the call to holiness? I will first make a distinction between “good-enough work” and “good work,” and then distinguish between “good work” and what I will call “sacramental work,” work that is understood as an effective sign of the fullness of God’s kingdom.

Catholic ethics has spent most of its time talking about achieving good-enough work—work that is not fundamentally unjust or contrary to the dignity of the worker.<sup>14</sup> This is certainly a very important task; nothing I say here should be understood to diminish it. From Leo XIII onward, the modern encyclicals have stressed a basic set of themes: first and foremost, the just wage, but also safe working conditions, limitations on how much work can be extracted, and rights of association. Christine Hinze’s recent benchmark book, *Radical Sufficiency*, outlines this tradition in the American context comprehensively.<sup>15</sup> She starts from the work of John Ryan in overcoming “subnormal conditions,”<sup>16</sup> and then admirably expands his lenses to include issues like race and gender that were too often rendered invisible.

Achieving “good-enough” work is necessary... but limited. In a sense, it is no different from a sexual ethic that focuses on “thou shalt not sin.” It is minimalist. It defines a basic level of adequacy for work, ruling out “inhuman” work, but it does not yet address the role of work in flourishing. As I said, left to itself, it tends to view work—as was the case with sexuality in pre-Vatican II theology—as little more than an instrumental reality of creaturely survival. As Pius XI said in *Quadragesimo Anno*, “Man is born to labor as the birds to fly.”<sup>17</sup>

By contrast, John Paul II notes at the outset of *Laborem Exercens* that properly speaking, “only man [sic] works,” identifying work as “one of the characteristics that distinguishes man from the rest of creatures.”<sup>18</sup> Even what the pope defines as the “objective dimension” of work involves the exercise of a dominion that goes beyond mere “daily bread.” Human work is not simply toil, but involves the development of tools and knowledge that collaboratively generate a larger commons benefitting all (*LE* 5). John Paul also develops the (more morally determinative) subjective dimension of work: work is meant to make us more and more *human*, it is good for our humanity (*LE* 6).<sup>19</sup> In Hinze’s book, this more expansive vision was present even in Ryan’s work—Hinze calls it a “dream of livelihood” within “a broader, Catholic understanding of personal and common flourishing” that included developing a person’s capacities,

---

<sup>14</sup> Brian Matz, *Introducing Protestant Social Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 126, also provides a nice example of Christians laying down benchmarks for good-enough in the 1908 “social creed” of the Methodists.

<sup>15</sup> Christine Firer Hinze, *Radical Sufficiency: Work, Livelihood, and a US Catholic Economic Ethic* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Hinze, *Radical Sufficiency*, 269.

<sup>17</sup> Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* (May 15, 1931), 61, [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19310515\\_quadragesimo-anno.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html) (hereafter cited as *QA*).

<sup>18</sup> John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (September 14, 1981), introductory paragraph, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091981\\_laborem-exercens.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html) (hereafter cited as *LE*).

<sup>19</sup> This is the basic sense he describes with the aphorism “work is for man, not man for work.”

communities, and spiritual yearnings.<sup>20</sup> Lovely. Yet this idea of truly good work has not received sufficient development.

How to describe it—what are its ends? Schwartz talks about work that engages us so much that at least some of the time, it is “fun.” It offers us sufficient autonomy to build skills and meet new challenges. It gives us opportunities for enlivening collaboration with others. And most important, Schwartz suggests, we find the work “meaningful” in the sense that what we do seems to make a difference in the world, whether small or large. There are no shortage of examples of this. Schwartz discusses an oft-cited intensive study of how hospital custodians understood the significance of their work, and how this understanding shaped the way they fulfilled their daily responsibilities.<sup>21</sup> Wendell Berry has led a generation of imaginations, including mine, back to a vision of a food system involving truly good work. No one needs to explain to a room of teachers this sort of good work. And finally, I was struck by the remarkable (if also disturbing) approach to good work that Michael Jordan reveals in the recent documentary *The Last Dance*.

Note that the *opposite* of good work might still meet the criteria for good-enough work. We may feel like a cog in a machine (*LE 15*) or be governed by managerially-established, competitive carrot-stick incentive systems.<sup>22</sup> But this “not-good work” can still pay a just wage, offer secure benefits, give us vacation, and avoid breaking any laws where we might cheat or steal from a competitor.

Moreover, this distinction is invaluable in explaining two different sets of polling data from Gallup. On the one hand, Gallup has long done a complex operation of polling on what they call “workplace engagement,” trying to help employers identify whether workers are, as they describe it, “involved in, enthusiastic about and committed to their work and workplace.”<sup>23</sup> Roughly speaking, this is “good work,” especially in its subjective dimension—it suggests the actualizing of one’s human capacities that is central to John Paul’s description. Over time, the percentage of “engaged workers” has generally hovered around a third, sometimes rising (as it has over the last few years), sometimes dropping back. That data suggests that all too many workers are not really developing themselves as subjects in the way John Paul describes.

Yet, in a different poll, Gallup has for decades annually surveyed workers on a range of workplace issues, asking basic questions about satisfaction: are you satisfied

<sup>20</sup> Hinze, *Radical Sufficiency*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Schwartz, *Why We Work*, 12-20. For the details of the study, see Amy Wrzesniewski and J.E. Dutton, “Crafting a Job: Revisioning Employees as Active Crafters of Their Work,” *Academy of Management Review* 26 (2001), 179-201.

<sup>22</sup> Schwartz, *Why We Work*, 36-60.

