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Toward A Christian Philosophy of Work: A Theological and Religious Extension of Hannah Arendt's Conceptual Framework

Stephen R. Palmquist

Without a philosophical framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of work our references to work in ordinary language can easily arouse confusion. In our everyday lives, of course, we need no such framework to know when we or others are *doing* work. But adopting a framework is crucial for a philosophical analysis or theological exposition of the meaning of work, given that the word “work” has such a wide variety of different meanings; for example, if I exclaim “My work is useless!” I could be expressing frustration that it has started raining just as I finished washing the car, that nobody appreciates the beauty of my sculpture, that my mission in life is failing, etc.¹ From a philosophical standpoint, political theorist Hannah Arendt offered one of the most significant discussions about work when she wrote over fifty years ago her now classic book, *The Human Condition*² (hereafter, *HC*). Although Arendt did not regard herself as a philosopher or a theologian, her book remains a fruitful starting point for a philosophy of work because she proposes a clear, simple and systematic conceptual framework for human activity that readily lends itself to a theological and religious extension in terms of the corresponding forms of human *inactivity*. Part of this paper’s task is to show how such an extension of Arendt’s

framework renders her position more complete. Balancing Arendt's three essential features of activity with three corresponding features of inactivity will give rise to a robust philosophy of work that exhibits specifically Christian implications.

A framework for extending Hannah Arendt's theory of work

The core structure of *HC* utilizes a fundamental distinction made in the opening pages, between three types of "activity": labor, work and action (*HC* 7-9). Although in ordinary language these terms (especially "labor" and "work") are often used interchangeably, most languages (like English) nevertheless preserve different terms that, upon closer investigation, appear to have distinct meanings. Thus, Arendt defines *labor* as *life-sustaining effort* rooted in the "biological process", while *work* is *creative productivity* resulting in "worldliness" (i.e., in the construction of a "world" of man-made artifacts, distinct from nature³). For Arendt *action* is activity that necessarily involves a "plurality" of *human beings relating to each other*; it is "*the condition ... of all political life*", the chief concern of political theorists.

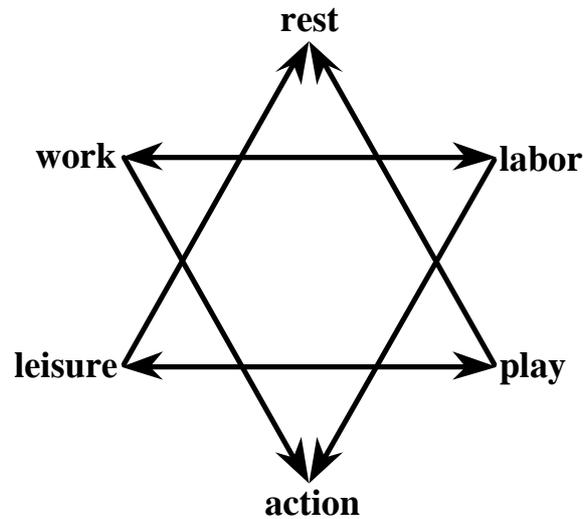
Arendt claims "labor", "work" and "action" denote, respectively, the types of activity most appropriately characteristic of animals, God and human beings (*HC* 22-23). Each type demarcates a distinct "sphere": the private (labor keeps us alive), the social (creative works enrich everyone), and the public (political action generates agreements). Humans, of course,

participate in all three spheres; but because our proper or natural sphere is the public, characterized by mutually free action, our participation in the other two is fraught with dangers. Labor subjects us to an animal necessity essentially amounting to slavery.⁴ Likewise, when engaging in creative activity, whereby we make artifacts in a way analogous to how God brought nature into being, we must beware that we are stepping into a realm that is not fully our own. The “human condition”, as Arendt sees it, inevitably involves all three types of activity, in all three spheres. The challenge each of us must face is how to balance them properly and resolve the quite different problems that typically accompany each.

By setting human activity in the broader context of the contrast between our relationship with animals and God, Arendt’s distinction offers an effective starting-point for a philosophy of work; nevertheless, it is deficient in one significant respect. Immediately after describing the three levels of activity (*HC* 12-17), Arendt invokes the classical distinction between the “*vita activa*” (i.e., the *way of activity*, encompassing all three levels) and the “*vita contemplativa*” (i.e., the *way of inactivity*, as practiced in various monastic traditions). While this additional distinction is helpful, her application of it is questionable. Reacting against the long-standing bias she sees in Christian circles, favoring passive contemplation, Arendt explicitly places *active engagement* in center stage, virtually ignoring the latter “way”. Such an extreme stance may have been necessary to enable her to develop such a comprehensive, political analysis of labor, work

and action. But to construct a robust and balanced *philosophy* of work, we must take into account both “ways”.⁵

Mystics and contemplatives, including the best of the early Church Fathers, typically regard the ways of activity and contemplation as thoroughly interrelated.⁶ Just as one cannot stay awake indefinitely without eventually falling asleep and cannot live forever without dying, so also we cannot understand work (or any of the three forms of activity) apart from its polar opposite. A complete framework for a philosophy of work should therefore include a threefold distinction between types of *inactivity* corresponding directly to Arendt’s threefold distinction: the life-sustaining effort of *labor* should be balanced by times of effortless *leisure* in the private sphere (as typically occurs mainly on our days off); the creative productivity of *work* flourishes only when balanced by inefficient times of *play* in the social sphere (as when a crucial insight comes while our mind is occupied with trivialities); and plurality of *action* is fruitful only when balanced in the public sphere of human relationships by solitary times of *rest* (as evidenced by the necessity of sleep, and ultimately, death). In each case, these pairs function as two sides of the same coin, rather than as mutually exclusive “paths”, whereby choosing one requires abandoning the other. We can represent the resulting framework diagrammatically by depicting the way of activity and the way of inactivity as downward and upward pointing triangles, respectively:⁷



With this diagram as a map to guide our discussion, I shall use the term “complement” to refer to the pair of terms on either side of each line segment of the same triangle (such as work and labor), while “opposite” refers to the pair of terms located in corresponding positions on the two different triangles (such as action and rest).

This diagram highlights two interesting parallels between the three terms for activity and the three terms for inactivity. First, “play” and “leisure”, like the complements “work” and “labor”, are technically distinguishable but commonly used interchangeably. Just as work and labor often occur together, yet can be distinguished upon reflection, so also play normally takes place during our “leisure time” and leisure activities⁸ often involve some form of play, yet the two are technically very different. If playing a game requires too much effort, it ceases to be leisurely and becomes *laborious*. (This explains why game-playing can be addictive,

constraining us to submit to the “necessity” of the game’s rules, just as slaves are constrained to serve their masters through labor.) Likewise, if we use our private, leisure time to create artifacts that transcend our pleasure at having made them and obtain an objective (e.g., monetary) value in the social sphere, such activity ceases to resemble play and becomes instead a form of *work*. In such situations, play and leisure, respectively, are not wholly transformed from a type of inactivity into a type of activity; rather, these examples merely illustrate the close relation each term has to both its *complement* and its *opposite*, as well as to its *complement’s opposite*, thus demonstrating the need for making clear distinctions.

