Note:
This is a summary of a longer published paper that argues for an understanding of the meaning and value of work standing in contrast to the conventional Utilitarian and technocratic paradigm. The perspective represented here can also have implications for the continued evolution of mature work teams. [see also my article, "Education for Work & About Work," *American Journal of Education*, Feb. 1993.

VALUES IN AND AROUND WORK: A POST-UTILITARIAN PERSPECTIVE

--Thomas Fitzgerald

In the decade before this one, I spent half of those years promoting participative practices in industry, that is to say, encouraging experiments by organizations in team building, problem identification, information sharing, and joint decision making among employees in factory and office occupations. During this time, I conducted many small group meetings and interviews with individuals. My purpose was to talk to them about getting change projects started and overcoming typical obstacles to participation (the problem of "maintenance" would come later) but they often voiced their dissatisfactions with work and working life, as well as a pessimism that it could ever change.

Their many different sorts of complaints are hardly news for students of industrial relations, but it seemed to me that those employees were also trying to say something more about their situation that is hard to talk about: a sense of emptiness or loss for the center of one's life taken out by every working day. Employees see their work as existing separately from themselves, with the incremental things or ephemeral paper they produce as having no real connection with who they consider them-selves to be. Despite the "motivational" campaigns of management's communication specialists, they protect the self from involvement: "It's just a job, not me. . . "

The absence of believable alternatives has kept many working people, unhappy with the jobs they do, from moving to a different way of working and a more satisfying work life. There <u>is</u> an alternative perspective, but it won't make sense, however, unless we examine the theories of academically trained researchers who have taken over most of the discussion about work, jobs, and employment. Their frames for seeing the world of work and their vocabulary for thinking about it serve not only as a rationale and official orientation for public policies and legislative action, but obscure other legitimate approaches to its problems. If we examine and rethink that background, we

might learn how we got so stuck.

One reason we have difficulty in talking about work in any but a conventional way is that we continue to think about and study productive effort in terms of an explanatory model originally provided by the classical economists of the late 18th and 19th centuries. They puzzled over the question, especially important then in the expanding political economy in England and on the Continent, of how prices for goods were determined, taking into consideration the variation in quality of land, relative scarcity of materials, and the needs of people.

The concept of marginal utility, when finally formulated, seemed to provide an answer, not only for goods, but to the vexing question of how a proper wage was decided. According to that explanation, wages offered to workers by an employer were set at equilibrium of the "margin," i.e., at the point which reflected the usefulness--and therefore the value--of the employer's least wanted unit of labor. The value of labor, that is to say, the worth of the completed work, was thereby firmly established in terms of its utility to those who hired from among the unemployed. Use-value, exchange value, and intrinsic-value collapsed into one number on any given day.

Construed and stated in terms of price, work and its tangible results became no different than other goods whose cost is arrived at among competing calculators who seek to maximize a quantity of personal felicity. Workers were assumed to be homogenous and incremental units, invited into the market for physical labor, there to forego leisure while trading their exertions for bread. Like much else in mainstream social science that followed, this version of an economy centered in markets depicted an admirable self-adjusting mechanism of pushes and pulls with a sort of continuing hydraulic equilibration. Its persuasive authority was in explaining how the process of pricing allocates things of competing value, but like the later functionalism of ethnology, was normative as well. Wages set at the margin reflected a fair share of price, along with rent, interest on investment, and profit. They also balanced at the level needed to provide an adequate supply of workers (no more, no fewer). Whatever wages were paid were thereby justified, even when they left the worker impoverished.

But if we look outside the closed boundaries of the classical doctrine to the real world, we can see that the pay offered for work and the worth of work are not necessarily equivalent or co-extensive. Pay represents only one aspect of the value and possible meaning of the doing of productive work, and rarely is its sole measure. Indeed, work continues to be done when no pay or wage is involved at all, yet value is often found and realized in it. If we can see such relationships in pre-literate societies, why can't we see them in our own? Or if we do acknowledge unpriced benefits from working, why diminish them by sweeping them all into a residual category, like "the invisible economy"?

Because the analytical and reductionist model of the market is an impersonal instrument like other machinery, it is free of any moral character. For each of us as individual persons to find a way out of the unsatisfactory experience of our own working lives and re-established moral significance in work, we must start therefore by

rejecting the premises that underlie the construct of a marketing mechanism which assigns value to our labor and everything else. Worth in things prevails whether or not confirmed by market participants (and, of course, asserts itself wherever no market is convened.)