<sup>23</sup> Gallup Association, “What is Workplace Engagement?”; [https://www.gallup.com/workplace/285674/improve-employee-engagement-workplace.aspx?g\\_source=link\\_WWWV9&g\\_medium=speedbump#ite-285701](https://www.gallup.com/workplace/285674/improve-employee-engagement-workplace.aspx?g_source=link_WWWV9&g_medium=speedbump#ite-285701). They also track “actively disengaged” workers, defined as “those who have miserable work experiences and spread their unhappiness to their colleagues.” This number in 2020 was 13-14%. Jim Harter, “US Employee Engagement Rises After Wild 2020,” February 26, 2021; <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/330017/employee-engagement-rises-following-wild-2020.aspx>

with your pay, your benefits, your job security, your bosses, your safety, and the like.<sup>24</sup> Strikingly and consistently, workers say that in their current job, they are “completely” or “somewhat” satisfied with all these things at levels well over 70 percent, and often into the 80 percent range. For example, asked about their boss, year after year, around 10 percent of workers say they are somewhat or completely dissatisfied. And when asked the question about their overall job satisfaction, almost 40 to well over 50 percent respond they are “completely satisfied,” and 83-92 percent are completely or somewhat satisfied.<sup>25</sup>

What are we to make of this data? I admit when I first found it, I was quite taken aback. Certainly we shouldn't read it as if we've arrived at the worker's paradise. However, it should make us think twice about how exactly to name the problems we are facing. It is not 1891, nor 1931, at least in the United States and other developed economies. We have, in fact, achieved good-enough conditions for work for a large amount of the population. Should we, as Francis always reminds us, “go to the margins” of these numbers, seek out those who are still ground down, and especially those who are often very fragily connected to the labor market? Absolutely.<sup>26</sup>

But we should also recognize that the task we have now should be named differently from the task of a century ago. We must hold onto the “good enough” level, which faces real challenges (just ask the formerly good-enough taxi drivers or hotel workers about Uber and Airbnb), but also recognize that “good enough” is *not* good enough for a society with such abundance. It should not be a privilege of the few to enjoy one's work or find it meaningful. Truly good work is needed for all.

Yet we should not even stop there. Analogously to marriage, we can come to recognize that work can be “meaningful” in a supernatural sense, too; it can be graced. As one saint put it, “the sanctification of ordinary work” is “the hinge of true spirituality” for those “who have decided to become close to God while being at the same time fully involved in temporal affairs.”<sup>27</sup>

As Benedict XVI argued most clearly in *Caritas in Veritate*, the “astonishing experience of *gift*” must animate all of our work. He notes that all our economic activity should be marked by “quotas of gratuitousness,”<sup>28</sup> stressing that not only does every economic decision involve a moral judgment of justice, but also “works redolent of the

---

<sup>24</sup> Gallup, “Work and Workplace (Historical Trends);” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1720/work-work-place.aspx>

<sup>25</sup> During the convention presentation, the overall satisfaction data from 1993 through 2020 was displayed via slide.

<sup>26</sup> For example, the interlocking challenges here (substance abuse, lack of mental health treatment, family breakdown, and the effects of mass incarceration, to name only a few) require a much more comprehensive approach. Dr. Gemma Tulud Cruz's plenary at this conference also outlined extensively the challenges faced especially in the global labor market, although even here, there is considerable data suggesting large populations have moved out of poverty in recent decades. In any case, as I mentioned, the thrust of my paper presumes the necessity of protecting and enforcing good-enough work.

<sup>27</sup> St. Josemaria Escriva, “Working for God,” in *Friends of God* (London: Scepter, 1981), 61. I am indebted to my wife Melissa Moschella for this reference.

<sup>28</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009), 39, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html) (hereafter cited as CV).

spirit of gift” (CV 37), where we go the extra mile and give of ourselves beyond what is due to others. Can this language of self-gift be abused? Certainly—as it sometimes has been in sexuality. But that doesn’t mean we disregard it. It is still true that work itself has sacramental potential, that rightly understood, it can share in the hope of CST to “shape the earthly city in unity and peace, rendering it to some degree an anticipation and a prefiguration of the undivided city of God” (CV 7).

What does this sacramentalized work look like? I’d highly recommend Michael Naughton’s recent book *Getting Work Right*, which lives up to its title. Naughton’s book follows in a line of reflection that focuses on Sabbath, observing, “If we don’t get Sunday right, we won’t get Monday right.”<sup>29</sup> This is a paradoxical but central theological truth about the sacramental life as a whole: we best honor the thing itself by reminding ourselves that it *represents* something much larger. Just as sacramental marriage ultimately takes its meaning by a reference outside itself, so too sacramental work refers outside itself. Naughton prioritizes what he calls “primary institutions” of worship, family, and all forms of true friendship.<sup>30</sup> This is “leisure” in the correct sense, but it certainly differs from so much of what we think of as leisure—above all, the reference points of God and others are the critical ones. Perhaps we could be said to have this “leisure” best as a society if we had no such thing as a “leisure industry” (though that is an exaggeration).<sup>31</sup>

However, though sacramentalized work refers outside itself, to “Sunday,” it possesses its own value, too. The goal, Naughton rightly notes, is to achieve a “wholeness” of life—not simply a work/life “balance” but a “genuine integration.”<sup>32</sup> Here, the notion of gift is crucial; we give ourselves to the work and to the others with whom and for whom we work.<sup>33</sup> Theologian John Hughes’ study, *The End of Work*, also emphasizes this extension of sacramentality in ordinary jobs. He criticizes any theology that involves “the removal of *divine intrinsic value* from the material,

<sup>29</sup> Naughton, *Getting Work Right: Labor and Leisure in a Fragmented World* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2019), xi.

