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Work and the Human Condition

**Position Paper:
Exploring the Place of Work Within the Human Condition Today**

What is the place of work within the human condition today? Ask ten people, and then be prepared to hear ten different answers. Our understanding of what work is and our ideas about its place in our lives is deeply rooted in our unique backgrounds, where we grow up, what our families and societies believe, value, and teach us, and what our passions and goals are. But even with all these variables shaping each of our answers to this question and bringing us to our own unique conclusions, I believe we can all agree on this: work is a necessity. For most of us, it's a means for putting food in our stomachs, clothes on our backs, and a roof over our heads. For some, work grows into a way to give our lives movement and direction, a way to challenge and provide ourselves a sense of purpose. Many of us give such significant chunks of time and energy to our jobs, thus we strive to weave our passions, talents, and deeply felt values into the way we earn our money. For yet others, a nine-to-five job is simply a means for financing and making possible their life's work which is cultivated out of the office and often completely unrelated to the way they earn money. Whatever our reasons, whether to sustain ourselves out of necessity, or to engage our passions and talents and work toward a *telos*, or something in between, in today's society we need work to survive and help define our role, identity, and purpose among our fellow human beings.

I have to admit it is a difficult and daunting task to define the place of work within the human condition today entirely accurately. I am a human being writing this, and you, my readers, are also human, and because of our human nature we're each inevitably biased by upbringings and beliefs from which we can never completely disentangle ourselves. We are

closely tied to these issues and living within the very questions we're asking, and so it seems we can never fully step out of ourselves, our human condition, and gain wisdom that comes from having a distant viewing spot where we can look upon what we're studying objectively. But these questions are important and worth examining. I feel obligated to flesh out my thesis only after stepping back and trying to understand the place of work in the human condition around the globe and over time, but in the spirit of Carr, I am also acutely aware of my scope and place in this world, as a human being, as a young woman born and raised in the Midwest and deeply entrenched in American culture. I will draw upon what I have studied, discussed, and experienced in my own life, both leaning on my perspective and also recognizing its limitations, as I try to support my ideas.

The sharecroppers in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* face the exhausting reality of having to work day in and day out simply to survive. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt distinguishes this effort as labor, which never results in a finished product or legacy that we can leave behind (80). Out of sheer necessity, these sharecroppers daily give their bodies and minds entirely to their labor, leaving no time or energy or even reason for education about other subjects and possible ways to think and live. In their particular culture, there is "no attempt to get beneath and revise those 'ethical' and 'social' pressures and beliefs in which even a young child is trapped" (258). Trapped, indeed, running endlessly in a hamster wheel, tackling often mundane and repetitive tasks with no tangible product or lasting legacy to show for it in the end. It seems a tedious and futile existence, but in some ways, it would have been even crueler to educate the children immersed in this culture and introduce other possibilities and opportunities which wouldn't have been relevant or feasible. Without the luxury of even a meager financial cushion, the sharecroppers' situation demands daily devotion to sustaining basic biological

processes for survival of themselves and their families, leaving no time, energy, or application for education and exploration within their system. Even today some continue to labor in conditions not unlike the sharecroppers', born into what seems like a pre-determined role and function, to grow and then labor to survive and provide until death.

For others, especially in more modern Western culture, work provides much more than a way to pay bills; it's also a way of chasing a *telos*, expressing our talents and passions, leaving something useful or beautiful behind, or contributing to a cause in which we strongly believe. For Hallie, in Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*, one of life's greatest tragedies was that "there might never be a cause worth risking everything for in our lifetime. She was nineteen years old then, and as she lay blowing her nose and sobbing on my bed she told me this. That there were no real causes left" (36). Hallie ventures off to Nicaragua to help the people invigorate their crop land and improve agriculture, a cause to which she feels passionate about dedicating her life. While older sister Codi admires Hallie's strong commitment to tackling a greater cause, Codi flounders as she searches for meaningful work and, more importantly, a sense of belonging. She grows into a realization that, while her sister felt compelled to work to support something she believed in, Codi wants to build a family and carve a place in the world. She initially grasps for love, acceptance, and identity by following in her father's footsteps, nearly completing medical school, but by the end of *Animal Dreams* she unifies her hometown in Arizona through her work and creates what she's been craving: a sense of community and place.

While Agee and Kingsolver illustrate very different ideas about work and its significance in the lives of their characters, both reveal the tremendous power our unique backgrounds have in shaping our understanding of work and our purpose. They also show us the necessity of work. Some must labor to survive, like the sharecroppers, while others are so passionate about tackling

a certain kind of work it seems like they might die without the chance to do it, like Hallie. Agee and Kingsolver also reveal how work acts as a framework around which we build our lives. The work the people do in these pieces of literature significantly molds their understanding of their role and purpose within society. In the heroic society of ancient Greece, MacIntyre asserts that roles, and thus a moral framework, were clearly defined by social standing. For sharecroppers, their lot in life was defined at the moment of their birth into a closed system of grueling labor. Hallie and Codi had more education and freedom to search for meaning and purpose in their lives through their work. As we look to the future in America, our identity and values seem increasingly grounded in emotivism and consumerism, driving many of us to strike out on our own in search of financial and material success. I can't help but be concerned by this trend; although our reasons for working may be different for each of us, we all seem to have an innately human need to be part of something. The way American society is structured today provides many of us increasing freedom to search for our *telos* and use our talents through meaningful work, and it seems the work we do has, for many of us, become the primary way we shape our moral values and understand our role, identity, and purpose within our human condition.