

## Working for the New American Consumerist Dream

What do you do? — This is not just a question with one answer. It holds more than just the explanation of a job. It gives the asker an insight into how the responder views themselves. What do you do, is really asking how do you see yourself, who are you? But the simplest answer, the one that is most likely to be given is an explanation of their job, but everyone is so much more than a 9-5 title. Yet what you do, is the work you do; but the why you do work isn't a simple answer. The American Dream changed everything. Because work was changed from what one does to survive, into what a person does to create more for themselves and their family. Work then has become the way in which Americans are able to consume more; the more we have the more we want. Because humans tend to be self-serving,. "...A human being awards himself too many goods" (Aristotle 77).

At some point during Fall Quarter I went from trying to explain work in the human condition, to trying to answer a question regarding the individual and society. Edward Carr raised somewhat the ultimate question, "Which comes first – society or the individual" (Carr 36)? comparing this quandary to the same as the hen or the egg, reminding us that in the end it's not really a question at all because "you can no more have the egg without the hen than you can have the hen without the egg" (Carr 39). And so I realized that I was looking at the question from a different view than others. Both the society and the individual play upon each other, both take the task of affirming the role of work. A person can never state that they do not need society, nor can society have a voice to silence specific parts of it. "It never ceases to

amaze me: we love ourselves more than other people, but care more about their opinion than our own" (Aurelius 162). We work for ourselves but only so much that it creates a place within the world for us to say we are here, and that's where work makes purpose specific to the individual. But although we do work seemingly for ourselves, in reality nothing is done or can be done without it affecting the whole. No aspect of work, especially if taken by the definition Hannah Arendt gives in *The Human Condition*, can be seen without applying to the whole. Work, in itself, is relevant to the world, to an artifact that is made and then put into viewing. Working for the majority of individuals is, "excellence, by definition, the presence of others is always required" (Arendt 49), so that the best work involves the presence of others in a society regardless of personal requirement for their involvement. A person must live within a society without letting the society choose how they live. The things that occur on a daily basis do not dictate the future. Be present in an event not absent, but also not encompassed by it. Everyone goes through the same things, for "work, they continued to insist, was what man was made to do" (Rodgers 29). But what sets people and their work apart is how they take experiences and use them positively to move forward.

Work once was how you survived, "it is for the clothing, and for the food, and for the shelter, by these to sustain their lives that they work" (Agee 281). But that ideal isn't as true as it was when first written. Now work is how we maintain a status in public. Buy a big house, have cars, go on vacations. Work now enables a person to visually show what they are worth- television opened the world up to the differences in how people live. Now we are bombarded with the best, biggest, and newest- all of which have a structure around how much one makes in the work that they do. Marcus Aurelius put it that, "if you don't have a consistent goal in life,

you can't live it in a consistent way" (Aurelius 155), but we now consistently strive for grandeur. Work has become the passion that enables a person to have outside passions. It lets us consume, and consume, and then consume more; realistically making work the platform of consumerism.

There is a point in a person's life where what one does makes them who they are. As children we see jobs and workers as heroes. Constantly we ask young kids what they want to be when they grow up and it is their answer that shows the innocence of their age. We hear responses like fireman, astronaut, teacher, doctor. We constantly tell them they can be anything they want to be. But is that really true? Carr said that, "as soon as we are born, the world gets to work on us and transforms us from merely biological into social units" (Carr 36), so I wonder if from the earliest age we tell kids they can do anything, but at the same time have them constantly see programs emphasizing the consumption of things without showing the work behind them, how can we expect them to go for jobs that they don't see as making them money.

Whether it was society pushing the individual or the individual pushing society into a different realm, we are now making our work less about pure survival, and more about our place within a classed system; everyone wants to "move on up". It's bleak, and sometimes depressing but what can we really do about it? My work is not my passion, but my work gives me the ability to have passions. And having the ability to pursue passions is worth the sometimes depressing outlook of over consumption. Cause in the end, from birth to death, everyone in society is striving for wealth- wealth to make them happy, secure, and in the end

“all of us are working on the same project” (Aurelius 78), searching for a place in our new American Consumerist Dream.

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