

## **Brecon U3A**

### **Philosophy SIG 13<sup>th</sup> June 14.30**

#### **The Philosophy of Work**

Taken from article by Alessandro Colarossi – Philosophy Now Issue 160 Feb/March 2024.

I used to think my father invented the Protestant Work Ethic: he grew up in a mining community and a scholarship to Chesterfield Grammar School enabled him to escape from the incredibly dangerous and life-shortening occupation of coal mining. He began work for an Insurance Company in 1935 and retired from the same company in 1984 having clocked up 49 years service. For my dad work always came first and his loyalty to the company never faltered – they counted his war service 1939 – 1947.

In the UK today 9.2 million people aged 16 – 64 are not in work or looking for a job – 700,000 more than before the pandemic. Taking out 2.2 million students, 1.7 million carers, 2.3 million sick and 1.2 million retired it still leaves a lot of people “economically inactive”. The UK has more people out of its workforce than the US, Canada, France, Japan, Italy and Germany – i.e the G7.

In a recent survey by Kings College 60% of people asked said they saw work as a duty and want a greater work/life balance. This survey covered 24 nations and indicated that people in the UK are amongst the least likely to say that work should come first, so can philosophy help us to understand this trend, and what can we learn about the ethics of work from a couple of famous names – Aristotle, Marx, Schopenhauer, and for an eastern perspective the Bhagavad Gita.

**Aristotle:** The Greeks were famous for their work ethic, although we need to remember that slavery figured in Greek GDP. In the “Politics” Aristotle drew a distinction between wealth acquisition and household management. Work performed just to keep body and soul together was not particularly virtuous, but a means to an end. However, work done that contributed to the well-being of the community was considered virtuous, because it served a higher purpose. He stressed that work should be about fulfilling ones potential and living a good life. Each person has a unique set of skills and virtues, so we should be contributing to the good of society whilst achieving personal fulfilment and happiness. He also warned that if wealth creation became your primary goal, it leads to an unhealthy focus on materialism which degrade societal values. The emphasis should be on co-operation and sharing. I personally don’t see a great deal of that – work and wealth accumulation are very often in our society seen as the primary measure of success.

**Karl Marx:** Marx together with his friend Engels were both “Young Hegelians” and both lived through the process known as the Industrial Revolution which (amongst other things) was characterised by people moving in large numbers from the land into developing towns and cities and being employed in factories. Engels family-owned textile producing businesses in the North west and in 1844 Engels produced the first survey of poverty in Manchester – “The Condition of the Working Class” and whilst it is still in print it makes difficult reading. Marx spoke of “The Alienation of Labour”. Under capitalism workers are estranged from their productive activity, the products of their labour, their fellow-workers and their potential for self-realization. For Marx human fulfilment lies in unalienated labour where workers can freely express their potential. For Marx the antidote lies in a society where workers have control over their labour, and have a connection with the product of that labour. A simple example from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century would be the movement away from textiles being produced as a “cottage industry” and the vast mills

employing thousands of people in repetitive jobs, which resulted in workers becoming de-personalised and seen as simply a factor and cost of production.

Arthur Schopenhauer: Another German Schopenhauer introduced the idea of “the will to live”. As humans we are driven towards existence and life. We have no final purpose. We strive to attain a goal, but once achieved the satisfaction is temporary and a new goal or desire arises. Life for poor Arthur was a cycle of striving, anticipation and dissatisfaction, which characterises life and is the root of suffering. I have heard many people describe their jobs in this way, from call centres to zero-hour contracts and carers rushing from one job to another. Both Thomas Hardy and DH Lawrence were influenced by Schopenhauer.

The Hindu Scriptures: The Bhagavad Gita sees work as a duty which must be performed without attachment to its fruits or outcomes – known as “Karma Yoga”. This approach encouraged individuals to focus on the act of working itself rather than the rewards it will bring. The Buddhist would argue that work should be seen as “Right Livelihood” – part of the eight-fold path. Work should not harm others and should be an expression of compassion and wisdom.

So, how did you view work when you were employed, were you fulfilled and excited at the prospect of another day at work or were you counting down to retirement. Is there a place for vocation in the 21st century? How will AI affect the world of work?

On a personal note, I tended to follow my father. When the posting came to move, we moved. It changed in the final part of my career as the Police Service lost dozens of Employment Tribunal cases and increasing numbers of women in the service from the late 70s meant more senior roles were taken on by women, which changed the culture of the organization. I’m not starry eyed about the past, there was a lot wrong in both attitudes and behaviour, but on the whole I enjoyed my time in the service and would probably do it again!