Consciousness, Individuality, Mortality:
Basic Thoughts about Work and the Animal/Human Boundary

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Work raises in a special way the question of the human, "Who am I?" In work, this question, which is latent in all experience, becomes visible and unavoidable. Work brings the problem of identity down from abstraction into the field of action, from "who am I?" to "what am I doing here?" This is another way of saying what Marx does: "The question whether human thinking can reach objective truth -- is not a question of theory but a *practical question*. In practice man must prove the truth, that is, actuality and power, this-sidedness of his thinking."[1]

Work raises the question of the human above all through its inherent *intentional complexity*, by forcing our attention to an act whose purpose is always double, comprising the two ends of livelihood and the work itself. No matter how directly the act of work may contribute to livelihood, this doubleness remains, constituting a kind of ineradicable tension within the experience of work. "Every worker is simultaneously creator and slave," wrote the socialist Hendrik De Man, "He is the latter, even if he be the happiest of creators, for he is a slave of his own creation. Freedom of creation and compulsion of performance,

[1] Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, trans. Easton and Guddat, in *Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), thesis 2, p.99.

ruling and being ruled, command and obedience, functioning as subjects and functioning as objects – these are the poles of a tension which is immanent in the very nature of work."[2] This tension originates in the fact that work is always at once an affliction, an act forced upon humans by material conditions, and an expression, a self-directed exercise of specifically human powers.

Work's inherent tension is an aspect of the ambivalence of the human, in the sense that work expresses the simultaneous debility and mastery of human nature. Where the animal appears to embody an identity of being and function, work brings into relief the *distinction* between being and function, self and role, within human nature. In doing so, work raises the question of the difference between humans and animals, but not in an easily resolvable way. Rather, work asserts that there is a difference between humans and animals but also calls that difference into question. To see this more clearly, consider Marx's well-known definition of labor's specifically human character in *Capital*:

> A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will. And this subordination is no mere momentary act. Besides the exertion of the bodily organs, the process demands that, during the whole operation, the workman's will be steadily in consonance with his purpose. This means close attention. The less he is attracted by the nature of the work, and the mode in which it is carried on, and the less, therefore, he enjoys it as something which gives play to his bodily and mental powers, the more close his attention is forced to be.[3]

[2] *Joy in Work*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (London: Allen and Unwin, 1929), 67.
[3] *Capital: Volume One*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Eveling, ed. Frederick Engels (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887), Chapter 7.

The human worker thus distinguishes himself from the animal in being able, in consciousness, to stand outside his work. But this ability has a paradoxical effect. On the one hand, it is the very means of the creativity and newness of human production, the inner tool or principle by which being becomes a tool, an agency capable of purposive, teleological making and acting. On the other hand, it ensures that the difficulty of work is always more than the difficulty of exertion, but the continual overcoming through attention and self-subordination of an inertia rooted in consciousness itself, the inertia of being, in consciousness, outside, or elsewhere than, one's work. The very faculty that makes human work possible as such thus becomes, in the act of work, a hindrance, an irresponsible imp who must be dealt with, either forced *to* work or provided with a game to play. Thomas Hoccleve's comparison of his scribal work to the more fully manual labor of artisans identifies this problem precisely:

> This artificers, se I day be day,
> In þe hotteste of al hir bysynesse
> Talken and syng, and make game and play,
> And forth hir labour passith with gladnesse;
> But we labour in trauaillous stilnesse;
> We stowpe and stare vp-on þe shepes skyn,
> And keepe muste our song and wordes in.[4]

Ideally, work would itself become the play that consciousness requires, bringing the worker into the space of intrinsic value, where work, however instrumental, is fulfilled in itself and becomes its own end, collapsing the distinction between work and play. And it

