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Work and the Human Condition

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In responding to the question, “What is the place of work within the human condition today?” I find myself with the same conclusion that I came to during the first quarter which was exactly this: Other than the obvious financial provision, work allows us to be creative, challenges us to be a better person, meets our social needs, and allows us to create change in the world. We need work in order to do these things. However, as I take a closer look at this previous thesis, I notice that each point supports the lone aspect that work challenges us to be a better person. I believe that the notion of a “better person” is best articulated by referring to Aristotle’s idea of the highest good which leads to happiness – all of which can only be achieved within the confines of our human condition.

Today, work is often solely the means to a paycheck which allows us to pay off self-induced debt. This debt is comprised of items we’ve acquired by credit since we often don’t have the cash to pay for them in the first place. However, even if we have cash at our disposal, we often end up using a credit card anyway. In a 2004 Frontline episode “Secret History of the Credit Card,” a group of consumers admitted that they had money in the bank to pay off (or the majority of) their credit card balances but chose not to – even knowing they were paying exorbitant monthly fees - since they wanted to ensure they had cash in the bank “for emergency purposes.” This is an interesting twist since they also wanted to keep their credit cards “for emergency purposes.” This shows that monthly credit card debt has become just a normal part of a consumer society and that with this come the added dependence and strain on monthly

income. Now, this only clarifies that the majority of us must work to pay off debt; however, it does not clarify why we are even afforded the opportunity to go in debt in the first place. The conditions of our humanity can, in part, show us how this came to be.

One condition we are constantly confronted with is that we live in a made world. As Arendt notes, nature has been violently modified to create the world in which we live. Although some of these modifications help support our basic biological needs, such as shelter, clothing, and the means to produce food, there is also a mass of unnecessary items created that are an assault on the senses. As a society, we've moved beyond the modest homes, the simple attire, and the basic foods, towards a continuous glut of anything that is bigger, supposedly better and just plain different. We buy new clothes, not because our old ones are tattered, but because "orange is the new pink," or some other fashion motto. We buy bigger houses, not because our families are getting bigger (just the opposite is true), but because we need more room to house our "treasures." We have such an abundance of food that 33% of the adult U.S. population is obese. We have moved from modest to excess. Thoreau exhorts us to live life simply, to work for just the basic necessities of life and to not accumulate an abundance of things (Thoreau 46). The Tao Te Ching also warns us to "get rid of extravagances/get rid of excesses" (126). By stripping our lives of the excesses that imprison us emotionally and financially, we have freedom to focus on improving our character by turning away from the vice of wastefulness. This is not to imply that desiring to have the finer things in life is a vice. In fact, MacIntyre notes that in the Odyssey, "prosperity too is spoken of as an excellence" (MacIntyre 127). It is not wealth or having fine things, it is excess and wastefulness to which I speak.

Another way that work can challenge us to be a better person is intermixed with another value of work, and that is through social interactions. Many jobs necessitate communication

with people –whether it is clients, customers, or other businesses. Our condition of plurality – in that we are each individuals although we are all the same in our humanness, creates challenges within the workplace. Competing personalities, differing work ethics, etc. can challenge even the most temperate person. I think it's possible to use these challenges as opportunities to learn about and improve upon ourselves. The Tao Te Ching tells us that we can only be truly fulfilled if we fulfill others (75). This can translate to how we support our co-workers either within the workplace or, if appropriate, in taking an interest in their personal lives. In the end, the ultimate human condition is that of our mortality. Each and every one of us, no matter the differences in the chapters of our lives, all comes to the same ending: death. Aristotle notes, it is only in death that others can determine, based on our interactions in life, whether we lived a happy life, or rather, if we were a good person. So, it is important that our social interactions be purposeful and virtuous.

Finally, as I close out my argument that work – within the confines of our human condition – allows us to be a better person, I am reminded of why this paper, and on a greater scale this class, is so important to me: I recall the last job I had before I left state service. After a succession of promotions into rewarding positions over 15 years, I found myself promoted to a position that was certainly not a good fit for me. I instantly found myself isolated from the constant interactions with co-workers and the autonomy that was once valued in my previous positions was no longer desired or encouraged by my superiors. A previous supervisor had given me a card that read something along the lines of “A job is just the means to the end for providing for what I really like to do.” Initially, I liked the quote because it put into perspective that my job was financially providing for my life outside of work. However, as time went by, I noticed that the longer I focused on this viewpoint, the more distraught I became in my work. I realized

that having a job that challenged me to be a creatively better person and in charge of my life, rather than just showing up for the daily grind, was very important to me. I was only able to realize these things after having the opportunity to quit work and reassess what was truly important in my life and what place I wanted work to take in that life. In everything that I've written about, it is my hope that once I return to the work force, I will keep these ideas at the forefront of my mind to ensure that I strive to *do* the best – not necessarily *be* the best – in all matters.

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