



The End of Work - Theological Critiques of Capitalism

by John Hughes

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reviewed by Eve Poole

I started studying for my PhD at Cambridge in Autumn 2004.

Everyone I met spoke with awe about a PhD that was being written up by the brilliant John Hughes.

As soon as it was out I made my pilgrimage to the University Library to pay it homage, so I am delighted that those sensible people at Blackwell's have seen fit to publish it for those of you who do not have the level of security clearance required to enter the hallowed portals of the UL.

As befits a book that started life as a thesis, it is hardly a light read, although it does have a rather fetching picture on the cover. I see from the scholarly notes I have written: 'lots of good stuff in here,' and this would be a fitting title either for this review or for a suitably annotated Monty Pythonesque hand on the requisite Amazon page. In case you are in a Generation Y mood

and aren't feeling up to reading the whole book from cover to cover, let me provide a précis.

Hughes starts with a survey of twentieth century theologies of work, before moving on to examine nineteenth and twentieth century debates about labour under capitalism. His 'big idea' is about the centrality to modern work of the 'spirit of utility' and its essentially anti-theological origins. In tracing this provenance he uncovers a suppressed theological source, to which he attributes many of the psychological difficulties that have in his view subsequently dogged the Marxist tradition. He shows that a parallel critique of work from the English Romantic tradition has rendered this theology explicit - through the work of Morris and Ruskin - criticising contemporary labour conditions on the basis of a vision of true work as art, akin to God's work in creation. He rounds up this treatment with a survey of those twentieth century Catholic thinkers who have supplemented

this aesthetic tradition with classical metaphysical categories, producing a robust critique of utility as essentially nothingness. Hughes intends that this analysis be used to rescue work, transforming it from nothingness into co-creative activity with God so that it 'becomes a liturgical offering.'

Hughes' genius is in noticing that critique of any kind is only possible with some kind of ideal to act as a benchmark. His view is that Marx's notion of unalienated labour can only have emerged from the quasi-theological traditions of German Romanticism, which furnished Marx with the necessary archetype - the notion of divine labour - with which he might argue. While this might appear a rather technical line of argument, it provides the faith and work debate with a crucial piece of intellectual scaffolding. Writers such as Peter Sedgwick, Richard Higginson, Clive Wright and Peter Heslam have long argued for work to be considered as participation

in God's ongoing act of creation. Hughes buttresses this argument for them by showing that this is fundamentally what good work is, regardless of the tradition from which critiques of work have come. It follows then that the image of work as divine labour is not just an assertion of faith but is also rooted in history. Awareness of this historical as well as theological dimension may embolden those involved in faith and work in their mission to encourage everyone at work – whether people of faith or not - to regard their labour as somehow hallowed. Being a Greek to the Greeks, we can now argue with our secular colleagues that good work is that which is consistent with creation. This underpins the current debate about sustainability with an insistence on the necessity of harnessing both the means and ends of work more explicitly to the ongoing maintenance of Planet Earth.

One of Hughes' particular contributions is his exploration of the concept of utility. He notes that its historic usage also connoted goodness and happiness, notably in Bentham's Utilitarianism, but over time it

came to mean mere 'utility.' However, peeling back the layers of this particular onion reveals the emptiness at its core. By definition, utility has to point towards something else, utility *for what*: 'Utility cannot escape the commitment to higher goods, and when it attempts to do so, by opposing itself to higher notions of goodness and claiming to be an end-in-itself, it becomes nonsense. Utility cannot be made "value-free," because questions of utility are always necessarily parasitic upon prior, presumed values' (p.223). Hughes uses this insight to restore the aesthetic view of work - utility's traditional opponent - by recalling beauty's status as an intrinsic good. He argues that the phenomenon of the beautiful points to the theological because of its ontological transcendence, thus providing the ideal necessary to facilitate critique.

One caveat. A Romantic critique of work privileges craft, but our own economy is increasingly service-driven. Neither could an economy work if we only did 'beautiful' jobs. And lest Hughes' efforts be used by those who

would argue for a return to the agrarian ideal, let it be said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Even Gentleman Jim, the boxer Jim Corbett, had a beautiful job to do, illustrated in the 1942 film about Jim, who developed a more beautiful style of boxing.

Providing a service can be as creative as manufacturing a product, in the same way that an ugly artificial heart valve may be more beautiful to a sick patient than the fine work on a filigree chalice. As a necessarily subjective category, even beauty is not as clean an ontological category as Hughes would have it. But he does pose us a wonderful challenge: how can we make the work that we do more beautiful?

While Hughes says in his Foreword that his book is aimed at those of at least higher undergraduate level in the disciplines of theology, philosophy or politics, he seems to have observed the rule used by the Financial Times that clear writing can be understood by the average eight year old. So I warmly encourage you to read it. ■

Eve Poole

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THERE IS A WAY OF LIFE so hid with Christ in God that in the midst of the day's business one is inwardly lifting brief prayers of praise, subdued whispers of adoration and of tender love to the Beyond that is within. No one need know about it. I only speak to you because it is a sacred trust, not mine but to be given to others. One can live in a well-nigh continuous state of unworded prayer, directed toward God, directed toward people and enterprises we have on our heart. There is no hurry about it all; it is a life unspeakable and full of glory, an inner world of splendour within which we, unworthy, may live. Some of you know it and live in it; others of you may wistfully long for it; it can be yours...

Thomas Kelly, Quaker, 1941