

The Idea of the Transformative Vocation

A First Point of Departure

THREE basic ideas about work are now available in the world. These ideas are not just about jobs; seen from a wide enough perspective, they involve people's views of what they can expect to do with their lives, and they put in question the tie between the family and society. The rivalry of these conceptions, as they have been variously developed by different classes and among different peoples, gives rise to an obscure but decisive spiritual struggle. People wage this struggle all over the world, through contrasting visions of society and secret movements of the heart.

Each of these visions of work finds its chief home in the experience and outlook of a part of society. But the groups responsible for developing the idea vary from one moment in history, and even from one society, to another.

Work may be seen as an honorable calling within society. So conceived, labor enables the individual (at first the man but then others as well) to support the family that provides him with his most important sustaining relations. The job as honorable calling helps shape a person's view of his own dignity. He can do something that fulfills one of the natural needs of society. He fulfills it by performing, or preparing for, work that requires proficiency or experience. His job, and the trained and learned capacities with which he performs it, singles him out from the shifting, the dependent, and the useless.

The idea of work as an honorable calling usually accompanies certain preconceptions about society and the family. There exists a catalog of natural needs: social demands that have to be met for a society to go on as it always has. To this catalog of impersonal jobs, there corresponds an equally natural list of occupations, each with its distinctive skills and rewards. The person who occupies one of these positions can expect to live with his family in a certain way. He also has, at work, a distinctive relation to the people who do other jobs. Thus, an idea of natural ranks accompanies the notion of natural social needs and natural jobs.

The social world that these honorable callings keep going knows its share of conflict. But its quarrels – according to this view of social life – deal more with peripheral matters. People may feel that they

have been done an injustice. They may try to grab more for themselves and their co-workers than what they are properly entitled to. In either event there will be trouble. But the basic order of needs, jobs, and ranks is not, in its fundamentals, the outcome of such struggles. It is just part of the way things are. You can go a long way toward qualifying this view of social life without giving up its central tenets. For the naturalistic attitude to society seems far more persuasive in the nuance of active belief than in the caricature of exposition.

The image of work as an honorable calling and the larger vision of society that extends and justifies it have often been accompanied by a view of the family. The honorable worker is, above all, the adult man. His performance of the honorable job outside the family lends moral authority as well as economic support to his position within the family. The family itself amounts to a softened, smaller-scale version of the social world. The wife and the children occupy a recognized place within the family. By performing their roles scrupulously, they earn the respect of their wider social milieu. When all goes well, the greater world of society and the smaller realm of the family display a fundamental harmony both in their economic requirements and in their moral principles.

Today, this idea of work flourishes most vigorously among the skilled and semiskilled working classes of the rich Western and the communist societies. It survives better among those who do something with their hands or who apply techniques with tangible results than among the lower ranks of paper pushers and commodity circulators. But until recently in the history of the West, and of many of the civilizations whose life the Western peoples have interrupted, all ranks of society shared this conception of work. Even the most privileged groups embraced it. The gentleman landowner might disclaim anything that looked like a job. But his view of himself included the idea of occupying a natural station that both entitled and obligated him to perform valuable social tasks. He showed he was up to it by exhibiting in his person and his deeds the qualities proper to his caste.

Another, more chastened idea of work is also loose in the world. According to this conception, work lacks any intrinsic authority, any power of its own to confer dignity or direction on a human life. You have to do it to achieve or support the things that count: your family and your community or, if worse comes to worst, your own self. If labor can still be said to be honorable in this instrumental view, the honor lies solely in the activities its earnings support.

The instrumental view of work represents drastically diminished expectations of what a person can make of his life. It is in fact, and is understood to be, an aberration: the stigma of a terrible defeat or

the price of a transition to a higher mode of life. In the rich Western countries of the present day, three types of workers seem most often to share this vision of work.

Some are people who have been defeated in their attempt to grow up into the honorable working class or who have been cast out of this class after having gotten into it. They float from one unstable and dead-end job to another, and pine in the suffering underclass.