The second parallel is that, just as “action” (a cognate of Arendt’s general term “activity”) is typically regarded as including both “labor” and “work” and as referring to a type of activity that synthesizes yet transcends the others, so also “rest” is the closest in its triad to being a synonym of “inactivity”, and as such, encompasses yet goes beyond the meaning of the other two. Given Arendt’s special, politically-charged definition of action in terms of behavior involving human relationships in the public sphere, we must be careful to regard the word “rest” as technically limited to the complementary *opposite* of action: *ethically*-charged events that “happen” in the solitude of one’s personal situation yet have political implications. So rest can take place just as readily when we are engaged in the care-free inactivity of game-playing as when we are engaged in the unproductive inactivity of leisure; but as we shall see in the

concluding section, it can also refer in a Kantian sense to a higher form of deeply *religious* inactivity that transcends both.⁹

Integrating Arendt's insightful threefold analysis of the *vita activa* with a corresponding analysis of the *vita inactiva* provides a balanced framework for a philosophy of work. To narrow the scope of this task, I will focus on how the sixfold framework of activity and inactivity impinges on our *jobs* (where "job(s)" refers to any *paid employment*¹⁰). In applying this framework to identify practical ways of being philosophically responsible in our jobs, the remainder of this essay will adopt three successive standpoints. The next section examines job-related activity from a *philosophical* standpoint: philosophers have been concerned above all with jobs involving *labor*, yet the conflict between the two main politico-economic philosophies (capitalism and socialism) can be resolved only when we take note of how *leisure* relates to both systems. The third section modulates to a *theological* standpoint, whereby the problems arising in job-related activity are best understood in terms of the interconnection between *work* and *play*. We shall then conclude by exploring how a *religious* standpoint can be adopted in response to the political issues that inevitably affect us in our jobs, pointing us to insights aroused by the tension between *action* and *rest*.

Labor and leisure in perspective: philosophical reflections on animal activity

The philosopher's life is a life of leisure. Many philosophers might be reluctant to agree with such a maxim, on the grounds that philosophical reflection is often anything but “leisurely” (in the common sense of the term). The life of thought requires a person to struggle relentlessly with the most difficult questions ever posed by and about human existence. Yet, in terms of the above framework, a person can “make a living” out of mental activity only in a cultural-economic context that provides other means of satisfying the necessary demands of biological life (see note 4, above). If “labor” refers to jobs involving a struggle to produce the physical necessities of life, then philosophers obviously contribute little (if anything) to this realm of human existence. Rather, a philosopher’s job has more in common with what we normally call “leisure”.¹¹

Any philosophy of work must respond effectively to the scholars who have most shaped our idea of what it means to have a job. Until recently, few philosophers had devoted much attention to this topic,¹² perhaps because labor and thought (as a form of leisure) are diametrically opposed. Karl Marx (1818-1883), the first thinker to treat labor as the focal point of his whole system, was (like Arendt) reluctant to call himself a philosopher: as a true man of thought, he was a philosopher as well as a socio-economic/historical critic, even though he saw himself as an opponent of philosophy. Unlike most philosophers, his goal was not merely to *describe* the world, but to *change* it. Marx regarded philosophy as a symptom of society’s

sickness and believed it (like religion) would naturally die out once the disease is healed.

Basing his criticism of Western culture on a reversal of Hegel's dialectical conception of history,¹³ Marx argued that humans create their own nature through their work. "Work" here refers mainly to what people do in their *jobs*, especially to those whose jobs require them to *labor* (in Arendt's sense of the term): for Marx, "labor (and not God) created man", who is to be regarded not in Aristotle's terms, as a "rational animal", but as "*animal laborans*".¹⁴ Marx observed the capitalist economic system that pervaded Western Europe in the nineteenth century and constructed an insightful theory to explain why it intrinsically harms laborers. In a capitalist economic system, a small, wealthy minority owns the machines and property needed to produce all life-sustaining necessities; these people hire poorer people (the vast majority) to do the labor that produces the goods. To make a profit, owners must set the price of their goods higher than the cost of labor. Yet this economic law at the heart of capitalism tragically separates laborers from the product of their labor. Since we are *self-defining* creatures, our nature determined by what we *do* (especially in our jobs), the owners of capital have set up a new form of slavery: laborers who do not own the products they make are in effect selling *themselves* to their capitalist employer. This loss of self-identity through labor is what Marxists call "alienation".

Marx believed that, in order to overcome the problem of alienation, laborers must *revolt*, forcibly taking possession of the means of production. After passing through a temporary phase

of socialized industrial economy, society will eventually be transformed into a perfect communist state, requiring no class structure, no government, no private property and no money. People will then be able to realize their nature by contributing to society the creative output of their own *work* (understood now in Arendt's special sense), so that nobody needs to submit to the humiliation and self-alienation of mere labor. Unfortunately, history shows no sign that this ideal society will ever emerge from the socialist state. Instead, new forms of alienation have arisen: state control separates socialist laborers from the products of their labor just as much as the profit margin does for their capitalist counterparts—if not more so.

Marx's theory is filled with subtle ironies. First, this staunch defender of the superiority of labor (as authentically human, self-defining activity) over thought (as essentially unproductive) never held a steady job! Instead, he spent many years inside libraries, writing his *thoughts*. For this he was supported by money from Engels (see note 13, above), who himself owned a factory! Marx devoted his life to anti-philosophical (pro-labor) writing, yet he produced what are now regarded as some of the most influential philosophical writings of the past two centuries. Arendt points out another fundamental paradox in Marx's position: he defines human beings as *laboring animals*, yet the purpose of revolution (the highest form of activity for Marx) is to *abolish* labor, thus *freeing* mankind from its necessity. "We are left with the distressing alternative between productive slavery and unproductive freedom."¹⁵

An important point about Marx's philosophy of labor that is not often recognized is its consistency with the major philosophical reflections on labor that preceded him. Although earlier philosophers had not raised labor to the status of a self-defining activity, several had discussed its socio-economic significance in detail. John Locke (1632-1704), for instance, argued that "labor is the source of all property," while the main function of money is to provide a way of saving labor's products from being of short duration.¹⁶ Most significantly, Adam Smith (1723-1790), in his great capitalist manifesto, *Wealth of Nations* (1776), treated "labor as the source of all wealth".¹⁷ From Smith's time forward, most economists have taken for granted his main point, that a nation's wealth is measured not by the amount of money it possesses, but by the amount of consumable goods its laborers produce. Smith's book is partly descriptive of the economic situation in eighteenth-century Europe, and partly prescriptive. For instance, he accurately predicted a more sophisticated division of labor in the future would result in a wider margin between the available workforce and the amount of labor that needs to be expended to produce enough goods for all consumers. The ever-increasing surplus resulting from this margin, whereby "the labor of some suffices for the life of all" (*HC* 88), has not only given more people than ever before an opportunity to pursue non-labor-intensive jobs, but has also given rise to a new phenomenon that has radically changed how the average person views his or her job: *leisure time*.¹⁸

Although Marx argued against many of Smith's capitalist views (most notably, by rejecting Smith's conviction that self-interest is a sufficient motive to insure a nation's general economic stability), these rival theorists share one key assumption: that *labor bestows value on the goods we produce*. This assumption, however, is precisely what I believe a balanced philosophy of work must call into question. For its effect, as history has shown, is to compartmentalize human life into two discrete spheres: time spent performing laborious activity to sustain life (i.e., to make money, according to the capitalist ideal; or to contribute to the common good, according to the socialist ideal) and other time spent "spending" the value we (either as individuals or as a community) have accrued through our labor. The altruistic communist slogan, "give [labor] according to your ability and take [goods] according to your need", is rooted in this dualism between labor and leisure (giving value and taking value) just as much as is the self-centered capitalist slogan, "leave the people alone" (so they can decide for themselves how to spend their leisure time and the amount of labor needed to support it).

