# Introduction

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In the *Book of Genesis*, as Adam and Eve are exiled from Eden, God tells them, “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food.” Thus begins our long, difficult relationship with working: is it a curse we suffer under, or the very means by which our lives find their purpose?

The genesis for this project was my reading the material on work in Karl Löwith’s *From Hegel to Nietzsche* and being struck by how divergent the views of work were even on one continent (and mostly from one country, Germany) during the course of one (the 19th) century. I gradually began collecting writings about work from other times and places, and decided it would be useful to explore how variously it has been conceived by different major thinkers, with the aim of clarifying how we have arrived at our “double vision” of work. These conceptions run the gamut from viewing work as positively opposed to living the best life, to seeing it as the most essential part of living the best life.

Reflections on work are back in vogue, with recent notable works on the topic by Geuss[[1]](#endnote-1), Graeber[[2]](#endnote-2), Lucassen[[3]](#endnote-3), Anderson[[4]](#endnote-4) and Suzman[[5]](#endnote-5), among others. Raymond Guess’s *A Philosopher Looks at Work* is, as the title suggests, a meditation on the role of work in human life. Given that Geuss believes that for environmental reasons we must change our lives to both produce less and consume less, we must replace work as traditionally conceived by new ways to be active, which nevertheless perform the “anthropological” role of lending meaning to our lives.

Elizabeth Anderson’s *Hijacked* contends that there is a conflict between what she calls the “progressive work ethic,” which holds that workers are entitled to “respect, decent pay, and safe working conditions,” and the “conservative work ethic,” which holds they have “a duty to work relentlessly, without complaint, under whatever awful conditions and low pay their employer can impose in pursuit of maximum profit.” She argues that these two views have been struggling for supremacy for the last three centuries. No socialist, she admits that “the old socialist ideal of comprehensive state ownership of the means of production and centralized planning field disastrously.”[[6]](#endnote-6) She argues that while neoliberals, upon whom she lays the blame for the ascendancy of the latter view, believe they are liberating individuals to pursue their own self-interest as they see fit, in fact, “The neoliberal preference for market ordering over state regulation and provision does not liberate ordinary people from the government. It entrenches the commodification of labor, under which most people have no alternative, but to submit arbitrary government of employers to survive.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Here, one might quibble with her characterization of the neoliberal approach as “conservative,” since economic thought in the Middle Ages would very much have been inclined towards what she calls the “progressive” approach. Nevertheless, she makes sound arguments as to how the state might offset the power of global capital to improve workers’ lives.

David Graeber’s book *Bullshit Jobs* addresses the jobs that he views as “pointless,” such as those held by “private equity CEOs, lobbyists, PR researchers, actuaries, telemarketers, bailiffs or legal consultants.”[[8]](#endnote-8) And he notes that these jobs often pay more than “real” jobs, such as garbage collectors, poets, ska musicians, or cabinet makers. His explanation as to why people with money pay others to do jobs that are pointless is that these are “positions designed to make them identify with the perspectives and sensibilities of the ruling class”… but he offers no explanation as to why any *particular* company should take on the burden of employing people just so they identify with the ruling class: clearly, there is quite a bit of expense involved. Why should a profit-seeking company not simply pay for the labor it actually needs, while leaving it to somebody else to worry about getting people to identify with the ruling class? Graeber’s theory seems to leave a huge hole through which companies can defect from this ruling class scheme and maximize their own profits while free-riding on the political work done by companies that do employ “bullshit” labor… which ought to lead more and more companies to defect until the bullshit jobs disappear.

As confused as some of the recent thought on work may be, it is nevertheless clear that the increasing role of automation replacing human physical labor, and now artificial intelligence replacing even some human intellectual labor, the question of what place work holds in the human world is more salient than ever.

How did the Western world’s almost schizophrenic view of work come about? And how did various thinkers defend their positive or negative evaluations of work? This volume was assembled in order to collect in one place some of the thoughts of some of the most significant theorists of work in the Western tradition. Although we have not been able to cover every thinker we wished to – for instance, Augustine, Durkheim, and Veblen all would have had their place in this volume, if it had been possible to solicit essays on them – we have been able to cover a significant sampling of the most important thinkers on this topic, beginning 2400 years ago, with the founders of philosophy, who were decidedly in the “pro-leisure” camp.