Others who hold this instrumental view of work also occupy the worst and least secure jobs. They often come from a foreign country or a backward region, to which they hope to return. For them, work is a purgatory governed by rules they can barely understand. They analogize its arrangements as best they can to the ideas of obligation and reward they have brought with them to a new land. Their overriding goal remains to go back home to a better life that includes the experience of labor as an honorable calling. This hope may eventually be frustrated. It may also be replaced by the desire to stay where they are and there to become the honorable workers they had at first thought of becoming back home. Meanwhile, they live in their communities and find in these communal bonds the consolations and the self-respect their jobs deny them.

Still others who hold the instrumental conception of work are young people or married women willing to take on temporary jobs. For them, too, the immediate conception of work can be unashamedly instrumental because it remains ancillary to their main concern: a future career or the life of the family.

In other parts of the globe – in some of the communist and third world countries – access to the experience of work as an honorable calling remains barred to vast numbers of people. These people may be driven to a purely instrumental vision of labor. But, at every opportunity, they may also put up a rearguard struggle and demand something better.

For to conceive of your workaday activity in this manner is to view the social world as utterly oppressive or alien. If the personality is not discredited and crushed by this world, it is at least (with the exception of the part-time workers) denied any sense of belonging to it. Confidence in a natural order of needs, jobs, and ranks is shaken, though not dissipated. The defeated and the excluded understand more easily what the self-deception of the honorable workers tends to conceal: that the entire order of jobs and ranks—not just its details and adjustments – results from fighting and from the containment of fighting. They have seen the fist without the glove and have looked in through the window, with the undeceived eyes of the outcast, at the indifference of the fortunate. But they would gladly exchange this insight—which is, in part, a discovery of the falsehood of the

naturalistic premise – for a reprieve from their defeat or their exclusion.

A third idea of work has appeared in the world, and it is turning things inside out. It connects self-fulfillment and transformation: the change of any aspect of the practical or imaginative setting of the individual's life. To be fully a person, in this conception, you must engage in a struggle against the defects or the limits of existing society or available knowledge. The goals of self-fulfillment and service to society combine with the notion that such service requires you to press against things and conceptions as they are. The quarrel may be pursued in imaginative work rather than out in the open. Even when it involves real-life conflict, it may be moderated and concealed under the appearance of faithful service. But it cannot be abandoned altogether without exacting a price in disappointment and failure. Resistance becomes the price of salvation. Only when you move away from the concern with the terms of collective life toward the more impersonal endeavors of art, philosophy, and science or give yourself over to the immediate care of individuals does the weight of this command diminish.

This idea of work – and of what you can most valuably do with your life – has taken root most strongly among the educated and the privileged, and especially among the young who are educated for privilege. You can find it most unequivocally among intellectuals, agitators, artists, and scientists. But it extends as well into the great professions. Each profession does more than link a privileged exercise of power to a claim of expertise. It also serves as the scene of a conflict between the idea of the honorable calling and the more ambitious standard of the transformative vocation.

The people who have been converted to this view of what they should do with themselves run into trouble in their experience of their own lives and in their relations to all the groups who have stuck with another vision of what work and life are for. Even after you have tried to understand, with a clear mind and a quiet heart, what the trouble means, you cannot easily tell. Is there a flaw in the idea of the transformative vocation that condemns it to futility and self-deception? Is it, in this respect, like a certain romantic view of love with which it has been historically associated? Or are these difficulties and surprises the unavoidable road to higher insight?

A person may come under the influence of the idea of the transformative vocation in his youth. Much may bring him over to it. Even for those who deny that it conveys any ultimate truth about mind and activity, its presence, its omnipresence, in the productions of high culture is hard to miss. The works of literature and social thought, of speculative theory and moral sloganeering, revel in it.

The broader popular culture speaks it back in a thousand diluted but still recognizable forms. Both the political heroes and the modernist antiheroes of the age seem to embody one aspect or another of its central concerns.

