

Jan Ram baud

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Susan Preciso

Work and the Human Condition

Work: It's Not Fun, But That's Okay

Work. The word itself can bring feelings of dread, form a knot in the pit of one's stomach, and create a general sense of uneasiness. By the same token, work can improve one's quality of life and make one feel like she has a purpose in life. Indeed, it has been theorized that work is an essential part of what it means to be human. But we must tread carefully, because too much work can lead to quite the unfulfilling life. As such, work is something that we all must do, but we shouldn't allow work to become the main driving force in our lives.

We all must work. Work isn't something limited to the poor slobs in the working- and middle-class. Why is this? Work, according to Arendt, "fabricates the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice" (136) and those things (she uses the example of both a table and a chair) "have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that [...] men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table" (137). In other words,

work (in the Arendtian sense of the word) helps build the world around us, from which we derive our sense of who we are as humans (our human condition). Without work, we would not be able to be human. Thus, even the most idle of persons are obliged to do some kind of work.

While Arendt theorizes that we take our sense of humanity from our work, Marx thinks otherwise. He writes, "The worker puts his life into the object; then it no longer belongs to him but to the object. The greater this activity, the poorer is the worker. What the product of his work is, he is not. [...] The more the worker *appropriates* the external world and sensuous nature through his labor, the more he deprives himself of the *means of life*" (60). What Marx is essentially saying is that the more a person works, the more he loses his own life. However, we still must work: "labor, *life activity*, and *productive life* appear to man at first only as a *means* to satisfy a need, the need to maintain physical existence. Productive life, however, is species-life. It is life begetting life. [...] man proves himself to be genuinely a *species-being*. This production [of things by a standard which animals lack] is his active species-life. Through it nature appears as *his* work and his actuality. The object of labor is thus the *objectification of man's species-life*: he produces himself not only intellectually [...] but also actively in a real sense and sees himself in a world he made" (Marx 63-4). Essentially, the character of man is, as Marx is arguing, to lead a life of that of free

consciousness, which involves creating things to a certain set of standards, which allows man to live in a world full of things, that he made.

Despite the inherent nature in humans to work, it is important not to take one's work to any sort of an extreme. Doing so can only lead to an imbalance of work and non-work. Take, for example, the character of Willie Loman in the film "Death of a Salesman." He relied upon his work as a salesman too much as a means to "making it big." After having given almost 25 years to his company as a salesman, Willie, unable to sell as much as he once did, is forced to collect only commission. He works and works, but isn't able to make a living, and his debts pile up. In the end, driven by desperation, he kills himself in order to collect the money from his life insurance policy. Similarly, in the play Uncle Vanya by Anton Chekhov, work is essentially the only thing that several characters do. They have worked most of their adult lives, and, as the character Sonya explains, they will experience true joy and happiness after they die, when they are in the afterlife and no longer have to work as they do. Really, their lives are so toilsome and tiring, that the titular character, Uncle Vanya, tries to kill himself, all the while talking about how his life was wasted. All in all, these two stories show the tragedy of the man who works too hard, and the consequences that follow when work plays too large a part in one's life.

While we must all do some kind of work at some point in our lives, we

mustn't let work be too large of a part of our lives. Work is indeed necessary to live life in a healthy and mentally fulfilling manner (being a part of our nature as humans). However, too much work can drive a man to do desperate things. Indeed, if there is one lesson to be learned from both Uncle Vanya and "Death of a Salesman," it's to do a good job with one's work and take pride in it, but to not let it become an all-encompassing way of life. Hopefully, we can all learn this lesson, and use it to our advantage, all throughout our working life.

Works Cited

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