## Plato (427–348 BCE) and Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

James Murphy highlights a fascinating paradox in Plato’s and Aristotle’s evaluation of work: both philosophers praise the virtues of craftsmanship while simultaneously denigrating craftsmen. Murphy notes W.B. Yeats asking, “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” A similar question arises regarding Plato and Aristotle: How do they differentiate between the act of craftsmanship and the craftsmen themselves, and why do they admire the skill while dismissing those who possess it?

Neither philosopher considers craftsmen worthy of citizenship. Yet, Plato refers to his ideal rulers as “the best possible craftsmen” and describes ruling as “the royal craft.” They both admire the intellectual knowledge required for skilled work but criticize the manual skill and labor involved. They celebrate those who conceptualize tasks but have little regard for those who execute them. This perspective reflects their broader belief in the superior dignity of intellectual over physical pursuits. As such, their writings are early milestones in the “anti-labor” pole of our dichotomous understanding of work.

## The New Testament

James Alexander contends that the New Testament transformed the view of work in Western thought. Unlike the arduous labor avoided by Hellenic philosophers or the Hebraic notion of divine creation, work in the New Testament is redefined as God’s saving act. In this new context, human labor is seen as secondary to divine work, but still partaking of its essential goodness.

While the Pauline and Lutheran doctrines distinguish between ‘justification by faith’ and ‘justification by works,’ such a distinction is less clear when considering the full spectrum of work in the New Testament. Various terms for ‘work’ appear: not only *ergon* (effective act), but also *kopos* (burdensome act) and *ponos* (painful act). Additionally, terms like *praxis* and *poiesis* (the roots of ‘practice’ and ‘poetry’) and words denoting specific significant acts–such as healings, miracles, signs, and resurrection–illustrate the complexity of the New Testament’s contribution to our understanding of work. Its view embraces both ordinary toil and the divine work of healing and preaching. And it culminates in the salvific work of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. In the end, the New Testament, while not dismissing the genuine value of work, emphasizes trust in God’s work.

## Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)

As Tamás Nyirkos notes, work was not a primary focus in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. His discussions of the topic emerged in the context of defending those religious orders that no longer engaged in manual labor, something that was controversial during his time. The most frequently cited passage on this topic are from a public disputation question in a *Quodlibet* (a public disputation question) rather than from a treatise where he selected it for its intrinsic significance. Though his early arguments were further developed in his theological summaries, they consistently involve the question of whether those in religious orders were obligated to perform manual work. Thus, a “Thomistic theory of work” must be pieced together from these dispersed references rather than being given to us as a fully developed doctrine.

Despite this, Aquinas remains a significant figure in many modern discussions of work, particularly in economics. Some scholars view him as a precursor to Adam Smith’s ideas on the division of labor or even Karl Marx’s labor theory of value. Others argue that he advocated for a more “humane” economy, critiquing capitalism before its time. Although these interpretations reflect Aquinas’s lasting influence, his primary interest in work was soteriological – how work relates to human salvation – rather than purely social or economic.

To grasp his perspective, Nyirkos delves into his original texts, armed with an understanding of their terminology and historical context.

## Martin Luther (1483–1546)

Orsolya Horváth begins her chapter on Luther with a specific episode in his life: In 1530, Martin Luther delivered a mid-week sermon series in Wittenberg on the Sermon on the Mount, including the Beatitudes. Luther’s interpretation of the sentence “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8). particularly puzzled his audience. Luther’s of just who is “the pure in heart” challenges conventional views, which often associate purity of heart with a life removed from worldly distractions, focusing solely on divine contemplation.