[4] *Regement of Princes*, 1.997, 1.1009-15, cited from *Hoccleve's Works*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, EETS, ES 72 (Millwood, NY: Kraus Reprint Co., 1978). Hoccleve here separates writing from the model of monastic labor as established by Augustine: "Cantica vero divina cantare, etiam manibus operantes facile possunt, et ipsum laborem tanquam divino celeumate consolari [Kleuma, cantus nautarum et remigum, quo se mutuo ad laborandum excitant]. An ignoramus, omnes opifices quibus vanitatibus et plerumque etiam turpitudinibus theatricarum fabularum donent corda et linguas suas, cum manus ab opere non recedant? Quid ergo impedit servum Dei manibus operantem in lege Domini meditari, et psallere nomini Domini Altissimi: ita sane ut ad ea discenda, quae memoriter recolat, habeat seposita tempora?" (*De opere monachorum*, ch.17, *Patrologia Latina* 40:565). [Indeed they may easily sing the divine songs even while working with their hands, and cheer up this work with a kind of divine rowers' song. Or do we not know to what vanities and for the most part even baseness of theatrical fables all workmen give their hearts and tongues while their hands do no leave their work? What therefore keeps the servant of God working with his hands from meditating on the law of the Lord and singing of the name of the Lord Most High?]

is just this ideal that Hoccleve, as the poet laboring in *his* words before us, gestures towards. But is such an idealized worker any longer human? He seems to have left the ground, to have transcended necessity, subsisting in the privileged space of his own spiritual fulfillment.[5]

However much work may be redefined or experienced as play, the human at work remains an animal, a being anchored in the needs of the body, his own and others'. Rather than taking us beyond the animal, work brings us into contact with the boundary between the animal and the human, a boundary that is felt most palpably within the gap between being and function, self and work. The "ambiguity of the body," writes Emmanuel Levinas, "by which the I is engaged in the other but comes always from the hither side, is *produced* in labor."[6] In this sense, the location of animal/human boundary exposed by labor is not the body but its ambiguity, its simultaneously being self and world. Work does not bring this boundary into relief abstractly, as a concept, but as a boundary that is constituted by a number of specific facts. Chief among these are the fact of consciousness, the fact of individuality, and the fact of mortality.

Each of these facts belongs to the ambiguity of the body in that they do not belong to the body, but simultaneously to the body and the self. Consciousness does not belong to the body in the sense of being a part of it. Instead, the body is something like the seat or house of consciousness, its container and mode, so that the moving, living body becomes the sign of consciousness. Individuality is similarly housed or seated in the body, only more concretely, in corporeal idiosyncrasy and uniqueness, above all, in the face. Individuality, as the state of being a self or individualized consciousness, does not reside in the body but has the body as its most intimate projection. The body is the *place* where the self can say "I." Mortality would seem to belong to the body in the sense that, because death transforms the body from life to lifelessness, being mortal means being in a to-be-lifeless body. Yet the only thing that gives even this restricted notion of mortality any meaning is that it is a notion of *one* who must die. Mortality is constituted, made real

[5] Cf. "The activity of God is called a 'game' precisely because it is assumed *he* has no ends of his own to serve; it is in the same sense that our life can be 'played,' and that insofar as the best part of us is in it, but not of it, our life becomes a game. At this point we no longer distinguish play from work" (A.K. Coomaraswamy, "Play and Seriousness," in *Metaphysics*, ed. Roger Lipsey, Bollingen Series LXXXIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 158.

and meaningful, by the fact that it belongs to the self, that it is always someone's mortality. Whence Heidegger's denial of mortality to animals: "They are called mortals because they can die. To die means to be capable of death as death. Only man dies. The animal perishes."[7] In these terms mortality belongs neither wholly to the self or wholly to the body, but to both. Accordingly, a central aspect of the experience of seeing a dead body is the sense that, rather than the person being extinguished (for which the body, containing only its own lifelessness, gives no evidence), the person is no longer *there*. The corpse is not a dead person, but something that used to be a person. Whether or not the person exists elsewhere or otherwise is beside the point.

