

Work and life

There are four attitudes towards work worth considering, that is to say:

- (1) there are those who work to live;
- (2) there are those who live to work;
- (3) there are those for whom life is work; and
- (4) there are those whose work is all done.

Most of us, who are gainfully employed for the sake of living a sustainable life, would fall into the first category – **those who work to live** -- which mostly consists of the “white collar,”¹ that is, executives in the government, corporations, offices and so on. On the higher levels of this group are the well qualified professionals and specialists. Their positions also entail a wide range of responsibilities in that their works should be effective, safe to the public, sustain our environment, and generally benefit society, even the world.

The second category – **those who live to work** – comprise mostly the working class, that is, “the pink collar” and “the blue collar.” Their work consists of long hours, and manual, even heavy, labouring. The pink collar is those whose labour is related to customer or client interaction, entertainment, sales and service-oriented work.

Most blue collar, because of their lack of higher education and proper training, generally earn less than those in the first category. However, they are the foundation of a sustainable society, providing us essential services, such as farming, construction, factory work, food catering, maintenance and cleaning services, public transport, physical labour, and so on.

This is only a general survey, not a technically exact one (for example, there may be overlapping of work amongst these “collars”). However, this serves well as a background for a reflection on the meaning and purpose of work. If we look deeper into this, we can add two more kinds of work. So far we have looked at work as an economic activity, that is, its goal as giving us wealth, or more broadly, as a means for living (meaning) and the pursuit of life as we envision it (purpose).

These two new categories of work go beyond the economic pursuit. We could see them as the philosophical approach (seeing life itself as work) and the spiritual approach (for whom all “work is done”). In many important ways, as will be evident, these two notions of are more satisfying in terms of true and meaningful happiness.

This third category of people sees their life and work seamlessly flowing as a common meaningful and purposeful stream. How is such a life meaningful and purposeful? Simply put, “**meaning**” refers to how we view life, our life-view, and “**purpose**” is what we then do about it, our life pursuits.

The two notions are integral in terms of true happiness. For, if we only see our life as being meaningful and do nothing about it, we are either helpless or being autopiloted by someone else or an external agency: we are but mental slaves. If we see our lives merely as being purposeful, but without any wholesome meaning to it, then we are no more than a machine or mechanical process: we are human robots.

How is work meaningful? On a worldly level, work is not often meaningful in itself. It serves a higher purpose, especially that of supporting what is of the greatest value to us, indeed, to all beings: life itself. Hence, to live is to work. Even the tiny ants live to work; as do the busy bees; and so too animals, birds and reptiles, big and small. However, as we have noted, they

¹ The term “white collar” is credited to Upton Sinclair, an American writer, in relation to clerical, administrative and management workers during the 1930s, though references to “easy work and a white collar” appear as early as 1911. (Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd edition (electronic): White collar.)

know no purpose in such activities. They do it out of instinct; they have no real choice. Humans have choices, and such choices allow us to see higher meaning in work.

While life is, as a rule, precious to each and every one of us, we (as humans) can understand, why this is so. Our human vision does not stop here. We feel that our lives need to be happy: we might even say here that the purpose of life is to be happy. This basic happiness entails regular and reliable sources of the basic life-supports: food, clothing, shelter and health.

Like everyone else, we need to work for these life-supports, but unlike animals, we are capable of understanding and using the concept of exchange and charity. We barter goods, pay for services, or freely offer them to others (perhaps for love or out of love). It is meaningless to simply take the not-given because if this were a common habit, then we would see no purpose in work. Hence, we see work as a meaningful (life is precious) and purposeful (we need life-supports to live).

However, if this is all that our work-life is, there comes a time when we might feel that we are forced to work, that we have no free choice of *not* working, or at least of changing work or work-style. We need personal freedom, to do what want to, or work the way we want to. Again we need to apply the golden rule here. If everyone simply did so, we would basically be each pursuing our own selfish ends; then a harmonious society might not be possible.

By living together, humans are able to do more useful and good things than if we were each to live all alone. However, a social life entails some sacrifice from each of its members. We need especially to respect the person² of another and his rights.

For such a social system to work, we must each know and accept that our speech and actions actually reflect our ideas and intentions. More vitally, such a convergence between thinking and acting also reflects the true nature of life itself. In short, we must communicate truthfully. Truth, then, is the fourth universal value that makes our life-as-work meaningful and purposeful.

So now we see how our work is meaningful and purposeful through the values of life, happiness, freedom, and truth. However, if these values apply only to our physical being, our persons or bodies, then we are still animal by nature, only more highly evolved perhaps. What differentiates us from the animal is that we know and accept that we have choices: we have a mind. But it is more than a mere instinctive “animal” mind: we have a *thinking* mind and *feeling* heart. It is this mind-heart that has allowed us to think up all such ideas and guide our lives by them, to improve on them, and to be happy.

Here, let us simply take “to think” as meaning to be able to see and understand conditionality (how causes and effects work), and to use language to work this knowledge towards a common good: this makes civilization, culture and goodness possible.

If thinking involves language and concepts, then “to feel” is to experience life directly, beyond language and concepts. It is not always easy to put aside language or concepts, the very tools of our human nature. Yet, that very same nature feels truly happy, when we are able to finish a good meal, or see a sunset, or fall in love, or finish a work of beauty, or simply feel gratified that our work is done. To feel in this way is to enjoy, to be happy, at least for the moment, our work is all done. Beyond this, where a higher happiness awaits us, we need to explore further for ourselves.

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² See **The person in Buddhism**, SD 29.6b: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/29.6b-The-person-in-Buddhism-piya.pdf>