

Rough Work Must Be Done



Wednesday, March 20, 2013

By Jordan J. Ballor

<http://blog.acton.org/archives/51960-rough-work-must-be-done.html>

Joseph Sunde's [fine post today on vocation](#) examines the dynamic between work and toil, the former corresponding to God's creational ordinance and the latter referring to the corruption of that ordinance in light of the Fall into sin.



Joseph employs a distinction between “needs-based” work and something else, something privileged, a first-world kind of “fulfilling” work. The point DeKoster makes is right on target; we need to, in Bonhoeffer’s words, break through from the “it” of the work to the “you” (ultimately the divine “You”) that we meet in the work itself.

The discussions of these kinds of distinctions between “hard” work and “head” work have a long pedigree. There was a philosophical dispute running throughout the ancient and medieval eras about the value of the active versus the contemplative life. But I’d like to highlight a more proximate antecedent for some of this thinking, the British controversialist and critic [John Ruskin](#) (1819-1900).

Ruskin distinguishes between “rough” work and “soft” work, or work with the “hands” and work with the “head”:

There *must* be work done by the arms, or none of us could live. There *must* be work done by the brains, or the life we get would not be worth having. And the same men cannot do both. There is rough work to be done, and rough men must do it; there is gentle work to be done, and gentlemen must do it; and it is physically impossible that one class should do, or divide, the work of the other. And it is of no use to try to conceal this sorrowful fact by fine words, and to talk to the workman about the honourableness of manual labour, and the dignity of humanity. That is a grand old proverb of Sancho Panza’s, ‘Fine words butter no parsnips;’ and I can tell you that, all over England just now, you workmen are buying a great deal too much butter at that dairy. Rough work, honourable or not, takes the life out of us; and the man who has been heaving clay out of a ditch all day, or driving an express train against the north wind all night, or holding a collier’s helm in a gale on a lee-shore, or whirling white hot iron at a furnace mouth, that man is not the same at the end of his day, or night, as one who has been sitting in a quiet room, with everything comfortable about him, reading books, or classing butterflies, or painting pictures. If it is any comfort to

you to be told that the rough work is the more honourable of the two, I should be sorry to take that much of consolation from you; and in some sense I need not. The rough work is at all events real, honest, and, generally, though not always, useful; while the fine work is, a great deal of it, foolish and false as well as fine, and therefore dishonourable; but when both kinds are equally well and worthily done, the head's is the noble work, and the hand's the ignoble; and of all hand work whatsoever, necessary for the maintenance of life, those old words, 'In the sweat of thy face thou shalt eat bread,' indicate that the inherent nature of it is one of calamity; and that the ground, cursed for our sake, casts also some shadow of degradation into our contest with its thorn and its thistle; so that all nations have held their days honourable, or 'holy,' and constituted them 'holydays' or 'holidays,' by making them days of rest; and the promise, which, among all our distant hopes, seems to cast the chief brightness over death, is that blessing of the dead who die in the Lord, that 'they rest from their labours, and their works do follow them.'

There's something to this. There does seem to work that, as Ruskin puts it, "takes the life out of us." There is something about work that is toilsome, cursed, even *alienating*.

But is this an experience unique to "rough" work? It seems so for Ruskin, since it is the "hand work" that he highlights as particularly cursed. Those of us who work in the economy of ideas, if we are honest, I think, will not see such "head" work as immune from the curse, however.

Contrast Ruskin's judgment that "when both kinds are equally well and worthily done, the head's is the noble work, and the hand's the ignoble," with the view represented by Neal Plantinga and much contemporary neo-Calvinism, which eschews all such hierarchical ranking of soft work over hard work. Thus, writes Plantinga, "the things of the mind and spirit are no better, and are sometimes much worse, than the things of the body," claiming too that "it is not more Christian to play chess than to play hockey. It is not more Christian to become a minister than to become a muck farmer."

It seems to me that both Ruskin and Plantinga get at something true, but that they don't do justice to the complexity of the whole picture. Ruskin notes that the manual laborer is changed at the end of the day, he is "not the same at the end of his day, or night" as he was before or as one who was doing "head" work. This is a negative for Ruskin, as the person has, in some sense, lost something of himself.

But Lester DeKoster and Gerard Berghoef take this reality to which Ruskin points and construe it quite differently. The material matters of manual labor aren't all that matter, so to speak:

While the object of work is destined to perish, the soul formed by daily decision to do work carries over into eternity.... *This perspective on work*, as a maturing of the soul, liberates the believer from undue concern over the monotony of the assembly line, the threat of technology, or the reduction of the worker to but an easily replaceable cog in the industrial machine. One's job may be done by another. But each doer is himself unique, and what carries over beyond life and time is not the work but the worker. What doing the job does for each of us is not repeated in anyone else. What the exercise of will, of tenacity, of courage, of foresight, of triumph over temptations to get by, does for you is uniquely your own. One worker may replace another on the assembly line, but what each worker carries away from meeting the challenge of doing the day's shift will ever be his own. The lasting and creative consequence of daily work happens to be the worker. God so arranges that civilization grows out of the same effort that develops the soul.

Just as we shouldn't conflate matters of body and soul (as perhaps Plantinga's view might lead us to do), neither should we radically separate them (as Ruskin might lead us to do).

The critical question is how to properly relate body and soul, or from another perspective, nature and grace, and do them both justice. This is a perennial challenge, and one that the faith and work movement must engage directly.