But *how* does work raise these facts? Work brings the fact of consciousness into view as a faculty that is both essential and coincidental to work. It does so in the manner of Marx's specifically human worker whose work subsists fundamentally in imagination and at the same time brings to attention the worker's subsistence, as consciousness, outside of work, thus making close attention *to* work not only an aspect of it, but an independent act that work requires. The fact of consciousness thus emerges out of work as a *polarity*, comprising a positive as well as a negative aspect. In its positive aspect, consciousness appears in work as its directive power, the focused presence of the being at work. In its negative aspect, consciousness appears in work as something coincidental to it, as the undetermined absence of the distracted being. The tension inherent in this polarity demands resolution, a resolution that simple identification with one or the other aspect of consciousness, the present or the absent, can never accomplish. However much the worker may identify with his working self, the non-working aspect of his consciousness always remains outside that self, calling to him as the voice of his own being who exists above and beyond work. Likewise, however much the worker may identify with his non-working self, the working aspect of his consciousness always remains outside that self, nagging him as the voice of his own being who must remain at work. In short, work renders consciousness coincidental, but in a meaningful way, in a manner that requires negotiation and resolution. And yet the alternative resolutions that

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[6] Emmanual Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 166.
[7] Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 178,

the polarity of consciousness in work calls us towards seem equally impossible. How could consciousness ever completely manifest itself in work or completely transcend it?

The fact of individuality, of being a unique being, emerges within the experience of work in a similar fashion. However depersonalized the nature of the work may be, the worker remains a person at work. As such he does not simply put to use human powers, but modulates those powers in an individual way. Work bears the stamp of individuality, if not in its product, at least in the manner of its execution which is always specific to the worker's unique mind and body. Individuality is thus an essential component of the work process, being part and parcel of the way *one* works. It is impossible to work in any other way. But work, whose objectivity always contains the possibility of someone else doing it, makes this specificity appear trivial, as a kind of negligible fingerprint left behind by the act of work, and thus renders individuality incidental. Where consciousness emerges within work as a polarity, the presence and absence of the worker, the individuality of the worker emerges as the *paradox of being both substance and accident*.

Work raises the fact of mortality by subordinating the major quantities of life: time and energy. In doing so, work whispers in every passing moment, "I am more important than your life." Work is not only the instrument or means of life, work also instrumentalizes life, reduces it into a means. The false separation of life into work and life, however socially and culturally instituted, is a product of work itself, which, as the means of life, places life "after" or "outside" of it. But the blatant impossibility of this displacement, the fact that at work one is clearly living, accentuates the *expenditure* of time and energy in work, the loss of life. Work thus rearticulates itself in experience as the spending of a portion of life, underscoring life's finitude. In making life appear as both means and end work reveals its deep affinity with play as activity that is its own end. What, then, distinguishes work from play if work, as an essential mode of life, is in a very real sense its own end? Why does work's being both means and end appear as a contradiction whereas play's being both means and end appears as a harmony? The answer lies in the fact that work is inseparable from need, as the experience of lack, of being in the condition of missing something. Like pouring from one jug to fill another, the act of work, originating in need, reinstates in its experience, as a sense of loss, the lack it seeks to fulfill. The act of play, on the other hand, originating not in need but

desire, as the wish for something *outside* rather than lacking from the self, reinstates in its experience, as a sense of attainment, the object it seeks. Accordingly, we tend to think of the movement of energy in play positively as vigor and the movement of energy in work negatively as exertion, the loss of energy.