An ever-increasing awareness of the supposed importance of leisure time has been the West's most significant response to the Marxist critique of capitalism. The surplus of time made available by ever-improving forms of machine-assisted division of labor has prepared the way for this response:¹⁹ the "leisure *industry*", as it is often called (somewhat ironically), could flourish only after the working week was shortened, vacation times extended, and retirement

ages lowered. Far from being the solution to the problem of labor, however, the tendency of modern societies to focus on how people entertain themselves in their leisure time—typically viewed as the very purpose for having a job (i.e., to make enough money to have fun)²⁰—is a deeper symptom of the very sickness Marx recognized, but misdiagnosed, over 150 years ago. Marx believed capitalist-owned labor forces were producing a society of slaves, with religion and all other non-materialist aspects of culture (including philosophy) serving only to placate their misery. But the problem had (and still has) much deeper roots.

The social problem exacerbated by Smith's emphasis on wealth, yet misdiagnosed by Marx's call for revolution, is that human beings were themselves already beginning to separate themselves from the work of their hands. The reason "leisure time" has only come to be regarded as a necessity over the past century is not that people were previously unaware of how miserable they were, staying on the job all day long; rather it is because before the distinction was made between labor and leisure, the fulfillment we tend to associate with leisure time ("entertainment") was assumed to be part of what a good job provides. The craving for leisure, in other words, is a direct outcome of the loss of meaning in our labor. Viewing labor as a merely animal-like activity, best fit for a machine, leads gradually to *all* jobs being lumped into the same compartment, as a necessary evil that must be endured just to stay alive.

If philosophy is a profession that has more in common with leisure than with labor, as

suggested at the outset of this section, then does this not confirm Marx's conviction that philosophy is but a symptom of the modern socio-economic situation? Yes and no. It confirms his critique for philosophers who treat their jobs—like most scholars, usually teaching jobs—as primarily a good way of making enough money to support their non-philosophical activities. Such an attitude is ultimately self-contradictory. But philosophy need not be thus. For philosophers—and here scholars are no different from other job-holders—can refuse to accept the contrived division between labor and leisure imposed on us by the past few centuries of modernization. By viewing the life of thought as at once leisure and labor—as, indeed, a form of leisure that *is* labor (in Arendt's technical sense: a genuine life-sustaining expenditure of energy)—philosophers can overcome Marx's most fundamental critique, disarming his argument at its very heart. This transforms scholarship into a playful *work*, as we shall see the next section, integrating the highest aspects of labor and leisure. Adapting a famous statement of Kant's, we can say leisure without self-defining labor is “empty” of any inherent value (as Smith taught), while self-defining labor without leisure “blinds” us with alienation (as Marx taught).²¹ The highest lesson to be learned from these twin insights is that labor and leisure, though distinct, should not be viewed as separate. Every act of labor we perform should be imbued with the spirit of leisure. And every moment of leisure ought to be an aspect of the labor that sustains life.

The two great philosophies of labor, proposed by Marx and Smith, have led to polarized

interpretations of the relation between labor and leisure: the conflict between capitalism and socialism was the main feature of twentieth-century economic theory. Yet, how important is it to common laborers whether their life-sustaining efforts are interpreted in terms of one ideology or the other? For most, not at all. Likewise, our main concern when discussing issues relating to labor should not be ideological but attitudinal.²² A correct attitude toward labor will produce good fruit in either system, whereas an incorrect attitude will destroy either system from within. The key is to put leisure in its proper place, thus avoiding the mistake made by both Smith and Marx. For when leisure becomes an aspect of our labor (and vice versa), we can transcend the confines of our politically-determined circles and enjoy a solitude (even if we undertake our leisure activities in the company of others) that frees us to perform all our labor in a spirit of love. To do this, as we shall see, is to become imitators of God. The alternative—to sell ourselves into economic slavery for 40 or more hours per week so we can spend another 40 hours relaxing in front of a television—is to reduce ourselves to an animal existence that has more in common with the lifestyle of domesticated pets than with divine personhood.

The main philosophical question arising from this discussion is: if the activity of labor is a form of slavery, as Arendt's analysis suggests, how can freedom ever be attained by those whose jobs require them to devote most of their time laboring to provide for the preservation of the life of others, the so-called "consumers"? As we have seen, neither the socialist (Marxist) nor

capitalist (Smith's) interpretation of labor provides a viable solution to this problem. But our extension of Arendt's framework suggests a way forward. A philosophically sound solution depends on the laborer's ability to think of his or her job in a new way, transcending the bondage of necessity that defines such situations and taking refuge in the inactivity implicit in genuine leisure. Our tentative solution, then, is to emphasize that in return for the privilege of living a life of leisure, one of the philosopher's chief responsibilities is to model for the laborer an attitude that can free the mind even of a person who is, for all practical purposes, a modern slave. Philosophy on its own, however, will never reach this goal; to understand how any scholar's work can transcend natural necessity, we must appeal to divine assistance, the realm of theology.

Work and play in perspective: theological reflections on divine activity

The theologian's life is a life of play. This assertion may seem even more fanciful than the notion that the philosopher's life is one of leisure. Yet careful reflection reveals the former to be profoundly true, at least from a Christian perspective. Whether these twin insights are good news or bad depends in both cases on whether the opposites are viewed as united (despite their diversity) or alienated (belonging to different "compartments" of life). For just as labor (a private individual's life-sustaining effort) requires a sense of "philosophical leisure" to be properly balanced, so also work (creation of an artifact for society) must be balanced by a sense of

“theological play”. Examining the Bible’s use of “work” can elucidate this point. In so doing, I shall suggest that prayer—often the most individual expression of theological belief—reaches its highest expression when experienced as a synthesis of work and play.

The postulation of a specifically religious notion of work—a possibility Arendt largely neglects—raises an important theological question: can our “work” be *uniquely directed toward God*? Answering affirmatively would appear to contradict Kant’s claim that there can be “no special duties toward God”.²³ His main concern was to guard against the tendency some religious people have to neglect their *human* duties in favor of various religious activities they believe God has commanded, such as praying for a needy person instead of offering to help. Assessing the legitimacy of Kant’s view is beyond the scope of the present inquiry (but see note 29, below). More relevant is the simple fact that “work” often refers to something like a *religious profession*, calling or vocation—as when missionaries refer to their ministry as “the work”.²⁴

An overview of key biblical references to “work” reveals a scriptural basis for this usage. God’s creation of the world is described as a “work” (Gen. 2:2-3), and human beings are put in a garden to “*work* the ground” (2:5,15). This activity continues after the Fall (3:23);²⁵ but in order to “work the ground” *outside* the garden, Cain becomes a “restless wanderer” (4:12). This reduces work to mere labor; what was formerly God’s free gift becomes a commodity, traded for his brother’s animals. Likewise, Jacob works for seven years in exchange for a wife (29:15,18),

then another seven after Laban deceives him by giving him Leah instead of Rachel (29:27,30).

When Abraham's children move to Egypt, the chief sign of their changing fortune is when the Egyptians, fearful of their growing numbers, ruthlessly force them to *work* (i.e., labor) as slaves (Ex. 1:12-14). The closer the people come to heeding God's voice (e.g., by asking to hold a special festival of praise [5:1]), the more Pharaoh intensifies their labor (5:1-18). Perhaps in response to this the Mosaic Law commands: "Do no work at all on [holy] days, except to prepare food..."²⁶

The first reference to "*the work*", in the special sense pointed out above (see note 24), comes when God commands the people to build a "Tent of Meeting": "everyone who was willing and whose heart moved him came and brought an offering to the LORD for *the work* on the Tent of Meeting"; many brought various types of valuables "and everyone who had acacia wood for any part of *the work* brought it.... All the Israelite men and women who were willing brought to the LORD freewill offerings for all *the work* the LORD through Moses had commanded them to do."²⁷ This special, religious sense of "the work" exhibits certain typical features: it is commanded by God (cf. Ex. 39:42-43), done willingly rather than by force (as the labor imposed by the Egyptians had been), based on individual gifts yet aims to fulfill a community goal, and encourages individual creativity.²⁸ Following these principles, the people freely gave so much that they "were restrained from bringing more" (36:6)!