<sup>30</sup> Naughton, *Getting Work Right*, 59.

<sup>31</sup> Obviously a whole paper could be written on leisure, but see Conor Kelly’s *The Fullness of Free Time* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020) for a recent insightful treatment. The complexity of leisure in the social discourse of the last 150 years is well-displayed in Robert Snape, “Leisure Studies, Leisure History, and The Meanings of Leisure”; <https://leisurestudies.org/leisure-studies-leisure-history-and-the-meanings-of-leisure/>. See also Joseph Ratzinger, who argues that true liberation comes from work that is “integrated with culture” and that concerns itself with the “deepest questions” and “community in authentic humanity.” See “Freedom and Liberation,” tr. Stephen Wentworth Arndt and Michael J. Miller, in *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 239-255, at 246.

<sup>32</sup> Naughton, *Getting Work Right*, 47.

<sup>33</sup> One might contrast this approach with an example like the film *Babette’s Feast*, which is often used as an exemplar of Catholic sacramentality. Insofar as the point is to combat an overly-ascetical Protestantism, it is great. But it is kind of an easy win—who will not appreciate Babette’s great generosity and the conviviality of a feast? Moreover, the entire circumstance of the movie makes the occasion a mega-Sabbath: Babette wins the lottery and blows it all on one, big feast. Presumably the next day, it’s back to the basics! Babette “moments” are surely great, but the real challenge is how to infuse this into daily work.



empirical world,” warning that such approaches simply abandon the workplace to “the world of total utility.”<sup>34</sup>

The notion of work as involving self-gift is evidently more diffuse than its focused meanings in sacramental marriage. But the decisive guide for this task is found in Benedict’s *Spe Salvi*, an encyclical whose contribution to CST is often overlooked. In it, Benedict offers a radically communal vision of Christian hope for eternal life, criticizing the tradition for shrinking its eschatological horizon to the individual, and thereby ceding the grounds of social salvation to others. The heart of this communal hope: the overcoming of sin understood as “the destruction of the unity of the human race” via redemption understood as “the reestablishment of community.”<sup>35</sup> This can’t just happen “after working hours”; in so many ways, we can come to understand our work as contributing to this great project of reestablishing unity, a process that necessarily will go *beyond* the practice of justice, given the history of sin in which we find ourselves. It is this *communal vision of eternal life*, in which the human race is finally unified, toward which our daily work can and should be directed.

### ECONOMICS: THE DOMINANCE OF ANTI-WORK ESCHATOLOGIES

This threefold vision of the ethics of work—good-enough, good, and sacramental—within a Catholic eschatological vision is pretty easy to establish from the modern encyclicals, as I’ve indicated all too briefly. The real challenge comes when we try to bring this vision into dialogue with modern economics, in order to take the next step in the analysis: to ask what this vision requires to make it more and more a reality. Where does the root problem lie? The debate often quickly moves to a market-state binary: what should markets and/or states do? This is an *important* question, but it’s not the *first* question we should raise. I’ll assert here that such an argument is interminable insofar as one can easily point to evidence for how both markets and states can generate conditions that foster bad work, and both can also foster much good work, in all three ways.<sup>36</sup> The battle of anecdotes and even of structural examples does not produce a clear winner. So, both/and, not either/or.

But there’s a more serious *and prior* issue. Instead of questions of markets and states, we need to start the dialogue with modern economics in a different place: what eschatology is implied in modern economic thought, whether market-oriented or statist?<sup>37</sup> And how do the structures and culture generated by these theories affect how agents approach the world of work? It would take many monographs to handle these issues in sufficient detail, so for now, let me move quickly to the central knot that needs to be unraveled. Modern capitalist economies produce a kind of schizophrenia about work.

---

<sup>34</sup> John Hughes, *The End of Work: Theological Critiques of Capitalism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 221-231.

<sup>35</sup> Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* (November 30, 2007), 14.

<sup>36</sup> You get Michael Novak on the market side, and the progressive tradition’s portfolio of state policies on the other.

<sup>37</sup> I am using eschatology here loosely to indicate what is ultimate in some sort of last-things end state for the economy.

On the one hand, many write in the tradition of Max Weber's classic thesis: capitalism requires a "work ethic," a commitment to hard work and saving that maximizes production and rewards those who are willing to work. The capitalist imperative to produce require more and more "work," eventually grinding down the most vulnerable workers in the process, and worse, making them believe it is noble to be ground down in this way.