We must overcome the Utilitarian's habit of reckoning which permits them confidently to enumerate people as if they were so many bales or ingots or metric tons. What may provide a conceptual frame for certain kinds of national economic analysis and planning, or the broad perspectives of demographic statistics, is simply not adequate for a quite different purpose: appreciating the values and costs of worklife seen from the underside. Work has a human character and meaning not grasped by the descriptive procedures of mainstream, naturalistic social science. As in the realms of aesthetics and ethics, the observational rules, deductions, and explanations that make possible physical laws, say of planetary mechanics, do not apply to the understanding of active, reflexive, intentional human subjects. Reducing the human world to whatever is easily counted and summed not only ignores its density and particularity, but inevitably trivializes its meanings and sanitizes its contradictions.

While the perspective of markets as auctions was being established as the correct way to explain how worth is priced, another mindset, consistent with the first, was growing out of the industrialism that was then replacing craft and artisan work. An important move, not often articulated by that revolution in the production of goods, was toward a consistent instrumentalism and commodification. The dramatic change of the rational industrialist was to see everything as tools or instruments for putting to some use. The value of an object then becomes equivalent to its potential for achieving a purpose. This way of looking at things in terms of some other end was itself of use. Engineers and technicians could plan for workers as extensions of productive machinery, while company accountants could measure the value of work done by its contribution to the cost of the final product. And everywhere, it made possible a compact translation of work into monetary units. In our own time, it confirms the belief of people who work that a job is simply the means to acquire the specific end of a paycheck.

When instrumental utility becomes the standard of worth, anything can be reduced to a priced commoditywhich the buyer is entitled to consume and use up. To regard the local environment as an inventory of resources for transient use--say, a grove of trees as cut-able timber for cardboard packaging--justifies the appropriation and marketing of any part of nature. The notion of means-to-an-end is commonly allowed to slide over and convert all objects to instruments for producing one effect or another. After engineers have organized a unified "system" of productive processes, e.g., each component has relevance only as it plays its part in efficient functioning of the whole. The work of people, and then people themselves, do not escape similar reification and devaluation as "roles" and instrumentalities; worse, they disappear into system processes.

Utility's present reign as arbiter of value relies on our loss of nerve for asserting intrinsic and essential worth apart from exchange or consumption. Yet we can still see

noble qualities in things made by artisans in past centuries. An antique chest, or everyday ware like a pewter pot, retains within itself some touch of the hands that formed it, some energy and character of its own, essences or an immanence about which empiricist prudery no longer permits acknowledgement. We respect things like these not only for their endurance, but less obviously, for their particularity, for existing in their own right apart from the price they might bring. Fortunately, not all crafts have disappeared, so we can still observe the practices that distinguish craftsmanship from other kinds of effort. The craft worker requires no boss or supervisor, after he or she has completed an apprenticeship but initiates and controls the activities required by the work as well as selecting the tools, materials, and design. The work is done primarily to realize the finished product, and perhaps to please oneself and others, rather than for the pay or what the pay will buy. In contrast to the *resentiment* and/or apathy that accompany many paid jobs, the craft worker finds satisfaction in work well done, and seeks to improve her or his skills so it can be done better. Work then is not detached or isolated from the rest of one's life and surroundings; it does not stand in tension with leisure and play.

Robert Bellah and his colleagues call our attention to eras past when work was seen as a "moral relationship between people," in its strongest sense, a calling, "a practical ideal of activity and character that makes a person's work morally inseparable from his or her life." It constitutes "a crucial link between individual and public world." Perhaps the finest expression of the ideal of dedicated work in the West is to be found in the cathedrals of Europe, built before industrialists taught us their philistine view of labor as one more "factor of production." These venerable structures remind us of another way of working, of caring for what is done and how it is done. They remain as demonstrations of working conceived as more than occupying a job space, and someone who works as more than a job holder. They speak of attachment and connection instead of distance and indifference. The lessons of those stones affirm the possibility of a future when work and occupation, even within organizational settings, can again be experienced not as imposed duties traded for a wage, but as chosen vehicles for participation in a coherent community.

Men and women today, especially those who have long performed only the deadening tasks given to them, also need to be encouraged and supported with an opening of time wherein they may pursue a vocation, a project of their own. Such work, especially in the company of others like themselves, can lead to a more intentional, active, and unified way of life. The possibility of satisfaction, even pleasure in work, is not an illusion, and can be more than managerial rhetoric.

Not all work is alienated. We continue to meet individuals who say they like their jobs, or enjoy being with the people there, or would not want to do anything else. Amateur athletes freely apply their energy to activities far more strenuous and demanding than almost any work. The ethic of service and the impulse towards kindly help are widely honored by volunteers who assist those in need. People work when they feel no economic pressure to do so. . . retirees prominent among them. There is much to commend about work and working, but it cannot be discovered by concentrating on its odious exemplifications. At my count, some nineteen "virtues" in

and around work can be identified. (Perhaps there are more.)