Exodus 40:33 tells us “Moses finished *the work*.” Such passages do not refer merely to labor. The point is not that an activity requiring much toil was finally over, but that Moses had completed a *creative act* in obedience to God. Moreover, numerous passages indicate that “the work” continued even after the tabernacle was built (e.g., Num. 3:7-8; 16:9). Thus Numbers 4 describes the various people who carried out “the work”, while Numbers 8 explains the Levites’ special responsibilities relating to “the work” (see also 18:4,6,21,23). Many similar references to “the work” occur in the historical books recounting the construction of the temple (see e.g., 1 Chr. 28:10,13; 28:20-29:7) and rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem (Ezra 2:69; 3:8; 4:24; 5:8; 6:7-8,22; and Neh. 2:16ff; 4:11-21).

Another notable aspect of “the work” is that God’s creative work continues even after the initial creation. Human beings, for instance, “are all *the work* of his hands” (Job 34:19; see also Ps. 8:3). The Ten Commandments are also “*the work* of God” (Ex. 32:16); like all creative work, it is an ongoing process, for God promises that if the people keep the Law, others “will see how awesome is *the work* that I, the LORD, will do for you” (34:10). This work of God is beyond our understanding (Eccl. 11:5), so all people should respect it (Is. 5:12). Even the bad weather that sometimes forces us to take unexpected breaks is an aspect of God’s work (Job 37:7): “So that all men he has made may know his *work*, he stops every man from his labor.”

Becoming aware of God’s work is important because we were created to participate in it.

When we do so properly, *our* “work will be rewarded” (2 Chr. 15:7), just as God “blessed *the work* of [Job’s] hands” (Job 1:10). God blesses “the work” of those who give generously to God’s work (e.g., Deut. 14:29; 15:10; 24:19), who celebrate the Lord’s feasts (Deut. 16:15), and who obey God (Deut. 28:1,12; 30:8-9). Proverbs repeatedly supports a strong work ethic, assuming hard work (i.e., labor) produces good fruit naturally (see e.g., Prov. 12:14; 14:23; 22:29; 31:17; Eccl. 2:10) and condemning those with a lazy attitude toward work (Prov. 18:9; 21:25). A problem arises only when we begin worshipping the artifacts we make (Deut. 27:15), for this is how “other gods” come into existence: false gods are “*the work* of men’s hands” (2 Chr. 32:19; see also Is. 2:8 and Rev. 9:20). We can avoid this error by remembering that our work is ultimately meaningless (Eccl. 2:17-24); rather than worshipping our own creation, we can thereby learn to enjoy our work (Eccl. 2:24; 3:22; 5:19; 8:15), whether our jobs require hard labor or more “leisurely” activity.

Jesus develops and deepens this attitude toward work in his teachings on the kingdom of heaven, especially in the parables, where an attitude of playfulness is often evident. Those who treat their jobs too seriously will be appalled by the suggestion that a person who works in a vineyard for just an hour should be paid the same wage as someone who has labored all day! Yet Jesus presents this attitude to work as an essential characteristic of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 20:1-16). His frequently repeated maxim, that in God’s kingdom “the last will be first, and the

first will be last” (e.g., 20:16), is (among other things) a playful reminder not to treat our earthly priorities too seriously. The parable of the talents (25:14-30) reveals how mistaken are those whose attitude toward earthly investments (“talents”) is so cautious that they fail to take the risks necessary to put God’s gifts to work (25:16).

Far from denying the value of work (whether creative or laborious), Jesus challenges us to put all human action in its proper perspective. As we shall see in the next section, *resting in God’s presence* is the most important work. The story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) effectively illustrates this point: by opening her home to Jesus, Martha outwardly seems to be fulfilling the great Law of Love, like the Good Samaritan (10:25-37); yet her “work” becomes mere labor because she does it without a sense of *being with God*; paradoxically, by simply resting at Jesus feet (10:39), Mary accomplishes a far greater “work”. Likewise, Jesus tells a crowd, who had pursued him after he had miraculously used a boy’s lunch to feed them all (John 6:1-15), not to “work for food that spoils but for food that endures to eternal life” (6:27; cf. 4:34 and Rom. 14:20). The people, mistakenly thinking he is talking about religious duties, ask Jesus to tell them what “*works* God requires” (John 6:28). He responds by explaining that “the *work* of God” is the inner work of faith (6:29).²⁹ Jesus views his participation in this work as an opportunity to glorify God (17:4); and numerous passages charge Christians with the awesome responsibility of completing “the work” Jesus began (e.g., Acts 14:26; 15:38; 1 Cor. 15:58;

16:10,16; 2 Cor. 8:11; Phil. 2:22,30; Col. 4:17).

Perhaps the most telling indication of Jesus' *playful* understanding of his kingdom work is his habit of calling God "*Abba*"—a child's term for "Daddy". This enables Jesus to cut through traditional religious attitudes on numerous occasions, as when he interprets a man's blindness not as a result of some hidden sin, but as expressing "the work of God" (John 9:1-3)—in this case, an opportunity for healing. The Sermon on the Mount, especially its blessings and woes (Matt. 5:3-12; Luke 6:17-26), is bound to be misinterpreted if we overlook its playful tone; for Jesus is once again transcending the over-serious attitude we often have toward our tears and laughter, failures and successes—in our religious lives as much as in our jobs. Exhortations such as *love your enemies, pray with few words, stop worrying about trivialities, and trust in your heavenly Daddy's good gifts* are illustrated with examples radiating with deeply moving humor. The hyperbolic images of people cutting off various body parts (Matt. 5:29-30), welcoming abuse from others (5:39-41), being as perfect as God (5:48), or doing something with one hand without the other hand "knowing" (6:3), like the images of birds or flowers "laboring" to survive (6:26,28) or parents giving stones to children instead of bread (7:9), would be offensive and potentially disastrous, if taken literally. Recognizing their playful character does not make them disingenuous, but intensifies Jesus' spiritual lessons.

Is Jesus' playful attitude toward life in his Daddy's kingdom fundamentally new? Yes

and no. The Old Testament does portray God as having a sense of humor, of sorts. In the Psalms God laughs at the wicked (2:4; 59:8), “for he knows their day is coming” (37:13). In Proverbs Wisdom says something very similar to the fools who won’t listen: “I in turn will laugh at your disaster; I will mock when calamity overtakes you” (1:26). Moreover, various people laugh when God’s work is manifested among them: after giving birth to a son in her old age, Sarah says “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me” (Gen. 21:6); the captives whom “the LORD brought back...to Zion” say their “mouths were filled with laughter” (Ps. 126:1-2); and the “wife of noble character” (Prov. 31:10) “is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come” (31:25). Although the whole book of Ecclesiastes portrays all human actions, especially our work (e.g., 3:9), as being “vain” and “meaningless”, the author nevertheless encourages us to recognize the playful paradox that, by putting “eternity in the hearts of men”, God “has made everything beautiful in its time” (3:11). Accordingly, we should adopt a light-hearted attitude toward our jobs, not allowing the “burden” (3:10) to weigh us down. All our work, in itself, is vain and meaningless, yet “everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it” (3:14).