The more seriously someone takes these ideas, the greater his difficulties are likely to be. As soon as he begins to face the resistances and the entanglements of the social world, the effort to realize the idea of the transformative vocation starts to seem an unrealistic and self-destructive program. It seems to demand both a favorable opportunity and corresponding gifts. If either are absent, what begins in high purpose may end as mere anxiety.

As the obstacles to an actual transformative involvement pile up, the would-be transformer faces ever more clearly a destructive dilemma. He may trim his sails and look for more modest and "realistic" expectations. But it is not easy to pass from the idea of the transformative vocation to the notion of the honorable calling. The former implies an insight into the relation between self and society that strikes at the foundations of the latter. This insight is just too convincing to forget, once the individual has recognized it and acted it out, however incompletely or unsuccessfully.

The assumptions that underlie the idea of the transformative vocation combine an idea about society with an idea about the self. Society lacks natural needs, jobs, and ranks; whatever the social order is, it is as a result of the fights that have taken place and of the fights that have been avoided. Your work may serve a human need whose claim to attention you regard as unquestionable. But what people make of you, your station, and your work is not something that you can take for granted as the natural order of things. This given context may confirm, distort, or defeat your intention.

The idea about self that joins this notion of society is the primacy of transforming denial in all human activities. You satisfy desires by changing something in the world. You understand a portion of reality by passing it, in fact or fantasy, through transformative variations: by imagining it other than what it is or seems to be. All the more complicated enterprises of the personality involve equally complicated revisions of the practical or imaginative setting through which the individual moves. Through such efforts, and through them alone, you discover and make yourself.

These ideas about self and society betray a disbelief in what I earlier called the naturalistic premise as well as revealing a particular view of the purpose of a working life. The notion of an honorable calling cannot easily be made plausible again without resurrecting the vision of self and society implicit in the naturalistic premise.

The person who can neither make good on his commitment to a transformative vocation nor gain faith in the idea of the honorable

calling soon finds himself driven down to the instrumental conception of work. He seeks in the family or the spectacles of an ornamental culture compensatory solace for his incompensable loss. He cannot view his own instrumental work as the necessary transition to a higher form of experience.

When the idea of the transformative vocation runs into trouble it can take another direction. It may escalate rather than diminish its ambitions. Beyond the give-and-take of ordinary social life lie the great redemptive exercises of revolutionary thought, practice, and art. The artist sitting in his cork-lined room holds out the only true promise of happiness and salvation (but for himself or for everybody else as well?). Someone grinds away at his desk in the British Museum systematizing views about which most of his informed contemporaries hardly know what to think. A few generations later, people will be slaughtering one another in Manchuria in the name of his doctrines. Someone else arrives suddenly at a train station in the midst of violent civic commotion, seizes the state with the support of a disciplined following and an indignant mass, and inaugurates a new order of social life.

As escape routes for an embattled idea of transformative vocation, these images serve as corrupting delusions. They exclude all but a tiny band of extraordinary people. They cover up the actual texture of compromise, circumstance, resistance, and disappointment, the fantastic incongruity between intention and result, even in these unusual experiences. The heart, in its despair, wants to forget such indignities.

The two directions in which the idea of the transformative calling can move amount to two complementary ways of losing sanity. For the cognitive element in madness is precisely the alternation between two experiences of perception and reasoning. Perceptions and ideas are frozen in place; they cannot be recombined or replaced. At the same time, everything can be effortlessly broken down and combined with everything else. The simultaneous coexistence of these experiences makes all perceptions and thoughts appear arbitrary.

But suppose a person manages to keep the idea of transformative work from falling off in either of these directions. He soon finds himself at odds not only with people who share a different perspective on the aims of transformation but also with people who have a completely different view of work. He then has to recognize that activity inspired by such intentions contains, directly or indirectly, a claim to power that others resist and that he himself may be unable to justify or to confess. He may even try to get them to act in ways justified by his idea of work but opposed by them, in the name of their own ideals of labor and community, as a surrender to selfishness.