On the other hand, standard economics assumes what might be called a "consumerist eschatology": the models presume that all work is "bad," a disvalue or cost to both firms and workers that each seeks to minimize. At the top of the income ladder are those who want to consume without working at all. But in the mainstream in which most people live, the models assume that firms seek to minimize labor (at least labor *cost*) by adopting more efficient production schemes and wage workers seek to minimize labor (at least labor *time*), attempting to sell the work at the highest possible price presumably with as much time off as possible. This set-up is obviously inherently conflictual—firms want low-cost, high-output labor and laborers want more compensation and more time off. But since both parties have some self-interests at stake—firms needs workers, workers need firms—they strike a bargain.<sup>38</sup>

Where does the bargain lead? There are of course market defenders—let the workers and firms strike their own bargains—and detractors—the state needs to protect vulnerable workers from the obvious power of large-scale capital. But the important thing is that both types of economists presume the same consumerist eschatology. On the one hand, defenders of neoclassical economics suggest the market works fairly well in sorting out this bargain while the overall productivity of society expands.<sup>39</sup> In Harvard economist Greg Mankiw's textbook, he assumes that the question to be explained in this bargain is about the wage level, which is a matter of "why some people live in mansions, ride in limousines, and vacation on the French Riviera, while other people live in small apartments, ride a bus, and vacation in their own backyards."<sup>40</sup> Differentiated wages are *about leisure consumption*.<sup>41</sup> Harvard's George Borjas recites the same bargain: labor supply is defined in terms of workers *who seek well-being by consuming goods* "such as fancy cars, nice homes... and leisure." More tellingly, he

---

<sup>38</sup> George Borjas, *Labor Economics*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2016), 4, describes these maximizing negotiations as the basic equilibrium defining the labor market.

<sup>39</sup> Economists do presume a set of worker protections and the like, such that all workers are theoretically protected from gross abuses. The question of what "worker protections" means is obviously contested, and the problem of extending such protections to those on the margins is significant, but few economists today argue for a pure-laissez-faire system.

<sup>40</sup> N. Gregory Mankiw, *Principles of Economics*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Marion, OH: Southwestern/Cengage, 2009), 413.

<sup>41</sup> To be fair, Mankiw notes plenty of problems with the basic model—the nature of some work may be more pleasant or enjoyable, and at certain levels the agent may prefer less work or at least less work time rather than enhanced consumption. Yet even *that* trade-off is described as hours spent working versus "hours you have to watch TV, enjoy dinner with friends, or pursue your favorite hobby" (*Principles of Economics*, 399). Even worse, it is then dismissed, since it would make the labor supply curve bend backwards, and therefore complicate the model too much. See John Medaille, *Toward a Truly Free Market* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2010) for an accessible Catholic distributist critique of how economics models labor, including the key point about backward-bending curves.

notes that the slope of the labor supply curve is understood in terms of “how many additional dollars’ worth of goods it would take to ‘bribe’ the person into giving up some leisure time.”<sup>42</sup> It is interesting that Borjas supplies scare quotes around the word “bribe”!

Others are more skeptical about the bargain benefitting both parties: CST assumes that the state needs to provide what John Paul described as a “strong juridical framework” (CA 42)<sup>43</sup> for such bargains that (at least) maintains social peace and (at best) provides Keynesian demand management via government fiscal policy to save both firms and workers from excessive and destructive swings in the business cycle.<sup>44</sup> Through progressive taxation, the state also steps in to undertake some redistributive taxation of rents. Those skeptical of the sufficiency of the Keynesian path can take the socialist step: instead of just structuring the firm-worker relationship, the state can take over the means of production and direct them for the benefit of the workers themselves.<sup>45</sup>

*But to what end?* Here the visions of Keynes and Marx ultimately agree with the Harvard economists: less work, more leisure. One author captured this eschatology by entitling his 2019 book “Fully Automated Luxury Communism.”<sup>46</sup> When we center on market-versus-state arguments over “capitalism,” we miss the built-in “consumerist eschatology”—the assumption by all parties that work is something to be minimized, and that at best it is an instrumental reality, enabling consumption. Work has only John Paul’s objective dimension: it provides resources to spend outside the job, and it produces technologies and processes that further minimize the demands of work. These models describe how labor and wages work *in the dysfunctional context John Paul dubs “superdevelopment”*—a super-abundance of goods with no regard for “being” more.<sup>47</sup> And from the employer side, especially as the state does a better job supporting

---

<sup>42</sup> Borjas, *Labor Economics*, 21, 30.

<sup>43</sup> Even Pius XI notes that “capital...was long able to appropriate to itself excessive advantages” (QA 54).

<sup>44</sup> This is basically the picture assumed by the American postwar economy, with its “Treaty of Detroit” tamping down disruptive strife between workers and big companies and attentive countercyclical fiscal policy managing supply and demand in the overall economy. For an account of how unusual this period was, from the global dominance of America amidst the ruins of WWII to the homogeneity promoted by the rise of a mass media and decades of immigration restrictions, see Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

<sup>45</sup> To be fair, Marx was very reserved in his eschatological description. Robert Heilbroner (*The Worldly Philosophers*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986]), 162, notes that “there is almost nothing that looks beyond the day of judgment to see what the future is like,” and Henry Spiegel, (*The Growth of Economic Thought*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. [Durham: Duke University Press, 1991]), 476, notes that Marx wanted to resist the typical utopian descriptions of other socialists of the time (e.g. Owen). Still, Spiegel includes his famous quote about fishing during the day and criticism after dinner.