In the 16th century there was a prevalent contrast between the corrupt world of everyday life and the ideal world of pure spirituality. Luther rejects this dichotomy. He argues that a contemplative life, detached from the world, only leads to impurity and ungodliness, as it fosters delusions and fantasies. Instead, Luther posits that true purity of heart is achieved not by withdrawing from the world but by engaging with it. For him, the blacksmith, the cobbler with tar-stained hands, and even the dung-shoveling servant embody the essence of purity. Horváth explores the question of how a dung-shoveling maid can represent the ideal believer in Luther’s view?

## Francis Bacon (1561–1626)

Tyler Chamberlain notes that in modern thought, nature is often seen as an obstacle to human well-being, a hostile force requiring human subjugation. Francis Bacon was a key figure in forwarding this understanding. His chapter focuses on one crucial influence on Bacon’s understanding of nature’s resistance and how it might be overcome, namely, Bacon’s interpretation of the Judeo-Christian concept of the fall of man, as described in Genesis 3.

Bacon’s take on the fall posits the central human predicament as the loss of dominion over nature. According to Bacon, this loss necessitates constant labor, as humanity must toil to meet its material needs. The prevailing approach to understanding nature has, in his view, failed to yield practical technological advances. Bacon believed that a more effective method of natural inquiry could potentially restore humanity’s dominion and allow us to achieve the divine rest for which we were originally created. Chamberlain contends that this is Bacon’s vision.

## John Locke (1632–1704)

Jason Ferrell writes that John Locke’s theories on labor and property are well-explored, but they remain provocative. Traditionally, Locke is seen as a natural law theorist who justifies property rights through labor, asserting that labor fulfills a moral duty of self-preservation. Interpretations of Locke’s work generally fall into three categories: one that aligns him with classical liberalism and libertarianism; another that critiques him for justifying exploitative market practices; and a third that dismisses his ideas as outdated. These interpretations often reflect the biases of individual scholars more than Locke’s actual arguments.

Despite the familiarity of Locke’s work, Ferrell argues that there are important nuances that repay a fresh look. Its continued relevance is evidenced by the fact that recent scholars, such as Robert Nozick, have turned to Locke for inspiration.

## Adam Smith (1723–1790)

Adam Smith, a Scottish thinker and professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow, is widely regarded as the father of economics, primarily due to his seminal work, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*.

Maria Paganelli argues that, while the concept of the “invisible hand” is perhaps Smith’s most famous idea, that of the division of labor is also a key idea closely associated with Smith. According to Paganelli, Smith considered the division of labor essential for creating a prosperous and happy society. Both concepts have been extensively interpreted and sometimes misused, but they remain central to understanding Smith’s economic thought.

## Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831)

William Lomabrdo explains that Hegel’s daunting and abstract philosophy often obscures the critical role that labor – engagement with the physical material world – plays in the development of the self-conscious individual and the rational state. Marx, in his *1844 Manuscripts*, recognized this when he noted that Hegel “grasps labor as the essence of man.”. Lombardo’s chapter explores labor’s significant yet frequently overlooked role in Hegelian philosophy by examining two major texts. He first analyzes its foundational role in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and then explores its place in the *Philosophy of Right*. His analysis reveals how Hegel portrays labor as both integral to human self-consciousness and as a component embedded in civil society while under threat from market economies.

Lombardo further contends that Hegel’s thoughts on labor are not merely of historical interest, but of contemporary relevancy, especially when contemplating the impact of automation and artificial intelligence on the world of human work.

## Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855)

Nathanael Blake’s essay immediately raises the question, “Since Kierkegaard did not write about economics at all, why include material on him in a volume on work?” He answers that, while Kierkegaard’s writings rarely address labor or economics directly, his views on labor are relevant due to his broader insights into the nature of personal vocation. Kierkegaard presents labor not merely as a mundane activity but as a component of one’s spiritual calling. He argues that every individual has a unique vocation and that despite social differences, all individuals stand equal before God in their pursuit of this calling. As such, he comes to us as a voice from the “pro-work” side of our civilizational debate.

## Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944)

Spartaco Pupo writes that Giovanni Gentile, a leading Italian philosopher of the twentieth century, developed a “humanism of labor” in his posthumously published work, *Genesis and Structure of Society* (1946). Gentile believed that the modern understanding of labor as spiritually valuable was correct, and akin to his view of culture. He emphasized the profound connection between intellectual and manual labor and the “Absolute Spirit,” arguing that both types of labor are of crucial significance. Gentile’s thesis highlights the importance of the interaction between intellectuals and workers, positing a genuine union of labor and culture within the framework of human values.

Pupo further notes that Gentile’s work is unduly neglected in the English-speaking world, due to his fame being eclipsed by his older contemporary Benedetto Croce, and because of an article published in English by his erstwhile follower, Guido De Ruggiero, who accused Gentile of promoting “an abstruse and tiresome theology” full of “false rhetorical emotion.” Gentile argues for renewed attention to Gentile, since his “humanism of labor” shows us a way to break out of our prison of “technism and consumerism.”

## Max Weber (1864–1920)

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber famously linked the rise of modern capitalism to the “Protestant ethic,” which he argued fostered a new attitude towards work and capital accumulation. Callahan assesses the validity of Weber’s thesis, which has been both influential and controversial. He summarizes key debates surrounding Weber’s argument and explores how critics, as Stephen Kallberg notes, often fail to fully grasp the complexity of Weber’s analysis.

The upshot of this chapter is that, while Weber was wrong or at least insufficiently attentive to historical detail in some aspects of his famous work, his central thesis has certainly not been decisively refuted, and is still worthy of our attention today, as we seek to understand how we arrived at our current situation.

## Ludwig von Mises (1881–1973)

Gabriel Benzecry and Nicholas Jensen defend the case Ludwig von Mises makes, that laboring inherently involves “disutility.” They claim that the adage “A bad day of fishing is better than a good day at work” reflects a sginificant understanding of the relationship between labor and leisure. This relationship is central to Mises’s analysis in of labor in *Human Action*. Mises critiques the socialist view (represented by Karl Kautsky), which suggests that socialism could transform the disutility of labor into pleasure. According to Mises, labor is inherently unpleasant because it involves discomfort and the sacrifice of leisure. He asks why people engage in labor despite its inherent disutility, proposing that labor involves delayed gratification: individuals endure the negative aspects of work to enjoy the benefits of leisure later.

## Edith Stein (1891–1942)

Sarah J. Wilford contends that any history of work will be incomplete without an exploration of “women’s work.” To that end, she examines the work of Edith Stein. Stein integrates the concepts of nature, freedom, and grace into her view of work. For Stein, while work is influenced by one’s nature, including gender, it is not solely determined by it. She emphasizes the personal nature of vocation and the role of freedom in choosing one’s path. Stein also explores how grace sanctifies work and supports individuals through their trials and triumphs. Wilford’s chapter first addresses Stein’s views on women’s nature and education, then her ideas on freedom and choice in vocations, and finally, how grace and spiritual practices enhance the experience of work. Wilford demonstrates that Stein offers us a “middle way” view of women’s work, simultaneously arguing that women may excel at and should not be barred from any profession, while recognizing that the nature of women *qua* women may incline women on the whole more towards certain roles in society.

## Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990)

John Coats argues that Michael Oakeshott’s concept of “the deadliness of doing” offers a critical perspective on the role of practical activity, and in particular, labor, in human life. Oakeshott suggests that practical activities should not dominate our lives but rather be complemented by philosophical and poetic endeavors. Coats examines Oakeshott’s view on the limited role of practical activity, contrasting it with materialist perspectives like those of Karl Marx.

Coats goes on to discuss Oakeshott’s belief that activities done for their own sake, rather than for external benefits, mirror the creative structure of human experience. Coats compares Oakeshott’s views with those of Aristotle and Montaigne. And Coats looks at the role of ritualistic practices in achieving practical outcomes in a less burdensome manner, highlighting how rituals can be performed for their own sake while providing residual practical benefits.