For example, a militant in a rich Western country fights to vindicate rights of abortion for unmarried women. He does so in part because he has an idea of personal dignity connected to his own idea of vocation. He wants to imagine, or to make, this idea universal. The working class family fights back not only out of religious belief but out of the desire to preserve, through the repression of occasional sexual unions, its own hierarchic authority, the accompaniment to its own ideas of work as honorable calling. After all, what more inclusive and more perfect form of social solidarity does the self-appointed champion have to put in place of the one he is trying to destroy?

If the would-be transformer is someone who acts in the world, he may fantasize that he belongs to a mass of people who increasingly share his vision of history and work. The existence of factions, the dense confusions of personal animosity and programmatic difference, the struggle for leadership, the elements of self-aggrandizement in his own conception of his calling – each of these amounts to a knock on the door that he would rather not answer. Once he has tasted power, however, he may find such fantasies convenient. He may present himself as the voice of those to whom he gives orders.

The idea of the transformative vocation has begun to influence large numbers of people all over the world. It wages a largely mute spiritual struggle against the other two notions of work. Where did this demanding and even dreamlike view come from? What is its essential human meaning? You would be misguided to see it merely as the result of local episodes in the history of thought. In some parts of the Western world, the idea bears the imprint of a secularized version of Protestant ideas of calling. But it has advanced everywhere, independently as well as by contagion. The conception of an honorable calling has been undermined by the insights into self and society described earlier. Through them, the idea of the transformative vocation connects to everything that shows people the made-up, remarkable, and reimaginable quality of social life, to everything that frees the conception and the ordeal of personality from rigid social constraints. People seize on traditional religious, political, and moral doctrines and reinterpret them from the perspective of the new dispensation.

Once you view the idea of the transformative vocation from this more general standpoint you can identify in it a still larger human meaning. This meaning clarifies the hidden ambiguities, aspirations, and dangers of the idea, so carefully concealed in the ordinary thoughts and deeds of its adherents. The less the individual sees himself as occupying a natural position within a society that itself has a natural order, the more acutely he feels a certain aspect of his situation in his world. He feels it, ordinarily, less in its abstract and

general statement than in particular and concrete ramifications. The person experiences himself as the center of his own world. He knows himself in a way that he can know no other mind. He feels, in his less guarded moments, a will to self-assertion and to the satisfaction of a desire that knows no fixed boundaries other than the limits imposed by temporary satiation, apathy, or despair. When he imagines the world without himself, after his own death, he still hovers there as a disembodied onlooker. But the individual is also made to confront the world as a subject among many others. He must develop introspection by participating in a practical and discursive give-and-take that constantly denies his claim to be the center of things. He must satisfy his material and spiritual needs by performing activities that force him to deal with people who do not see him as the center and in whose lapses into self-centeredness he sees the barely suppressed traces of his own self-absorption.

But when all the taunting correctives have piled up, the individual's claim to be the center still refuses to go away. How can we even call it a mistake? It is built into the most elementary pretheoretical moments of perception and desire. It belongs to the intimate and ultimate though ill-defined experience of selfhood. Our reflective ideas may refine this experience but they can never repudiate it without ceasing to be persuasive or even intelligible.

That we lay claim to the center while recognizing at the same time that we are not the center is more than a natural fact about us, like our susceptibility to certain optical illusions. It is just as basic to our experience as the structure of conceptual thought whose preconceptions about sameness and difference prohibit us from saying that we both are and are not the center. By what standard can we choose between the conceptual structure and the counterconceptual experience? Though we disbelieve the latter in certain contexts of understanding and action or when certain interests seem paramount, we put aside the former in other settings and for other purposes. A person incapable of making this switch would be judged more insane than many of the madmen we actually meet. For his madness would not be simply the exaggeration of a conflict, a self-division, in ordinary experience. It would be a denial of one of the enabling conditions of our routine perceptions and responsibilities.