<sup>46</sup> The book is by Aaron Bastani, and summarized by Annie Lowrey, “Give Us Fully Automated Luxury Communism,” *The Atlantic* (June 20, 2019); <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/06/give-us-fully-automated-luxury-communism/592099/>

<sup>47</sup> John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (December 30, 1987), 28.

the worker, this means as many smart machines as possible. *Wall-E* world is not far away.<sup>48</sup>

*Wall-E* world—or more seriously, *Brave New World*—is in effect the theoretical economic eschaton. It is the place where socialist and neoclassical economic eschatologies converge, where work is minimized and where all remaining work is good-enough work. But does it generate good work? Or sacramental work? Yet even before we get to *Wall-E* world, we should recognize another problem with these consumerist models of the worker-firm bargain: how poorly they actually describe the mindset of so many workers and even firms in today’s world.<sup>49</sup> Neither maximizing income nor maximizing comfort and ease describes the approach to work seen in the diverse examples of farmers in Wendell Berry, Michael Jordan’s dances, Schwartz’s hospital custodians, and many aspects of the jobs we do as academic theologians. In fact, it misses almost everything important about those and hundreds of other examples of *good* work. Does good work require a certain amount of rest, fair compensation, moments where going to work is “easy”? Sure. But it would be all wrong to focus on agents *maximizing* these, just as it would be wrong to model firm behavior exclusively as profit maximization. Since the model distorts the agents involved in the labor bargain, it also offers us very little insight into what we really want to know, which is: what makes *these* custodians and *these* professors and *these* farmers and *these* basketball players possible? What are the conditions and structures that, while they can never guarantee good work (since by definition, good and sacramental work involves a certain sort of agency), can enable it and foster it?

The summary version of this discussion is that much market-versus-state economic debate is of little help to us because it doesn’t actually aim us at a *worker’s* paradise. It aims us at a *consumer’s* paradise.<sup>50</sup> Now it’s important to be fair here:

---

<sup>48</sup> *Wall-E* is a 2008 Pixar/Disney about a time when the earth has been completely trashed, and humans now live in artificial space environments in which they consume resort-like pleasures and whirl around from place to place in autonomous vehicular seats staring at constantly-on video screens. For reference, the iPhone had only been introduced to the world the year prior. Slides were shown during the convention presentation to illustrate these scenes.

<sup>49</sup> Economic historians routinely note that the effects of capitalism on workers tend to imagine one particular form of worker, one calling it “stereotypes of the English capitalism of the 1850’s” (Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers*, 169), and another noting the assumption that capitalism means the “increasing misery” and size of Marx’s “proletariat” (Speigel, *The Growth of Economic Thought*, 472). But work under capitalism turns out to be more complicated than that.

<sup>50</sup> At an anthropological level, this conflictual frame also plays into a “good people-bad people” understanding of the world. This fundamental assumption of a divided world was rightly critiqued from the beginning by Leo XIII, who stated astutely in *Rerum Novarum* (May 15, 1891), 15, [https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_15051891\\_rerum-novarum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html) (hereafter cited as *RN*), that the “great mistake” in the doctrinaire socialism of his time was “the idea that class is naturally hostile to class; that rich and poor are intended by nature to live at war with one another.” There are clearly structural critiques to be made of economics—the consumerist eschatology I’ve described is one such “structure of sin”—but the underlying anthropology of a world divided into heroes and villains should be rejected by a Christian anthropology that sees all people as sinners offered redemption in Christ. People are not Rousseauian innocents simply distorted by bad social structures. It is also the case, however, that we are not just self-interested, greedy knaves, an assumption that

setting strict Marxism to the side, mainstream economics, whether more market-oriented or more robustly Keynesian on government intervention, has historically focused on consumption because the problem to be solved was scarcity.<sup>51</sup> Such “scarcity economics” is often criticized by invoking Keynes’s speculative essay, *Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren*. In that famous essay, written in 1930, Keynes suggests that within a century, productivity increases will in effect reduce returns to capital to zero. Productive capital will no longer be scarce, and so the “economic problem” will be solved.<sup>52</sup> I agree with those who have recognized that, at least in developed countries, we have (in the aggregate at least) overcome (this type of) scarcity, *and yet* we still have an economic system founded on it.<sup>53</sup> As if we don’t have enough bread to go around!

Where I disagree with many anti-scarcity accounts is their idea that the problem that remains is simply intervening in the system in order to redistribute the artificially-scarce goods, thus achieving the universal destination of goods.

I disagree with this move to redistribution for two reasons. One, because (as I discuss at some length in my luxury book) one cannot overcome scarcity per se by redistribution *unless people self-limit their market desires to some level of basic necessities*.<sup>54</sup> Keynes himself *explicitly* distinguishes between “absolute” and “relative” needs. His post-scarcity economics is only about producing enough so that *absolute* “needs are satisfied[.]”<sup>55</sup>

But, a second reason is the neglect of good work: redistribution of the spoils of productive late capitalism still implies that fatal consumerist eschatology, that the

---

too often lies underneath apologetics for capitalism. These contrasting anthropologies could be seen as another way to contrast with the Christian vision of the person, good but fallen, in need of both the development of virtue over time and the gift of forgiveness and mercy on the way. Sacramental work would aim at both of these.

<sup>51</sup> As Alfred Marshall, Keynes’s predecessor and teacher put it, the purpose of economics is to identify “the cause and cure of poverty.” Cited in Heilbroner, ed., *Teachings from the Worldly Philosophy* (New York: Norton, 1996), 210.

<sup>52</sup> John Maynard Keynes, “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren,” in *Essays in Persuasion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932), 358-73.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Charles M.A. Clark, “Wealth as Abundance and Scarcity: Perspectives from Catholic Social Thought and Economic Theory,” in Helen Alford, et al., ed., *Rediscovering Abundance* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 28-56.

