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Work and the Human Condition

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### Community and Purpose in Work

The work we do is a central part of the human condition. While work is a primary means of financial support, it is also a significant opportunity for us to engage with our peers and make a place for ourselves within society. Modern culture is largely consumer driven, and the strong focus on material wealth has led to a decreased emphasis on community, a sense of isolation and a loss of personal fulfillment. As our economy continues to change, and with it the ways in which we work, it may be possible to reinvigorate our communities, using our personal resources to create a sense of purpose, learn from those around us and develop our own abilities.

In The Human Condition, Hannah Arendt criticizes the loss of autonomy and sense of accomplishment related to work beginning with the Industrial Age. What once would have been classified as *work* to Arendt, has become more closely related to her conception of *labor*, as the tangible things which we produce are designed for consumption rather than durability. We become enveloped in an endless cycle of production for the sake of consumption, and the motivation for work is primarily for capital gain. This has deprived many of us of a sense of accomplishment and self esteem regarding our work, as well as being tied to the aims of our employers as most of our work has become wage work. The struggle to obtain capital is by nature never-ending, and once basic needs have been met is ultimately meaningless. Opportunity for what

Arendt would classify as *action*, or the human ability to innovate and influence the community, is limited as well by the changed nature of the ways in which we work, and the consequent shift in values.

Henry Thoreau in Walden makes a strong statement about work and the unfortunate effects of materialism. He identifies all possessions as representatives of labor which must be done in order to maintain them. He chooses not to conform to societal pressures to obtain ever more luxurious resources, and is able to examine the parts of life which to him are truly meaningful. While to Arendt action occurs in a state of plurality, rather than isolation, Thoreau comes to a similar conclusion about work and its place in a satisfactory human life. The sentiment expressed when he writes, “I think the fall from the farmer to the operative as great and memorable as that from the man to the farmer” (Walden, 42), is related to Arendt’s ideas about the degradation of *action* and *work* and the glorification of labor. Thoreau discovers his own road to fulfillment, which he ultimately teaches to others in the writing of Walden, which has continued its tremendous social impact.

The characters in Barbara Kingsolver’s Animal Dreams deal with the concept of *action* in the way Arendt has defined it. While Hallie feels confident about her work, and is willing to do her best to influence the world around her, her sister Codi is intimidated by the many and varied problems she faces. Her character embodies the sense of isolation and complacency which Arendt might identify as part of the difficulty individuals experience in modern society. Her lack of feelings of connectedness to her family and community extend to her feelings about the world, and society as a whole. She views problems affecting her community as too large for her to influence, at the same

time feeling envious of Hallie's fearlessness. As the novel progresses, Codi discovers ways to connect with her community, where they work together to affect change. This is a powerful story in that it demonstrates that the problems we face in the modern world are overwhelming, but it is possible to make an impact as we all share a part in the changes that will occur in the world around us.

Ideally, work can serve as a way for us to interact with others in our communities and enrich our personal capabilities. Much of our adult lives are spent engaged in some type of work, and it is beneficial to consider it in terms of the impact it has on us as individuals and what examining the working world can teach us about our society. The work we do is closely tied to our livelihood, and can sometimes lead to isolation in our pursuit of financial stability. It is useful to recognize the importance of the work itself as well as the monetary benefits, being aware of the extent to which what we do affects others. The emphasis on community action and the notion that individuals are able to affect change is less prevalent than perhaps it has been in the past. This need not continue to be a barrier to reclaiming the importance of these characteristics which continue to be available to all of us.

Works Cited

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