An understanding of the values in and around work will require not only remembering what we have forgotten about the dimensions of work (or otherwise reinventing it), but putting aside certain thought clichés. One is the opposition, the assumed polarity, between work and leisure. When work is no longer begrudged as a levy or ransom for buying back time for one's own use, then leisure, in the popular sense of free time for doing not much of anything--sanctioned waste--will be less treasured and lose its contrast to work. Learning for its own sake (instead of "sharpening the competitive edge") and participating in community governance will be no less valued than paid work or leisure's indolence.

The revisioning of work, or more simply, remembering the true virtue in work, will not end the brute labor and drudgery in the world, or convert each heavy yoke into artistic crafts and diverting pastimes. This goes as well for the petty time-consuming duties we often meet with reluctance and turn over to menials when we can. Humble work always returns, and we should not separate ourselves from it. Appreciating work as intentional doing, work as purposeful action in the world, will not elevate labor to a religious experience, nor bless it so that all might be done with a glad heart. But dull tasks do not necessarily dull us; ordinary and quotidian as they may be, they can be done with modesty and quiet attention. Then we go on to something else.

It is not for lack of familiarity that I have omitted discussion of the various proposals, already implemented in some places, for improvement in the way work is structured. While changes in job arrangements can make work less of an indenture, they do not full address the separation of work from its wider significance. The quite different perspective outlined here does not say we should ignore working conditions or treat employees with less respect than free citizens should expect, but that the solution to the problem of work, and the realization of work's true benefits, requires more ambitious goals, coupled with realistic assessment of potentials and opposition.

For example, a declaration of independent initiative by working people, especially when public attitudes are deeply embedded in institutional practices, must anticipate being misunderstood. And an argument for, and movement toward, an evaluation of worth not convertible into cash invites condescension from mainstream economists. It will also be dismissed by journalists as romanticizing of the working class, or as nostalgia for the artisans of a vanished age. Little support can be expected from academic intellectuals for an ideal of work proceeding from freely chosen effort. They will cite history's lessons of populations driven by necessity, or ethnology's many narratives of work impelled only by iron duty . . . although most will exempt themselves from such imperatives. It is against this background of remote and unassailable professional expertise that alternative assumptions about work life, and different work practices, must strive to be understood and accepted.

There are further difficulties. Many people these days, especially in urban and suburban places, lack roots in local community, or even a neighborhood pub or cafe where, with people like themselves, they can talk about work, the day's events, and

how things look to them. Detached from other citizens to a greater or less extent, and stranded apart from convivial milieus, they are on their own when they attempt to change, that is, to undo and relearn. With few opportunities for sensible interchange, individuals are also more vulnerable to packaged stories about the outside world, and to deflection from their own conclusions by opinion surveys of phantom publics. It is hard, too, to know what would protect them from the inevitable banalization of the issues of a better working life.

Wage earners are caught in a puzzle box. Until they can articulate a more noble vision of work, they will be unable to plan how it might be realized, but lacking concepts and a locale for doing so, individual awareness cannot be shared. The result of this "undiscussability" of an alternative way of working is itself not discussed, while at the same time, the illusion of general satisfaction is maintained. Sadly enough, people now need the workplace more, even where the work provided gets worse, since many of them lack alternatives to simple connection with others and the dependable recognition the workplace provides. All this is but to recognize that a basic shift in the meaning and values found in work (or more correctly, a re-establishment of those values), presents an uncertain prospect.

A revisioning of work probably cannot be sustained without corresponding changes in the way work is arranged and ordered, so that it may be done with deliberation, grace, and intention. Organizations in turn cannot be transformed without questioning the assumptions that typically guide administrations, not only by workers, but by those who supervise them. The latter, especially, must become aware of the doctrines of control and abstract utilization that underlie the confident vocabulary of managing, often unnoticed, as in the now common (and unfortunate) reference to "human resources."

Nonetheless, we have sweeping changes (not without cost) within our lifetimes that once seemed impossible. Against considerable challenge, the gross subordination of women and ethnic minorities in western nations has been visibly reduced. Many more people in this country now take responsibility for their physical well-being. Public concern for the protection of the environment is still growing. These movements and the values they represent seem to have come from nowhere, but as they establish themselves, they demand revision of practices, regulations and institutional arrangements. Moreover, a reorientation toward worklife will not merely happen without all the individuals who change, one at a time. We don't really know how foundational values are transformed, but reflection and self-awareness seem to be part of the process. It may require us to confront again those old questions, "What is of true worth?" "What is important in my life?" From that, "What choices must I therefore make?" Finally, this process of individual change can benefit from the support, critique, and clarifying discussion of common concerns within a group of trusted work peers, if the opportunity and will are found for its initiation.