<sup>54</sup> Cloutier, *The Vice of Luxury*, 160-169. Can we have enough food for all? Certainly. Can we have good schools for all? Not as long as some people want “better” schools and are willing to pay (in various ways) for them. Can we have (as one book puts it) Ferraris for all (Daniel Ben-Ami, [Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2012])? No, because people buy Ferraris in part for their symbolic value that obtains because of their scarcity, and if everyone has one, it won’t be a Ferrari any more. Economists like Fred Hirsch (*The Social Limits to Growth* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976]) and Robert Frank (*Falling Behind* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007]) are clear.

<sup>55</sup> Keynes, *Economic Possibilities*, 365. He continues: “in the sense that we prefer to devote our further energies to *non-economic* purposes.” Thus, highly productive economies cannot grow their way to Keynes’s post-scarcity situation unless people (of all classes) curb their wants. Without curbing wants, scarcity competition just reemerges no matter how much stuff there is.

universal destination of goods means *as little work as possible*.<sup>56</sup> What distinguishes Catholic social thought quite sharply here is the fundamental insight, articulated most clearly in *Laborem Exercens*, that capital should serve labor. John Paul insists that the priority of persons over things means that the accumulation of both natural resources and capital must be ordered to empowering the “subject” character of the person, to increase not simply their “output,” but their humanity. “The only legitimate title” to the possession of the means of production, whether by market or state, “is *that they should serve labor*, and thus, by serving labor, they should make possible the achievement of the first principle of this order, namely, the universal destination of goods and the right to common use of them” (*LE* 14, italics in original). Thus, the true picture of just relations in a society is that *the universal destination of goods should come about through labor*.<sup>57</sup> In *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis explicitly reiterates this, noting that “helping the poor financially” is only a “provisional solution,” and “the broader objective should always be to allow them a dignified life through work,” adding “there is no poverty worse than that which takes away work and the dignity of work.”<sup>58</sup> Once we have beyond-necessity productivity as a society, what we should seek, as agents *and* structurally, is not less work, but better work. Not more compensation, but better use of a firm’s resources to make all workers not simply good-enough, but empowered for good work, and capable of sacramental quotas of gratuitousness. Not a consumer’s paradise, but a worker’s paradise, where the primary abundance is not more and more things, but more and more genuinely rewarding work for all.

### SCENES FROM THE FUTURE: THE END OF WORK OR WORKING FOR THE PROPER ENDS?

What does this mean in practical terms? All too briefly, I want to offer three cautions and point to three constructive pathways that can orient us as we move to application.

First caution: “good work” requires attention to both moral agents and micro-structures in the workplace—which is to say that it is greatly aided by the precision tools of critical realist sociology. As Daniel Finn, Daniel Daly, Matthew Shadle, myself

---

<sup>56</sup> In this regard, Keynes’s own life is instructive. Despite clearly possessing the resources to work little or even not at all, he chose to work incessantly his whole life—and not simply on his scholarship, but on innumerable institutional tasks he could have easily left to others. Further, whatever the productivity imagined for capital in Keynes’s scheme, his own way of life seems to rely heavily on the service work of others. Perhaps one could imagine a virtually costless life of zoom meetings, Jetsons-style automat meals, and Netflix streaming, but it strikes me that he—and we—would instead prefer train travel, convivial in-person campuses, manually-prepared meals, and live theatrical performances!

<sup>57</sup> This claim likely constitutes the basic contrast of my account here with the aforementioned anti-work account of Jeremy Posadas. Posadas contests in particular the tradition of connecting basic necessities to labor, while I have argued that labor is not merely instrumental to these needs, but rather that labor participation should be understood as intrinsic to how a post-scarcity society of abundance would function.

<sup>58</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (October 3, 2020), 162, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html) (hereafter cited as *FT*).

and others have argued, critical realism allows careful attention to the *interaction of agency and structures*.<sup>59</sup> Good work is necessarily a matter of developing and exercising a certain sort of agency—and we need to give an account of that “virtue work ethic” in a way that is not simply “work hard.” Yet this development of the virtuous worker is shaped by structural realities—these, however, are micro-realities, ones that vary from workplace to workplace, ones that look different in hospitals versus grocery stores versus universities. A similar attention to micro-structural realities might also address the real problem of moral luck, which is the subject of my respondent Kate Ward’s excellent forthcoming book from Georgetown. One-size-fits-all macro-structural solutions simply do not fit to address these problems. Indeed, first of all, we should heed James Keenan’s consistent calls for the university to focus on its own ethics, raising tough questions in our own institutions that we can do more than give papers about.<sup>60</sup>

Second caution: reliance on material incentives to self-interest—whether delivered via market or state—are fine to a point. Yet studies show that simply incentivizing self-interest has diminishing returns, some perverse outcomes, and, in the long run, erodes agent motivation toward shared and intrinsic goods.<sup>61</sup> So the categories of good and sacramental work are not chiefly going to be about getting self-interest right, but in fact shaping agents and organizations and citizens to get beyond the “what’s in it for me” question.

A third caution is to recognize that conversations about “the future of work”—and especially the end of work—are complicated, speculative, and produce much disagreement among experts. In a longer space, I would engage in some detail three very different, yet all very expert, analyses.<sup>62</sup> For this plenary, we simply need to

---

<sup>59</sup> Daniel Finn, ed., *Moral Agency Within Social Structures and Culture: A Primer in Critical Realism* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020).

