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Hard Times and Hard Work

This year, the Princeton Precept will return to the Great Books to consider the theme of work.

Everyone has complaints about his or her job, but these same people dread the possibility of unemployment. It is not just a financial matter; the activity of labor is a source of meaning, pride, identity. There are qualities within work that elevate it or debase it. These include greed, pride, laziness, sacrifice, perseverance, innovation, creativity, prudence, frugality, moderation and boredom. Work may sometimes be onerous but idleness is far worse. As Nietzsche once quipped, “The idle animal sleeps, the idle man broods.”

In Genesis, after the sin in the garden, work becomes painful (*By the sweat of your face you will eat bread*). In the Book of Ruth, work gives fruitful outcome to qualities of risk-taking and sacrifice, and links generations, even unborn ones, in particular ways of living. In this book of the Bible, work seems not to be a punishment at all. Aristotle taught that work was what slaves did, or, at least, was what free citizens did in order to do better things later on. In the Middle Ages, society divided along lines of those who prayed, those who fought, and those who worked; work was important, but it was still not *that* important. In earlier centuries, people worked in order to live, they didn’t live in order to work.

Today work is *that* important, despite new technologies that are supposed to reduce the burden. Indeed, some people are self-described workaholics and are proud of the label. But in this new century, we don’t understand work any better or agree any more on what it is and why it entails such powerful mixed emotions. The business school attitude toward work, presupposed on Wall Street and in corporate management, would appear to be the most widely held. It is a self-conscious compartmentalization of work and home. It requires you, in the words of Princeton historian Harold James, “to be calculating and aggressive at the firm so you can come home to be warm and emotional in the family.” This last, most modern understanding of work is perhaps the least coherent and the most difficult to realize.

The current malaise of the global economy, the crisis of financial institutions, and the resulting anxiety about our own work lives makes these wonderful books, which are always provocative, particularly timely.

Reading List

- Genesis, Chs. 1-4, *Book of Ruth*
- Hesiod, *Works and Days*
- Epictetus, “Of Freedom”
Aristotle, *Politics* I.8-11, VIII.1-4
- Montaigne, “Of Glory” and “Of Utility and Honesty”
- Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Ch. 5
Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, I.1-2, 8
- Emerson, “Compensation”
Marx, “Estranged Labour”
- Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, part 3, Chs. 4-6
- Weber, *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Chs. 4-5
- Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, part 8, Chs. 2-4