## Josef Pieper (1904–1997)

Ferenc Hörcher examines Josef Pieper’s concept of leisure (*Musse*) as a counterpoint to Max Weber’s work ethic. While Weber emphasized the Protestant virtue of diligence, Pieper, from a Catholic perspective, returns to medieval Christian notions of contemplation. Pieper argues that human beings can achieve more than mere existential sustenance through work by periodically withdrawing from the labor world to engage in spiritual and intellectual reflection. This chapter will also critique modern work ideologies and their simplification of existence, aligning with Ortega’s criticism of the “revolt of the masses,” and will explore the positive aspects of leisure, including play and culture.

## Hannah Arendt (1906–1975)

In this chapter, Josefina Araos Bralic and Sarah Wilford take up the work of the the profound twentieth-century thinker, Hannah Arendt. They show how Arendt examined the human condition through the lens of work and activity. Arendt’s writings, notably *The Human Condition*, distinguish between labor, work, and action, offering a framework for understanding these facets of human life. Since Arendt’s differentiation of these three types of human activity is novel, Bralic and Wilford explain why Arendt undertakes this division.

These days, scholars and pundits look to Arendt to reckon with various socio-political ills, such as “the decline of liberal democracy, the spread of fake news, the rise of the social sphere, the triumph of technology, the loss of the private realm and the experience of mass loneliness.”

They also address critiques of Arendt’s work, particularly from feminist and democratic theorists.

## Alasdair MacIntyre (1929–)

Matias Petersen claims that Alasdair MacIntyre’s moral philosophy, particularly his concepts of practices and practical rationality, is relevant to discussions of work. Introduced in *After Virtue* and further developed in *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre defines practices as cooperative activities with inherent goods and standards. He explores how practices help individuals develop virtues and practical reasoning by distinguishing between immediate and long-term goods. MacIntyre further demonstrates that all work has inherent implications for other areas of life, including the political. For example, work that demands workers put in 70 or 80 hours a week (like many entry-level investment banking jobs, for instance) will obviously have a disastrous impact on family formation.

MacIntyre demonstrates that our work can be an aid or a hindrance in the development of our practical reasoning. Furthermore, our current politics and social science, focusing as they do on the satisfaction of existing preferences (without asking where those preferences came from) tend to create work environments hostile to excellence, focused only on short-term profits and substituting wage growth for healthy workplaces.

## New Natural Law Theory

Christopher Tollefsen explains that the New Natural Law Theory (NNLT), advanced by philosophers like Germain Grisez, John Finnis, and Joseph Boyle, reinterprets the principles of natural law based on practical reason rather than human nature. These principles drawn from practical reason identify a number of basic human goods that should be pursued. The NNLT concept of “morality” is that one should pursue these goods in a reasonable manner.

Tollefsen’s chapter outlines NNLT’s account of the role of work as a fundamental good and its implications for practical reasoning and moral action. It will also situate NNLT’s perspective within a broader theological context, concluding our ability to work is a sign of our creation in the image of God, and forms the basis of our other rights and duties.

## Raymond Geuss (1946–)

Gülşen Seven’s chapter utilizes Raymond Geuss’s *A Philosopher Looks at Work* to explore contemporary issues and research directions in the philosophy of work. It will examine traditional conceptions of work, including its definition, organization, and societal value, and address anomalies and ideological features. Her chapter also engages with recent works by David Graeber and Axel Honneth, contrasting their views with Geuss’s.

Seven sums up Geuss as concluding “that for the sake of preserving a habitable environment and continuing to live (at all or perhaps comfortably) in conditions of permanent unemployment, we need to produce and consume less, and, in the absence of work as we know it, discover ‘new’ ways of remaining meaningfully active.”

1. Raymond Geuss, *A Philosopher Looks at Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jan Lucassen, *The Story of Work* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Elizabeth Anderson, *Hijacked: How Neoliberalism Turned the Work Ethic Against Workers and How Workers Can Take It Back* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. James Suzman, *Work: A Deep History, from the Stone Age to the Age of Robots* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Anderson, p. xiii. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Anderson, p. xii. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. David Graeber, “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant” (Strike! Magazine, 2013, <https://strikemag.org/bullshit-jobs/>). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)