These passages provide a helpful context for interpreting Jesus’ attitude; yet none match the new depth he reaches in revealing the playful heart of God. Resting in God empowers us to be creative in our work by freeing us from bondage to the necessities of labor (see note 4, above).

Machines have taken the place of human slaves; but we will enslave ourselves to them if our use of their services is not rooted in a deep rest that allows for playfulness in working with them. The lesson to be drawn from this analysis is that, with a proper understanding of how our activity (whether it be labor, work or action, in Arendt's classification) is all part of *the divine work*, we can learn to approach all activities with a sense of playfulness that breeds creative joy. Learning to enjoy our work, to see it as *divine play* rather than assessing it solely with human criteria (e.g., profit margins or peer approval), will not only encourage those whose jobs require *hard labor* to experience the hardship with a sense of meaning and joy; it will also remind those whose jobs involve a high degree of creativity to beware of the idolatry of putting what we create in the place that belongs only to the Creator.

As we begin to view our work as participation in divine play, the other side of the coin gradually becomes apparent: activities that otherwise appear useless can be essential to "the work". The most significant example for Christians is prayer. Thomas Merton, one of the most insightful Christian writers on prayer, was acutely aware of the interrelationship between work and play in monastic life. In *Contemplative Prayer* he says "prayer is not a struggle to keep recollected *in spite of work...*, but flows from everyday life and is in accord with work...: it is indeed an aspect of the monk's work, a climate in which the monk works, since it supposes a conscious awareness of and dependence on God."³⁰ Referring to the writings of numerous

monks before him, Merton highlights the dialectical relationship between action and rest: “all life on earth must necessarily combine elements of action and rest”; prayer, too, will inevitably be sometimes “laborious” and “unconsoling”, yet at other times “almost without effort”.³¹ The paradoxical goal of the monk’s disciplined life of regular (if not constant) prayer is to reach a state of contemplation wherein “the soul rests in God and God works in the soul”.³² A healthy balance between disciplined activity (such as liturgical prayer) and rest (such as contemplative prayer) therefore requires us not to emphasize one to the exclusion of the other.

Merton’s insights can also be applied to the relationship between work and play: we should aim to achieve a dialectical balance between these opposites, leading ideally to a complete synthesis. All too often religious believers regard prayer as entirely serious work that excludes any sense of playfulness. By contrast, charismatic churches sometimes emphasize laughter and joy in prayer without balancing it with an emphasis on work. Relating this insight to our job situations is not difficult (though practicing it is bound to be!): to raise our jobs to the status of being “work”—i.e., to manifest our divinely given creative ability in our jobs—we must learn to *play as we work* and *work as we play*.³³ Viewing our jobs this way enables us no longer to depend on leisure to escape from the drudgery of labor: adopting this theological standpoint enables us to flourish as our activities become aspects of “the work” that is our life in the making.

Approaching our work from the foundation of the deep, inner silence³⁴ of contemplative

prayer enables us to “put ourselves into” our work without succumbing to the alienating tendencies of labor discussed in the previous section. This theological key to being a “good” worker requires us always to be working on *oneself*, not merely creating a product for sale to others. The true measure of success in one’s work is not how high the pay or how many awards one receives; rather, it is how much of *oneself* is created and shared with others. There are no simple rules concerning how to do this; each person is different. In one true story, a person with Down’s Syndrome transformed the supermarket where he worked by putting little “thoughts for the day” into the customers’ bags as he packed their groceries.³⁵ This reminds me of the security guard at my university (now retired) who used to greet each person walking by with a big, warm smile. For some people, such acts would not be an authentic expression of creative sharing. The point is not to copy these examples, but for each of us, regardless of how high or low our job position may be, to find ways of injecting creative joy into our activities. Whenever we authentically express “the work” God has created within us, divine playfulness is present in a powerful way. When that happens, we transcend the distinction between play and work through the power that is “the joy of the Lord”.³⁶

Action and rest in perspective: religious reflections on human activity

The city-dweller’s life is a life of rest. This description of city life might seem absurd,

especially coming from someone living in Hong Kong, one of the world's most *active* cities. Yet if we adopt the expanded version of Arendt's conceptual framework proposed in the first section, this can be as true an insight as the idea that philosophical labor is leisurely and theological work is playful. The foregoing philosophical theology of work risks being inapplicable to real human situations unless we can show how it relates to the third and final mode of activity in Arendt's fundamental distinction: *action* (i.e., *human relationships*, especially in the political sense). Indeed, people who experience self-alienation in their jobs typically blame, and seek solutions from, the *political* structures that govern the relationships between employers and employees. My argument here will be that, whatever the *cause* of employee alienation may be, its only genuine *solution* is moral—and so also, religious (see note 9).

As we have seen, *labor* is animal-like activity aimed at sustaining life primarily for the individual—though, of course, the value of our labor may be measured by how well it supports and prolongs the lives of others. *Work*, by contrast, is God-like activity aimed at creating artifacts of intrinsic value to society as a whole; as such, its value is ultimately beyond measure. To realize its potential as the form of activity most appropriate to human beings, *action* must combine the good points of labor and work without being sucked into the extremes that endanger both (e.g., a herd mentality on the one hand, and alienated individualism on the other). To do so, we must treat “action” as human activity viewed from the higher, religious standpoint of

communion, measuring the value of what we do by how well it supports (or detracts from) *the cooperation of individuals in loving mutual relation*.³⁷ This is depicted in the diagram given in the first section, for “rest” occupies the highest point, being the only form of inactivity that transcends labor and work.³⁸ In this closing section, I shall briefly outline how adopting such a standpoint in politically-charged situations (i.e., adopting a disposition of rest in the very situations that call for action) provides the means whereby even citizens of modern, technologically-advanced cities can overcome the tendency toward self-alienation in our jobs. We can become more effective guides to those we influence by emphasizing the need to complement *all* action (whether in a job or in other contexts) with rest.

God’s rest on the seventh day of creation (see Gen. 2:2) is typically interpreted either as a welcome respite after the strenuous activities of the previous six days (as if God were “tired” after so much labor) or as a symbol that God’s creative activity was now complete (as if God’s work in the world had ended on the sixth day). A more plausible and symbolically meaningful interpretation takes God’s rest on the seventh day as a response to the fact that on the sixth day, with the creation of human beings, the potential for *relationship* came into being. On this reading of the biblical symbolism, God’s rest is a profound *political* statement, representing God’s commitment to give human beings the freedom to forge their own agreements about how to act toward each other. Politics did not arise on the first five days of creation, because no free moral

beings had yet been created; no “action” (in Arendt’s sense) could have taken place prior to the completion of the sixth day of God’s creative work, so there was not yet any need for the balancing function of rest. Interpreted politically, as a response to the newly-arisen potential for human action, God’s rest on the seventh day conveys a deep political message that lies at the core of all genuine religion: imitating God (i.e., acting in accordance with the divine image, as revealed in God’s rest) means resisting our natural desire to exercise power over other free beings as we relate to our fellow city-dwellers.

Having already explored in a separate book how this biblical message can be understood as constituting a distinctively religious, viable political philosophy,³⁹ I shall focus in the remainder of this essay only on exploring the implications this view of *rest* (as the proper religious response to our political nature) has for our jobs. In commenting on how the foregoing philosophy of work suggests various political responsibilities for Christians in their jobs, I shall use Volf’s influential book, *Work in the Spirit* (see notes 10 and 24), as a sounding-board.