<sup>60</sup> For example, isn’t the reward system at universities skewed toward senior faculty? But isn’t the problem really not faculty at all, but “administrative creep”? Or isn’t the problem that well-off institutions simply add indefinitely to their advantage over others, in the ceaseless quest to the eschatological goal of becoming Harvard, while lecturing poorer institutions who can’t charge high tuition and maintain endowments that provide enormous stock returns? These are really difficult questions for organizations to have frank, open discussions about, even though such things are known and said privately all the time. I am not suggesting magic-bullet solutions; indeed, the critical realist focus on specific agency/structure situations should excite us to look at the possibilities of improving work in our own backyards.

<sup>61</sup> See the detailed and nuanced series of studies in Samuel Bowles, *The Moral Economy: Why Good Incentives are No Substitute for Good Citizens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

<sup>62</sup> For a “this-time-is-no-different” analysis that suggests the pattern we have long seen of technological disruption simply leading to new jobs and roles in other areas of society, see Carl Benedikt Frey, *The Technology Trap* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019). For a “no, this-time-is-different” account that suggests smart machines are much more disruptive than farm machinery and factory production, see Daniel Susskind, *A World Without Work* (New York: Metropolitan/Holt, 2020). For an analysis that suggests the disruption caused by current technologies simply can’t be compared with the “one-time-only” leaps in labor-saving associated with electrification, water systems, combustion engines, and even basic home appliances like the refrigerator and the washing machine, see Robert Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

recognize that the future of work is not a certainty like gravity: rather, it involves questions about technology that, as Francis reminds us, “are not neutral” but “are in reality decisions about the kind of society we want to build.”<sup>63</sup> To use a blunt yet complicated example, I am all for just wages, but a \$15 *national* minimum wage is a good way to kill small retail for all but the highest-end luxury goods, particularly in lower cost of living parts of the country.<sup>64</sup> Amazon has zero problems paying \$15/hour in part because it has a lot fewer workers, no matter where it operates. Plus, it clearly can automate to scale in ways others cannot. A \$15 national minimum wage means advantage Amazon, which is a decision about the kind of society we want to build. As one economist puts it in explaining this future, reflecting the usual consumerist eschatology, “this is simply because people are more expensive than machines. The system will do everything in its power to get its work done with the minimum number of people. It is going to try to shed people whenever and wherever it can.”<sup>65</sup> The context for his argument is the new low-wage field of video-game players, in which companies hire low-skill players to provide weak but still human competition for wealthier players, who will then vie to show off and show up these weaker players by buying various in-game enhancements!<sup>66</sup> We shouldn’t allow some broad hypothetical scenario to determine these choices. Nor is economics a science that is deterministic in this way, in any case. If we want to incentivize good work, instead of Amazon and video gaming vanity aids, we can do it.

How? I want to conclude by noting three bodies of work that offer promising steps outside the consumerist eschatology of traditional economics and instead develop policy packages that consider how to sustain abundance (i.e., the universal destination of goods) *through* labor, rather than around it. The three approaches are potentially complementary. The first is best represented by Oren Cass, a conservative policy wonk seeking to move Republican economic policy away from what he calls the misguided “economic piety” of globalist neo-liberalism, and toward a “productive pluralism.” His key critique is that recent economic policy has made the “wrong trade-off,” prioritizing the welfare of consumers over the welfare of producers.<sup>67</sup> He offers a host of policy paths (some more debatable than others), but the most important is adjusting the tax and regulatory incentives that in their current form discourage both firms and workers from low and mid-skill work.

The second is represented by the Italian economic school advocating a “civil economy.” The school’s most prominent advocates have developed their approach in

---

<sup>63</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’* (May 24, 2015), 107, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).

<sup>64</sup> I would stress that localities may well be able to pay and have good reason to set local minimum wages that are \$15 or even higher.

<sup>65</sup> Edward Castronova, “Players for Hire: Gamers and the Future of Low-Skill Work,” in *The Digital Transformation of Labor*, eds. Anthony Larsson and Robin Teigland (New York: Routledge, 2020), 202.

<sup>66</sup> As economist Tyler Cowen more cynically puts it, there is always room for workers to show up to make high earners with disposable income feel better, whether through yoga classes, video game players, or various consumer products and services that can help them with their virtue signaling! See Cowen, *Average is Over* (New York: Dutton/Penguin, 2013), 23.

<sup>67</sup> Oren Cass, *The Once and Future Worker: A Vision for the Renewal of Work in America* (New York: Encounter, 2018), 2, 4.



explicitly Catholic terms and have influenced papal teaching, especially *Caritas in Veritate*. More so than Cass, the civil economists are critical of the way in which capitalism's focus on efficiency via "the principle of contract" has the effect of crowding out "the principle of reciprocity," as a different kind of genuinely two-way relationship.<sup>68</sup> Typical economic models make reciprocity instrumental to quantitatively-measurable contract. For example, if firms are generous to workers, the generosity is framed by traditional economists as the firm doing so for the purpose of maximizing productivity and profit. Eventually, the place of reciprocity in society shrinks, as it is squeezed from the one side by a substitution of market goods for the more human goods of relationship (since the former are more easily acquired and systemically maximized), and from the other side by relationships of disinterested charity, brought in to compensate for the failures of efficiency. This approach requires a way of attending to and encouraging existing forms of reciprocity—both measuring them at a macro level and seeing them at work structurally at a micro-level in particular workplaces.

