

## REVIEWS

### Work as a Calling: From Meaningful Work to Good Work

**Garrett W. Potts**

New York: Routledge, 2022 (153 pages)

In this new book, Garrett Potts argues that the current discussion about work as calling took an unfortunate individualist turn. Potts laments this for two reasons. First, the individualist turn departs from the communitarian root of the work as a calling literature, which is the seminal work of Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*. Second, the individualist view does not provide a remedy to the maladies of contemporary Western culture.

In his first chapter, Potts criticizes contemporary researchers of the topic (including work from authors such as Amy Wrzesniewski, Shoshana Dobrow, Bryan J. Dik, Ryan F. Duffy, J. Stuart Bunderson, and Jeffery A. Thompson), claiming that they moved away from the communitarian tradition of Robert Bellah. In *The Habits of the Heart*, Bellah introduced the three main attitudes we usually have toward work: the first is job orientation in which people's primary motivation is to earn money, the second one is career orientation in which people's main motivation is to move up in the hierarchy, and the third one is calling orientation in which people see their job as a self-transcending activity. What the last one exactly means even these criticized scholars disagree, but according to Potts, they all have something in common in their argument. They all departed from Bellah's original account when they interpreted work as a calling as a self-centered phenomenon. They see calling (or vocation) as a somewhat therapeutic phenomenon where the agent's work is of great importance for the agent himself and work contributes to the subjective feeling of meaningfulness.

Potts argues that this understanding of vocation is contrary to the original intention of Bellah and his co-authors since they characterized work as a calling as something that is deeply connected to communities and their traditions. According to them, vocation is a contribution to the agent's community and the promotion of values defined by the tradition of that community. Contrary to the communitarian view, contemporary work as a calling literature emphasizes the individual and subjective meaningfulness.

The main problem with this new perspective is that it does not provide an antidote to the aches of our current society and it may even exacerbate certain problems. According to Potts, what we need is to go back to a traditional, prosocial form of vocation instead of the individualist one. Many of us strive for self-actualization and authenticity but it only gives us a self-centered, stressful life. Only when we focus on submitting ourselves to a higher moral idea, working for the flourishing of our community, and growing in virtues, do we achieve what we truly need, eudaimonic happiness.

Potts highlights the contrast between two kinds of worldviews. The first one is expressive utilitarianism marked by individualist first-order languages. It is utilitarian because the agent aims to achieve happiness (in my view, egoism would have been a better term for utilitarianism). It is also expressive because it is motivated by our desire for self-expression. Roughly, we can characterize it as the individualist view. The other one is the realm of second-order languages that values communities and prosocial attitudes. The biblical tradition and civic republicanism are part of that group. According to Potts, we need to return to this latter tradition.

Potts argues that it is important to return to the communitarian tradition because it contributes to our well-being and makes us feel that our lives have meaning. On the contrary, while working in our wrongly conceptualized calling, we end up being miserable as a result of stress, of the constant rat race we are living in. Potts claims that if we give up on those ideals, and start working in practices narrated by a tradition, and if instead of our self-fulfillment we are working for our community, then we will experience fulfillment, meaning in our life, and eudaimonic happiness. It is only possible if we shift our focus from ourselves to moral ideals. Instead of searching for meaning, we need to search for the good.

Even though Potts makes a strong case, I still have the feeling that there is something self-contradictory in his work. This contradiction is not between the framework and the theory but between the prologue and the rest of the book.

In the prologue, Potts shares his own story with the reader. He used to work in IT sales but he was not enthusiastic about his job. He characterizes this chapter of his life as an example of the "job orientation", which means that his primary motivation for this job was to earn a living. After that, he explains in detail how it felt like to get the offer for his PhD position. He describes how happy he was and that he felt

summoned, he had a sense of calling. He quit his job and started his journey as a philosopher. I believe Potts's own story highlights a very important point. Namely, that subjective attraction to a specific work and authenticity are indeed vital features of having a calling.

Potts touches on what we might call the hard problem of vocation. A calling is something deeply personal but at the same time, it needs to be prosocial as well. Our theory falters whenever one component is too much or too little emphasized. To find the balance and to explain it in a unifying theory is the real challenge for philosophical research on vocation.

All in all, the book's main topic, calling, is a relatively under-researched issue in contemporary analytic philosophy, and Potts' work is an excellent introduction and also defense of a communitarian conception of vocation. However, this is not the only approach we can take; there can be other, rival theories that might give different answers to the problems highlighted by Potts. I hope those theories will arrive, so the debates concerning work as a calling will be even more rich and fruitful.

—Barnabás Ágota  
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## All the Kingdoms of the World: On Radical Religious Alternatives to Liberalism

**Kevin Vallier**

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023 (320 pages)

Interest in Catholic political philosophy is at an all-time high, as strange as that may sound to the uninitiated. The disintegration of Western political culture threatens an avalanche of anomie, corruption, confusion, and rage. What seemed possible for reinvigorating the ideals of liberal political philosophy, with regard to religious liberty and the protection of traditional religious values, even just thirty or forty years ago, has now been turned upside down by some sort of post-modern psychosis. Faithful Catholics are looking to understand the first principles and duties of Catholics in the chaos of this “post-liberal” age, and a variety of positions have emerged. In this examination, the choice appears to be between defenders of “the ‘liberal’ paradigm of individual rights and limited government against advocates for a ‘post-liberal’ approach that generally eschews government neutrality and envisions a more proactive role for civil authority in promoting the common good.”<sup>1</sup> Among the latter, we find a reinvigorated “Catholic integralism” that asserts the priority of church over state. According to this view, the church as the society singularly

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<sup>1</sup>NCR, December 2022.