The contrast between these two aspects of personality cannot become acute so long as the views of society and self that underlie the idea of work as an honorable calling survive. For these views prevent the experience of subjectivity, and therefore of the self as center, from reaching desperate and anxious lengths. They teach people to understand their internal world of passion and the outward order of society as two complementary realms that display the same principles of order and that, when well ordered, lend each other indispensable

support. These naturalistic ideas cannot abolish the contrast in our experience between self-centeredness and the overcoming of self-centeredness. The ideas can, however, deny this experience a voice and make its occasional manifestations look like mere outbreaks of delusory self-regard. When, however, people no longer adhere to the naturalistic view underlying the idea of work as an honorable calling, the conflict between the two poles of experience breaks out into the open.

Personal love and transformative work enable people to escape selfishness and isolation without denying the weight of subjectivity. In love, they find a connection to another person that simultaneously confirms them in their sense of self-possession. Transformative action offers them a way to establish an alternative connection: an engagement with the larger collective context of their lives that gives the acting or imagining self a chance for self-assertion while refusing to sanctify the resistant context. Whichever route of connection you follow, you have surprises in store.

The pursuit of the transformative solution faces two obstacles, which are also riddles. The first embarrassment is the coexistence of constant resistance to all the transforming efforts of the imagination and the will with our failure ever fully to understand the sources of this resistance. This failure plagues us in every area of experience. Some of the reasons for this inability are distinctive to each field of activity; others are common to all fields.

Nonhuman nature remains imperfectly knowable and manageable because of its vast disproportion to our own selves. We know nature only in part, through forms of practice and imagination that, though they imitate transformative variations of the natural world, do so from the limiting perspective of our interests and faculties. One level of insight falls down into another, more basic or universal, without any hope of reaching a place of rest.

Society remains imperfectly intelligible and pliable because it is made up of distinct selves, each with its power to resist submission and disclosure. Moreover, no practical or imaginative ordering of human life represents the definitive, complete form of personality or society, nor do all the orderings that have ever existed, when put together. In every realm of society or nonhuman nature, our ideas suffer from an incurable instability: we may always discover at the next moment something that is not just novel but incompatible with our assumptions. Not only may we have ignored this truth before, but we may have ignored the whole way of thinking, or seeing, or talking that its full exploration requires.

The recalcitrance of our circumstances to complete mastery by the imagination and the will has an important corollary in political action: the inability fully to comprehend or control the consequences of

action. William Morris described the ironic pathos of every transformative conflict over the terms of social life: "Men fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out to be not what they wanted, and other men must fight for what they wanted under another name."

The other problem with transforming action comes from within. The transformative deed fails completely to bridge the gap between the self as center and the self as one among others. It remains a bid for self-aggrandizement as well as a form of self-renunciation. The vicissitudes of the transformative vocation in society bring out this two-sidedness. The would-be transformer wants to shine and even to rule while portraying himself as the humble and responsive servant of an impersonal good. The self-appointed revolutionary vanguard, lording it over a frightened or passive populace in the name of a doctrine of virtual representation, is simply the extreme case of what appears, less starkly, in countless other disguises.

Most great social theories of the last two centuries accepted and attempted to explicate and develop the ideas underlying this revolutionary conception of work. But they did so in a way that concealed the embarrassments just described. They thereby limited the reach of the idea of the transformative vocation. They viewed the obstacles to transformation as the products of lawlike constraints that a fully informed mind would render fully intelligible. The would-be transformers could present themselves as agents of a historical necessity. The claim to be the unchosen agents of the oppressed and the voiceless remained their characteristic response to the suspicion of self-aggrandizement.

One way to understand the constructive social theory anticipated by this book is to read it as an attempt to carry to the hilt the view of society and personality within which the idea of the transformative vocation makes sense. We must reason about constraints without seeing them as the superficial expression of intelligible, lawlike necessities. We must describe how the antinaturalistic conception of self and society can inform the life projects of an individual. We must even try to show how it can guide these projects in ways that contain and ennoble the self-aggrandizing impulse.