

BOOK REVIEWS

***Full-Time: Work and the Meaning of Life*, by David L. Bahnsen**

Joseph M. Knippenberg¹

¹ Oglethorpe University

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We Americans have a complicated attitude toward work. On the one hand, we constantly regard education as “workforce development” and assess it in terms of “gainful employment” and “return on investment,” making preparation for work seem to be virtually the entire purpose of our *Bildung*. Even students, who once upon a time were more interested in developing a philosophy of life, have their eyes on the vocational prize. In response to a query about their plans after graduation, I have never in thirty-eight years of teaching had a student tell me that he or she expects to lead a life of leisure. On the other hand, the workforce participation rate has barely recovered from the historic low associated with the pandemic, many very productive workers seek to retire as early as possible, and terms like “funemployment” have entered our lexicon.

Some of these attitudes and behaviors reflect both our cultural heritage and the character of our contemporary economy. As for the former, I could cite John Locke’s emphasis on labor as both self-expression and the principal source of value conferred on an otherwise worthless nature, Alexis de Tocqueville’s observations about the restlessness and materialism of Americans, all the talk about “the American Dream,” and (on the other side) the Marxist critique of alienated labor and its idyllic vision of the end of history, where—in the oft-reported tart words of the late Harvard political theorist Judith Shklar—people only have hobbies. As for the latter, I need not go much further than Tyler Cowen’s *Average Is Over*, which already seems to underestimate the ways in which technology and artificial intelligence will render human work even more routine and meaningless, not to say superfluous.

Because I was saving the best (and perhaps the worst) for last, I haven’t yet said anything about the role our churches play in forming these attitudes and behaviors. Here David L. Bahnsen strides confidently onto the scene, arguing that American Christianity, and above all American evangelicalism, has misunderstood the biblical teaching on the relationship between “work and the meaning of life.” While properly arguing that human beings should study the Word and worship the Lord, the only true source of all meaning,

our churches have all too often deprecated and devalued the place of worldly work. To be sure, our preachers speak frequently of “good works,” or charity, funneled through the church, and work on behalf of the church. But they rarely, Bahnsen insists, encourage hard work in the world, for fear that we sinners will give ourselves over to materialism and greed, neglect our families, and worship mammon all seven days a week. As he puts it, “A creational theology about work (and wealth) is largely absent in today’s church, replaced by safe, facile decrual of the ‘idolatry’ of work” (18).

To address this need, Bahnsen, spends a lot of time recounting the biblical teaching regarding work and wealth. Citing chapter and verse from both Testaments, he reminds us that human beings were created to work, indeed for “good works” (87), and also that the latter aren’t simply what is done for charity. More precisely, when we work to support our families and to provide goods and services for our customers (that is, our neighbors), we are doing what God called us to do. We’re fruitful, not just by making babies, but also by putting our talents and energies to use in productive ways.

This is, I think, a useful corrective to a view that Bahnsen argues has its roots in the gnostic heresy, which leads us “to view the creation account as God making the human person only for spiritual fulfillment and heavenly companionship.” He properly adds that “in the materiality of humanity lies a capacity for work, for productive labor, for stewardship, for innovation, for creative design, and, yes, for growth” (68, 69).

For preachers and those in the pulpits who believe they should have a guilty conscience about making money and seeking advancement in their careers, Bahnsen invokes what Max Weber once called the Protestant ethic. All our vocations can serve God’s people without being conducted within or around the sanctuary. And hard work in a vocation is *supposed* to be rewarded. It is difficult, Bahnsen concedes, to hold in tension the twin biblical teachings regarding “wealth as a blessing and as a reward for diligent work” and the dangers of “idolizing riches” (101). That sin tempts us to embrace the latter does not detract from the truth of the former.

There is much more in this relatively short book that rewards those who take the time to read it. Acknowledging debts to Dorothy Sayers and Tim Keller, for example, Bahnsen doesn’t claim to break much new theological or theoretical ground, but his arguments are direct, forceful, and accessible. I limit myself to one more item of praise before attending to the reviewer’s duty to raise questions in service of advancing the argument: as someone very reluctantly approaching retirement, I found Bahnsen’s chapters on retirement as the *telos* of work and how we can continue to be productive late in life very bracing. God calls us to work, not to prepare for a long “unproductive” retirement.

Here then is one quibble. Neither Bahnsen nor I have anything against leisure, although my affection for classical philosophy might leave me with a greater appreciation for some sort of what Adam Smith calls “unproductive labor.” Those of us who are called to think, talk, and write for a living are probably inclined to keep doing so even if we no longer earn our bread that way. Moreover, the customer service model that can reasonably reconcile the Christian calling and the capitalist marketplace does not adequately account for the relationship between teachers and students. Teaching is supposed to be animated by philosophy, the pursuit of truth, not by sophistry, the pursuit of money. Teachers must persist in what C. S. Lewis calls “good philosophy” even if our students (and perhaps even their parents and our administrators and trustees) don’t want it or don’t know that they need it.

My second quibble is connected to what I regard as Bahnsen’s penetrating critique of our current macroeconomic focus on demand. As he remarks, “If we already know that God made us to produce, we don’t need to spend a century wondering how best to manipulate demand in pursuit of economic growth” (119–20). But in connection with this, we can ask whether it is as obvious as he thinks that unmet human needs are a sufficient incentive to production. Where there is wealth connected with those needs, there is little doubt that producers will enter the market to satisfy the demand. But what about those who can’t afford to pay the market price? How are their needs satisfied? I can imagine a number of very plausible and persuasive responses to this query, but Bahnsen doesn’t seem to offer any of them.

Given the water in which he swims, where the argument for charity (at least) is easy to make, I will not tax Bahnsen too severely for this omission. But there may be people in the pulpits and the pews (and outside the church altogether) who seize on it to condemn or caricature his undertaking. And as someone who regularly teaches the *Wealth of Nations*, I cannot help recalling Adam Smith’s assertion that “it is but equity ... that they who feed, clothe, and lodge the whole body of the people should have such a share of the produce of their labor as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed, and lodged.”

Stated in another way, Bahnsen’s bid to reinspire Weber’s *stahlhartes Gehäuse* (“shell as hard as steel” or “iron cage,” take your pick) with an old (rather than new) prophecy needs a supplement from political economy. Whether he is willing or able to provide it is an open question.

Joseph M. Knippenberg
Oglethorpe University



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