Finally, the third, most challenging possibility might be called "the road not taken"—represented by the non-mythical histories of British Luddites, American prairie populists, and Catholic distributists. Stripped of its sometimes questionable cultural nostalgias, such a path first and foremost recognizes the importance of what one might call "proprietorship," *the ability for skilled workers to maintain agency and control over the tools and processes by which they do their work*.<sup>69</sup> Such an approach is wrongly understood to be suspicious of technology per se—the suspicion is rather of what Francis rightly condemns as the technocratic paradigm, whereby technologies are implemented in ways that fundamentally serve those with the greatest power. Douglas Rushkoff's explicit advocacy for a "digital distributism" is an interesting example. One of the earliest and most insightful chroniclers of digital culture, his *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus* explicitly recommends CST in its last chapter, in support of widespread, open-source digital platforms that are not operated for maximum profit.<sup>70</sup> The key elements of such a proposal demand something from both agents and structures. Structurally, this would require genuine dismantling of oligarchic and anti-competitive domination of the digital space. But it will also demand agents with a love of creative skill, and a formation of users in the admittedly more arduous (but ultimately more rewarding) work of learning how to take ownership in the tools of work and cooperate with others to foster that work. For Rushkoff, this

---

<sup>68</sup> Luigino Bruni and Stefano Zamagni, *Civil Economy: Efficiency, Equity, Public Happiness* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), esp. 210-215.

<sup>69</sup> The centrality of forms of worker ownership was prominent in earlier encyclicals (*QA* 61-63), and makes occasional appearances in more recent documents (*LE* 14, envisioning each worker as a "part-owner of the great workbench," or *CV* 38, on various enterprises including cooperatives based on "mutualist principles"), albeit in less specified form. For a nice, accessible reminder of the centrality of cooperatives in CST, see Christopher Dodson, "The Co-op Pope," North Dakota Catholic Conference (November 2015); <https://ndcatholic.org/yourresources/editorials/column1115/> While specific forms of ownership are varied, the key point here is enabling certain sorts of worker agency.

<sup>70</sup> Rushkoff, *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus: How Growth Became the Enemy of Prosperity* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2016), 224-239.

would mean my trying to wean myself off of Microsoft’s and Google’s products as tools on which I am utterly reliant!

What unites these proposals is that none envision the response to technological productivity advances in terms of a consumerist eschatology—that is, in terms of an ever-increasing global marketplace in which we get better and better stuff *or* in terms of a state swooping in to redistribute the wealth generated by the technologies. Instead, they aim to use the tools of productivity to create space for more good work, to upgrade not the incomes from work as much as the experience of work. In so doing, they actually require more of all of us than do the typical market-state solutions.

This “more” is in part because we have fought the fight for “good-enough” work. We did not, however, build a worker’s paradise; we built suburbia. Dilbert’s office (the Gen X example) and David Graeber’s “bullshit jobs” (the millennial example) present a different set of moral challenges than did the Homestead strikers. The “more” that is asked from us now is to rethink and elevate the ends for which we work. Instead of sending humans to Mars or inventing yet-more-miraculous devices, our aim should be to make “more” of the noble and enriching work we already know is possible. In so doing, “more” will be asked of us, too, because the standard playbooks for pathways to good-enough work aren’t as easily available for creating good work. We will need more virtuous agents *and* we will need more cooperative and attentively curated workplace structures.

This is very much consistent with the “more” that lies at the heart of recent Catholic social tradition, the more the encyclicals call integral human development, which we might consider as another name for the universal call to holiness. Paul VI describes our movement toward this:

Less human conditions: the lack of material necessities for those who are without the minimum essential for life, the moral deficiencies of those who are mutilated by selfishness. Less human conditions: oppressive social structures, whether due to the abuses of ownership or to the abuses of power, to the exploitation of workers or to unjust transactions. Conditions that are more human: the passage from misery towards the possession of necessities, victory over social scourges, the growth of knowledge, the acquisition of culture. Additional conditions that are more human: increased esteem for the dignity of others, the turning toward the spirit of poverty, cooperation for the common good, the will and desire for peace. Conditions that are still more human: the acknowledgment by man of supreme values, and of God their source and their finality. Conditions that, finally and above all, are more human: faith, a gift of God accepted by the good will of man, and unity in the charity of Christ, Who calls us all to share as sons in the life of the living God, the Father of all men<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (March 26, 1967), 21, [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-)

Observe how the passage becomes more challenging... when it moves beyond achieving good-enough conditions for all. Instead of upper-middle-class suburbia, the next step is a “spirit of poverty.” Then comes working more and more in solidarity with others, in greater peace, with greater clarity about the values that unite us. Finally, we begin to make manifest our common journey toward a supernatural destiny, to radically communal eternal life.<sup>72</sup> It is a beautiful, challenging vision, full of the same hope for church and world that animated the work of Vatican II. This vision of integral human development leading on to the eternal hope of life in communion with God and all peoples of the earth—this is the only worker’s paradise that can or will exist. Blessed are the ones who labor for this harvest.<sup>73</sup>

---

vi\_enc\_26031967\_populorum.html. This quotation was displayed on a slide rather than read aloud during the paper presentation at the convention.

<sup>72</sup> It’s this vision of Paul VI on which has been built John Paul II’s defining of structures of solidarity in which “we are all really responsible for all,” Benedict XVI’s description of an economic world infused with gratuitousness and communion, and Francis’s call for sobriety and a fundamental change of paradigm in the face of the crisis of the environment, poised to diminish so radically the most poor in the world.

<sup>73</sup> I am deeply grateful to my colleagues Christina McRorie, Daniel Finn, and William Mattison, who read and commented on a draft, and also to those who posed questions at the CTSA convention.