As Volf aptly argues, the notion that the proper response to alienation in the workplace is to encourage a change in the attitude of the employees (e.g., by treating their jobs as playful opportunities to engage in a creative process, or by seeing their labor and their leisure as two sides of the same coin) is at best only a partial solution, for without a radical “transformation of the character of work...alienation in work will be masked, not overcome.”⁴⁰ Volf’s

“pneumatological” model (see note 24, above) suggests “both matching work with human nature and matching people of diverse individual inclination with work roles that suit them.”⁴¹

While Volf’s theology of work is correct as far as it goes, he tends to step rather lightly around the crucial fact that power structures themselves must be transformed, so that they reflect the model provided by the creation story and throughout the Bible. If even God does not “lord it over” us, but instead risks being alienated from the creation by entering into the era of human relationships (the “seventh day”) with a disposition of rest, then so much more should our human power structures reflect the model whereby all action is grounded in rest.⁴²

Alienation first arises as a *political* phenomenon, even in the workplace. That is, a job will alienate an employee only to the extent that the rules guiding the employer-employee relationship are power-laden. Volf recognizes this in his treatment of alienation, arguing that the two chief dangers in any work situation are “lack of self-directedness and [lack of] opportunity for [self-]development”;⁴³ avoiding both depends first and foremost on the *employer* adopting a correct (loving) stance toward the employees. That is, a Christian philosophy of work cannot address *only* the employees, encouraging them to suffer all manner of injustices with a joyful heart, but must appeal to employers to establish correct standards of political relationship. Guarding in this way against Volf’s two chief dangers makes a good starting-point for understanding what it will mean for Christian employers to complement action in the workplace

with “rest”. The employer rests (i.e., gives up power) when the employees are allowed to be self-determining and are given opportunities and means to further their self-development—even if such measures have an adverse affect on profits.

What Volf seems reluctant to admit is that the biblical model of political action implies that work-induced self-alienation is, to some extent, a *necessary* part of the human condition. Instead, Volf argues (somewhat perplexingly) that “alienation from God” is the key problem that may arise in any job situation.⁴⁴ But to think of alienation from God in terms of (for example) an employer requiring someone to work on Sundays is too simplistic. For in the biblical text, the alienation that is characteristic of human nature (and so also, of the action we undertake in our jobs, as we relate to other human beings in power-situations) is presented as a “given”, our expulsion from the Garden being (implicitly) part of what it means to live during the seventh day of creation, when God is at rest. Indeed, the whole Bible can be read as a drama of alienation and restoration that arises out of the dynamic interplay between action and rest in human power relations.

Volf recognizes that overcoming alienation in a job situation requires employees to be treated in an ethical manner by employers. He employs an explicitly Kantian understanding of morality (i.e., never treating others merely as a means), along with a quasi-Marxist application of it to economic situations, to argue that capitalist culture frequently goes badly wrong in this

regard, causing the work situation to be “dehumanized”.⁴⁵ The only solution, he argues, is for companies to introduce bottom-up management styles, requiring “a conscious effort by management to give up some of their rights and confer them to workers.”⁴⁶ When this happens, employees will be freed to enjoy “work for work’s sake”, so that the time we spend on the job will be a form of activity that we experience “as an end in itself” and so as both fulfilling and “fun”.⁴⁷

While Volf’s theology of work presents for the most part an accurate statement of biblical ideals, it does little to assist the employee who is stuck in “the human situation” of alienation caused by power relations that are *not* balanced by a boss who “rests”. At one point, for example, Volf claims a person “cannot *live* as fully human without working.”⁴⁸ Yet this dehumanizes a significant number of persons who would protest that they, too, are human even though they have no job and no desire to enter into a workforce that seems *bound* to force them into servitude.

The solution, I suggest, is to adopt a holistic conceptual framework for understanding work, such as the one I outlined in the first section. That is, while the primary application of the political “action-rest” dynamic is to employers, because it relates to the way we understand power relations in our jobs, the other two standpoints apply primarily to employees insofar as they define responsibilities that are real whether or not we find ourselves in a job with an employer who has a religiously well-informed (i.e., godly, bottom-up) management style. For a

religiously-sensitive person—whether in Hong Kong or Helsinki, Tokyo or Toronto—the only genuine rest is rest in God. If work (including labor and action) is “at best an exercise of freedom”,⁴⁹ and given that the chief threat to freedom is the alienation that arises when our fellow humans refuse to take refuge in divine rest (see note 38, above), the only way to guarantee that our jobs are fulfilling is to balance action with inaction, to seek to experience leisure in all our labor, play in all our work, and in all our political relations to be at rest.

In this concluding section of our attempt to construct a framework for a Christian philosophy of work, we have seen that, compared to rest, every other form of inactivity is ultimately unfulfilling. Leisure and ordinary play, without the spiritual grounding provided by divine rest, are perhaps the greatest yet least recognized forms of idolatry plaguing modern society. So innocent they seem. Yet the impetus behind the (often idolatrous) “money-making” ideal in capitalist culture tends to be the false notion that having money will allow us to enjoy our times of inactivity with more relaxing leisure or more pleasurable play, with the help of better homes, cars, vacations, etc.⁵⁰ When the idols of leisure and play are crushed, however, the love of money loses its power to tempt us, thus empowering us to see in all our action (or rest), work (or play) and labor (or leisure) the creative and redeeming hand of God.

Notes:

¹*Longman New Universal Dictionary* (Harlow, England: Longman, 1982), 1128, cites 44

different definitions for “work”, ranging from “sustained physical or mental effort to achieve a result” to definitions such as “to excite, provoke” and “to move slowly in relation to another part”.

²Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). Arendt shunned the label “philosopher” as too individualistic. As she famously wrote, “men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (*HC* 7).

³Nature can be regarded as part of “the world” only insofar as it is viewed as a result of *God’s* creative work. For a further elaboration of this distinction between “nature” (as God’s creation) and “the world” (as a human creation), see my book, *Biblical Theocracy: A vision of the biblical foundation for a Christian political philosophy* (Hong Kong: Philopsychy Press, 1993).

⁴*HC* 83-84. As Arendt points out, the ancient Greeks justified ownership of slaves on the grounds that this was the only way citizens could be free from the necessity associated with labor; to avoid contradiction, slaves were regarded as non-human. In Arendt’s terms, Greeks thought slaves could not *act*, so they need not be regarded as human. Later (107), she contrasts this Greek view, whereby labor is essentially evil, with the Hebrew view of labor as essentially good.

⁵Arendt did focus more explicitly on the contemplative way in a subsequent (posthumous) book, *The Life of the Mind* (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1971/1978), published in two volumes that examine “Thinking” and “Willing” (hereafter *LM1* and *LM2*, respectively); unfortunately, her planned third volume, “Judging”, was never written. While it is tempting to correlate these three volumes to labor, work and action, respectively, Arendt herself did not explicitly link her later reflections with her earlier theory of work in this way. Rather, her insights on the contemplative way are largely independent of her theory of work.

⁶For a good historical overview, see Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York/London: Doubleday, 1969), 29-66. Merton’s views will be discussed briefly, later in this article.

⁷This figure is based on Figure V.8 in my book, *The Tree of Philosophy: A course of introductory lectures for beginning students of philosophy*⁴ (Hong Kong: Philopsychy Press, 2000[1992]); its structure follows the principles established in *The Geometry of Logic* (see www.hkbu.edu.hk/~ppp/gl/toc.html).