By rendering the facts of consciousness, individuality, and mortality practically problematic, work leads us into them as mysteries. In other words, work is *haunted* by the question of what consciousness, individuality, and mortality are, the question of the human. So humans have created long-lasting work-specific *meanings* for these facts, meanings which both lighten and deny the burden of their mystery. Among the most obvious are the following:

Addressing the mystery of consciousness, it is maintained that through work we overcome the isolation of consciousness, living the greater life of world- and self-making agents, as expressed in Marx's statement that "the object of labor is . . . the objectification of man's species life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created."[8] Through work the human reveals itself to be not only more than animal, but more than rational, a *tertium quid* produced by the conjunction, or as Agamben has argued, in the disjunction, between the two.[9] Marx's this-worldly version of this concept has affinities with the medieval view, articulated by Augustine and repeated by Aquinas, that work is an original and essential aspect of the creature made in the image of God and placed in paradise *ut operaretur, et custodiret illum* (Gen 2:15), to work and keep it, through which man participates in God's work: "God placed man in paradise that He might Himself work in man and keep him, by sanctifying him (for if this work cease, man at once relapses into darkness, as the air grows dark when light ceases to shine)."[10]

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[8] Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. M. Milligan (New York: International Publishing Co., 1971), 76-7

[9] "In our culture, man has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a *logos*, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element. We must learn instead to think of man as what results from the incongruity of these two elements, and investigate not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction, but rather the practical and political mystery of separation" (Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, tr. Kevin Attell [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004], 16.

[10] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica,* trans. Fathers of the Dominican Province [New York: Beziger Brothers, 1946], Pt.1, Q.102, Art.3).

Addressing the mystery of individuality, it is asserted that work, as vocation, is the playground of individuality, the place where individual destiny is realized and the "work one is here to do" accomplished and understood. The fixing of this principle to the sphere of worldly, economic occupation is most apparent within Protestant capitalism's notion of the calling, which, as Weber put it, is "an obligation which the individual is supposed to feel and does feel towards the content of his professional activity, no matter in what it consists," in other words, an obligation to work itself as an ethical and individually meaningful act.[11] Of course the individualism of this work ethic, like the individualism of capitalism in general, is false insofar as the ethic works to narrow rather than open the scope of individuality. Indeed, the very concept of a work ethic, as P.D. Anthony has explained, presupposes the fact of alienation: "Alienation is a mirror-image of a work ethic: it reflects what is projected into it but the image is reversed. The concept of alienation emerges from a work ethic because of an inevitable recognition that men are not as involved in their work as the ethic demands."[12] Accordingly, the individualistic work ethic of capitalism, like the collectivist work ethic of service which precedes it, calls forth rather than satisfies the desire for individualized, vocational meaning in work, such as Langland asserts in his *apologia*: "For in my consience y knowe what Crist wolde y wrouhte" (C.V.83).[13]

Addressing the mystery of mortality, it is asserted that work overcomes death, like the heroic fame of old, creating *things* of outstanding permanence and influence. According to Hannah Arendt's analysis, for instance, work is the reifying, artifactual process that, distinct from the life-process of labor, creates the human world as an independent totality: "Work provides an 'artifical' world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all."[14] Work thus accomplishes an externalization of human powers that exceeds the limits of human life. It creates things that continue to work after the worker's death or through which his work continues,

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[11] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 54.
[12] P. D. Anthony, *The Ideology of Work* [London: Tavistock, 1977], 305.
[13] William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The C-text*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994).
[14] *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 7.

things that have a kind of life of their own. Yet however operative this "life" of made things may be, it as mortal as the life that produces them. The artifact is mortal, both in the sense of being ultimately transitory, its durability merely prolonged temporariness, and in the sense that its "life" is as dependent on the ongoing labor of the living as its original creation. The artifact "survives" its maker only insofar as it underscores his death.

These meanings of work do not dispel the liminal ghosts which hover around the working human, nagging it with questions like "what are you?", "why are you you?", and "why must you die?", in other words, pointing out the invisibility of our being, the arbitrariness of individuality, and our living towards death. Is it coincidental that human societies have habitually denied to animals consciousness, individuality, and mortality? No. Rather, these denials are an index of our suppression of and alienation from these mysteries, a projection of their negativity onto non-human life and thus a means of remaining unconscious about them.