⁸The above, sixfold framework reveals this common phrase to be an interesting oxymoron. Technically, leisure is a form of *inactivity*, not activity; for in leisure our focus on establishing serious, historically-significant relationships with other human beings ceases and what we do is governed not so much by the public sphere’s political norms as by the ethical norms that guide

each person's conscience. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the same event can often be interpreted from several (or even *all*) perspectives in this framework.

⁹While he does not refer explicitly to “rest” in the sense used here, Immanuel Kant does distinguish between a political form of social organization, based on external laws, and a religious form of social organization, based on internal (ethical) laws. Only the latter, he argues, can form the basis of a genuine church. See *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, tr. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), 98-100 (German pagination). See also my article, “Kant’s Religious Argument for the Existence of God—The Ultimate Dependence of Human Destiny on Divine Assistance,” *Faith and Philosophy* 26 (2009), 3-22.

¹⁰By contrast, many writers, especially those with a sociological bent, refer to paid employment as the best (or most obvious) definition of “work”. See for example: Nels Anderson (*Man’s Work and Leisure* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), 3; Robert Dubin (ed.), *Handbook of Work, Organization, and Society* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1976), 41; the MOW International Research Team’s *The Meaning of Working* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 2-3; Stanley Parker, *Leisure and Work* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 1; and B.M. Berger, “The Sociology of Leisure”, in Erwin O. Smigel (ed.), *Work and Leisure: A contemporary social problem* (New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press, 1963), 29-30. Nevertheless, I am not here identifying work with “gainful employment”, a tendency Miroslav Volf rightly rejects in *Work in*

the Spirit (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 8-9; rather, my focus on the latter serves to limit the multitude of applications that the conceptual framework defended in this section could have.

¹¹Arendt regards thinking as totally unrelated to her threefold theory of the nature of work (see *HC 90*), the “*vita activa*” being her sole concern (see e.g., 16-17). I argued in the previous section that any attempt to follow this “way of activity” ought to be balanced by attending to its *complementary* relationship to the “*vita inactiva*”, as epitomized by philosophical reflection. In *LMI*, Arendt offers in depth reflections on thinking and the philosophical task; but she never explicitly integrates these with her reflections on the *vita activa*. Aristotle, for example, viewed leisure as one of the central aims of living (see Berger, *op cit.*, 26), although he surely had in mind something quite different from what we now think of as leisure.

¹²Thus, the voluminous *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), has no entry on work. Fortunately, the more recent *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (New York: Routledge, 1998), does have an entry for “philosophy of work”.

¹³For Hegel (1770-1831) all historical change happens according to the “thesis-antithesis-synthesis” pattern, where each “synthesis” progressively spiritualizes the preceding “thesis”. But for Marx (especially as interpreted by his lifelong friend and financial supporter, Friedrich

Engels [1820-1895]), the process begins at an illusory spiritual level and progresses through a forced (revolutionary) antithesis to the more purified material level of the thesis.

¹⁴HC 86n. On p.101 Arendt adds that for Marx, “labor became the source of all productivity and the expression of the very humanity of man.”

¹⁵HC 104-105. See for example, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, tr. C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 10,59.

¹⁶HC 101. See Locke’s *Second Treatise on Civil Government* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952), Chapter V. In §§26-27 he persuasively argues that a natural object can “belong” to a person only when labor transforms it into that person’s property. This alone gives a thing its value (see §40): “For ‘tis *Labour* indeed that *puts the difference of value* on every thing.”

¹⁷HC 101. The entirety of Book I in Smith’s *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1910) is devoted to a thoroughgoing analysis of the role of labor in producing wealth. Sigmund Freud, incidentally, claims “every civilization rests on a compulsion to work and a renunciation of instinct” and not “principally or solely in wealth itself and the means of acquiring it and the arrangements for its distribution” (*The Future of an Illusion*, tr. W.D. Robson-Scott and J. Strachey [Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1964], 11). See also Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*, tr. J. Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), p.27n.

¹⁸Smith's main focus in Book I is on how to understand and improve the main function of labor, providing the "necessaries and conveniences of life" (*op cit.*, 2). In other words, Smith's goal is to promote the growth of a nation's wealth so leisure can be enjoyed. Obviously, leisure as such (i.e., as time to do things that are not directly related to one's job) is not new. What is new is the significance it has in virtually all modern cultures, to the extent that many people's *jobs* now involve keeping others occupied during their leisure time. Scholarly attempts to understand this new role for leisure began around the middle of the twentieth century and have only flourished in the past few decades. The books by Anderson, Parker and Smigel (see note 10, above) provide good overviews of the literature.

¹⁹In discussing the role of machines in this transformation, Arendt warns that, although machines may reduce the amount of *human* input needed to labor, they are also in danger of reducing all creative work to mere labor (see *HC* 144-153).

²⁰For an extreme example, see Timothy Ferriss, *The 4-Hour Work Week* (New York: Crown, 2007).

²¹In *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), B75, Kant say: "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."

²²Along these lines, Josef Pieper develops a religious interpretation of leisure as "an attitude of mind, a condition of the soul" (*Leisure, The Basis of Culture*, tr. Alexander Dru [London: Collins,

1965], 50). In the next section I shall elaborate further on how an attitude of play can fulfill a similar function. See especially note 33, below.

²³ Kant, *Religion, op cit.*, 154n.

²⁴This practice has an interesting history. Medieval alchemists referred to their attempt to transform base metals into gold as “the work”. For many alchemists, this served as a symbolic representation of the more profound “work” of transforming the alchemist’s own personality (the “old man”) into that of Christ (the “new man”). I discuss this further in *Dreams of Wholeness: A course of lectures on religion, psychology and personal growth*² (Hong Kong: Philopsychy Press, 2008[1997]), Chapter 7. The epistemological status of this way of speaking is of considerable philosophical interest, though it goes beyond the scope of our present concerns. In brief, references to “the work”, regarded as a person’s religious “calling” or “vocation”, can be classified as (paradoxically) both analytic and a posteriori. For an explanation of these terms and how they differ from the three more traditional epistemological classifications, see *The Tree, op cit.*, Chapter 4, and my article, “A Priori Knowledge in Perspective: (II) Naming, Necessity, and the Analytic A Posteriori,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 41 (1987), 255-282.

In suggesting that the old, vocational concept of work (whereby each person has a unique “calling” from God) be replaced by a “pneumatological” (spirit-based) concept of work, Volf associates vocation with “protological” (“old man”) theology and spirit with “eschatological”

(“new man”) theology (*op cit.*, 89-102). The main weakness of the typical vocational model, he argues, is that Luther (for example) “did not operate with a synchronic plurality of vocations” (156); in today’s world the typical person must engage in many different types of work, often concurrently, so the notion of each person working according to his or her “charisms” (multiple spiritual gifts) is more appropriate (115-117). Volf’s distinction, however, downplays the fact that both approaches use transformative spiritual concepts to describe “the work”. Surely the notion of “work as cooperation with God” (e.g., 98,114) is central to *both* approaches.

²⁵Arendt distinguishes between pre-Fall and post-Fall “work” by regarding the former as “service” of the soil and the latter as “servitude” (*HC* 107n).

²⁶Ex.12:16; see also 20:9-10; 23:12; 31:14-17; Lev. 16:29; Num. 28:18,25,26; 29:1,7,12,35; Deut. 5:13-14; 16:8. This command is extremely serious: “Whoever does any work on [the Sabbath] must be put to death” (Ex. 35:2; see also Lev. 23:30). Lev. 23 repeats the injunction not to work on holy days ten times (see vv.3,7,8,21,25,28,30,31,35,36). Accordingly, John’s Gospel presents the Pharisees’ decision to plot Jesus’ death as a direct response to his apparent disregard for the Sabbath Law (e.g., Jn. 5:9-18).

²⁷Ex. 35:21-24,29. Exodus 36:1-7 uses “the work” in this sense eight times.

²⁸For instance, “the work of an embroiderer” is mentioned numerous times as a part of “the work” (Ex. 26:36; 27:16; 36:37; 38:18; 39:29). For other types of creativity, see 28:6,15,39; 30:25,35; 31:4-5; 35:32-35; 37:29; 39:3,8,22,27.

²⁹Kant’s denial that there are any special duties to God is likewise an affirmation of the centrality of faith. See note 23, above.

³⁰Merton, *op cit.*, 33.

³¹*Ibid.*, 61. This complementary relationship between action and rest will be the focus of the concluding section.

³²*Ibid.*, 59. Quoting Peter of Celles, he adds: “God works in us while we rest in him.”

³³The “we” here is important. Working together (i.e., jointly engaging in creative activity) is an effective means of bringing unity into otherwise troubled relationships. Accordingly, Thomas Moore suggests involving family members in our work as an effective way of making it more “soulful” (*Soul Mates: Honoring the Mysteries of Love and Relationship* [New York: HarperCollins, 1994], 86-87). Ivan Illich thinks learning to “work together and care for each other” is the “solution to the environmental crisis” (*Tools for Conviviality* [London: Calder & Boyars, 1973], 50). Elsewhere, he relates this to the “disciplined and creative playfulness” that marks the foundation of friendship for Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas (xii-xiii; cf. 60). Such an attitude can fire the imagination to deal creatively with whatever problems we face in our jobs.

Arendt only briefly mentions the possibility of integrating work and play in this way; she thinks “the artist...is the only ‘worker’ left in a laboring society” (*HC* 127). Whereas Anderson (*op cit.*, 11) discounts such a synthesis as “less a theory than a wishful approach to a complex situation”, Fred Best (*The Future of Work* [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973], 3) predicts “a growing effort to avoid the compartmentalization of our lives evidenced by today’s dichotomy between work and free time.” And one of the “six major features” in C.W. Mills’ analysis of “the ideal of craftsmanship” (“The Meanings of Work throughout History”, in Best [ed.], *ibid.*, 10-13) is the lack of any “split of work and play”: “Play is something you do to be happily occupied, but if work occupies you happily, it is also play, although it is also serious, just as play is to the child.” (The other features of Mills’ ideal are: a “supreme concern” for “the quality of the product and the skill of its making”; an exuberant willingness to continue the work “even if not paid”; a freedom to plan and control one’s own work; an ability to use the work to improve skill and as a means of self-development; and lack of any desire to “flee from work into a separate sphere of leisure”.) Mills believes the “realization” of this ideal “is impossible for the modern white collar worker.” Even if true, this should not stop us from approximating it in our attitude toward our job.

³⁴For a thorough discussion of inner silence, see *The Tree*, Chapter 10.

³⁵Barbara A. Glanz, “Johnny”, in Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen (eds.), *A 3rd Serving of Chicken Soup for the Soul* (Deerfield Beach, Florida: Health Communications, 1996), 242-244.

³⁶Neh. 8:10. Note the connection this joy has with work in Deut. 16:15 and with Jesus in John 15:11 and 16:24. One of the best historical examples of this attitude toward work is Nicolas Herman (known as “Brother Lawrence” in *The Practice of the Presence of God*), the Carmelite mystic who was as happy and fulfilled doing menial housekeeping tasks as he was when engaged in more obviously “spiritual” work.

³⁷Christianity is (or should be) primarily about *love*. Love is and must be a heart-centered issue of *relationship* rather than a head-centered issue of isolated individuals “doing their jobs”.

Christians can, in this respect, promote what is best in the well-know trait of Chinese culture to emphasize relationships as more important than individualism by actively fostering *love in the workplace*. Unpacking what this entails is no simple matter. Since this is not an essay on love, let it suffice merely to say that when we see our work through the eyes of love, we will treat other people’s well-being as equal to (if not higher than) our own. For a more detailed treatment of this theme on a popular level, see Bill Heatley, *The Gift of Work* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2008), especially pp.38-40 on “The Discipline of Relationship”. See also my book, *The Waters of Love: A course of introductory lectures on love, sexuality, marriage and friendship* (Hong Kong: Philopsychy Press, 2003).

³⁸“Rest” here refers not to mere idleness (or ceasing one’s labor), nor to the playful inaction that can be an effective grounding for creativity, but to the powerful *pause* that follows and completes every truly creative work, rendering the existing power-structures ineffectual by comparison—just as the world’s creation is complete only when God *rests* on the seventh day.

³⁹In *Biblical Theocracy* I take the “city” (or *polis* in Greek) as the typical political situation, arguing that the Bible presents a coherent (though only implicit) political philosophy that can be described as a “non-political political system” (*op cit.*, 83n). Kant’s portrayal of the church in the Third Piece of his *Religion* exhibits the same, paradoxical character of having a form of “organization” that is based entirely on *internally-legislated* (i.e., ethical) laws. See my article, “Kant’s Religious Argument,” *op cit.*

⁴⁰Volf, *op cit.*, 160-161.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 161. The Bible describes such individual inclinations as “spiritual gifts”, a term Volf uses repeatedly but does not explain in a way that offers concrete assistance to employees and employers.

⁴²Tending to blur Arendt’s distinction between labor, work and action (e.g., *ibid.*, 9), Volf underemphasizes the importance of this crucial step in the process of rescuing work from the grips of alienation. Moreover, he explicitly excludes the relevance of discussing leisure as an aspect of understanding work, claiming the distinction between the two “is blurry” (13). He does

refer to “leisure” at one point as a form of “activity” that is the “polar” opposite of work (133-134). He therefore calls *worship* a Christian form of leisure (136-137); in the conceptual framework I am defending, by contrast, it corresponds more appropriately to *rest*. Worship is not a form of *action* whose purpose is to help us cope with *laborious work*, but a form of *inaction* whose purpose is to complement our tendency to act as if all human problems are to be solved by political means (i.e., through a power struggle). In worship, we rest from our tendency to lord it over other human beings by coming into a right relation with the Lord of All. Volf is correct, however, to argue that when confronted with such polar opposites we ought to seek *balance* between them (138-139).

⁴³*Ibid.*, 170.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 161-166. Volf portrays alienation as work that “negates human nature” (168), thus demonstrating that he does not recognize alienation as part of what it means to be human.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 170-173.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 177.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 196. Unfortunately, Volf seems to overlook the paradoxical relation between this conclusion and his initial definition of work (12): “The essential feature of work...is... *instrumentality*.” If work is and must be “a means to an end that lies outside the activity itself” (12), then *some* explanation must be given for how it can retain its essential character, yet

become an end in itself. My claim is that this paradox can best be explained by calling attention to the necessarily complementary relation between the three types of action and the three types of inaction in the conceptual framework introduced in the first section.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 197.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁵⁰An idolatrous attitude to money also plagues Christian “work” undertaken in capitalist societies that tend to view money as the principle means of solving problems. Money is closely related to power; so when we lack the resources to perform our creative work alone, we tend to look to money provided by others. Yet this is not the solution. Money enables us to build *good human institutions*. But the danger of public funding is that it intensifies the temptation to praise and (in effect) even *worship* the institution’s good work. When this happens, the work of human hands tends to eclipse the work being done by the hand of God, ironically heightening the alienation experienced by employees.