

Toward a Ecological Philosophy of Work

By Karl Soderstrom

Introduction

“I believe any environmental virtue ethics worthy of the name must also include a desire to put economic life in its proper place—that is, as a support for comfortable and decent human lives, rather than as an engine powering endlessly more acquisition and consumption . . . In seeking to subordinate economic life to life as a whole, environmental virtue ethics sounds an ancient and very necessary ethical theme.”¹ – Philip Cafaro

This essay examines the meaning of human labor as both a site and school for the exercise of ecological virtues.² If we consider an economic life “in its proper place,” we need to consider the meaning and ethics of work in light of ecological and human flourishing. While indeed changes to our consumption habits are crucial to limiting the destructive impact of our economy, economies are more than systems of consumption. They are systems of organizing the purposes of human labor. And for Christianity, as indeed for other religions, the purposes of work are bound to the purposes of creation and the larger human vocation. As such, the potential of our worklives to cultivate and practice ecological virtues and vices is profound, and how a culture motivates and directs its workforce has direct ecological consequences. This is where a philosophy of work becomes crucial for an ecological ethic. In general, a philosophy of work critically examines what qualifies as work within a culture, the criteria for meaningful or ethical work, and how work practices reflect or conflict with other moral values. These questions open a space for Christian philosophical reflection that connects the concerns of individual character formation, the ecological impact of work, and the human relationship to creation.

This essay offers a preliminary philosophy of work from which we may later identify ecological virtues. I argue that there are three intentionalities that lay at the core of human labor— toil, production, and reproduction—and that from this meta-ethical foundation, we can evaluate the ethics of our labor practices and systems according to how they “fit” individuals, our society, and our ecosystem. My argument will begin with a phenomenology of human labor that focuses the variety of worklife experiences into the three intentionalities. These intentionalities indicate a philosophical anthropology of persons as *creatures*, *creators*, and *procreators*, and suggest a set of

¹ Cafaro, Phillip. “Thoreau, Leopold, Carson: Toward an Environmental Virtue Ethic.” *Environmental Virtue Ethic*, edited by Ronald Sandler and Phillip Cafaro. Roman & Littlefield, 2005, 33-43.

² The research and some text of this essay are part of a chapter in a forthcoming book *Ecoflourishing and Character*, edited by Steven Bouma-Prediger and Nathan Carson and published by Routledge. The book is due out in 2023.

ecological virtues. Following this phenomenology, I reference and expand upon the philosopher Russell Muirhead's recent philosophy of work to articulate ethical criteria for evaluating our worklives according to how it may "fit" individuals, our society, and our ecosystem. Ideally, one's worklife as a whole could achieve a personal, social and ecological fit, thus suggesting the ongoing task of ecological justice to shape an economy that serves life as a whole.

The Meanings of Work

Like any "philosophy of . . .", a philosophy of work aims to understand and articulate the meaning of work *as* work. It aims at the broadest conception that is nevertheless rooted in human experience. A difficulty soon arises in a phenomenology of work when we survey work's diversity across history, class and culture. How could one concept indicate something common between a 12th century nun, a 15th century artist, a 18th century slave, a 19th century factory worker, a 20th century corporate executive, and a 21st century Uber driver? There seems as many experiences of work as there are workers and as many kinds of professions as there are jobs. And yet even associating work with "professions" or "jobs" excludes whole classes of human labor that are typically performed for no pay, through no formal organization, and with little recognition in the public sphere. The labor of raising children, caring for one's elders, tending to household garden, walking to pick up the day's water supply, maintaining one's home—none of these find their way into the official economic indicators, and yet are essential work for any society to function and flourish. To this end, I will consistently refer to our "worklives" and not specifically to "jobs", "careers," or "professions" which limit work to paid employment. Given this multiplicity of experiences, it is best that we not seek one essential feature, but rather the family resemblances and overlapping network of similarities. At the risk of oversimplifying, I propose there are three modes of being-in-the-world in which work operates: work as toil, as production, and as reproduction. Each conveys a particular relationship to the natural world and each can be done in ways that contribute to or interfere with ecological flourishing.

Work as Toil

“All work, whether manual or intellectual, is inevitably linked with toil. The Christian finds in human work a small part of the Cross of Christ and accepts it in the same spirit of redemption in which Christ accepted His Cross for us.”³

While the experiences of work are varied, the *need* to work is as universal to the human condition as the need for daily bread. This character of “necessity” distinguishes it from other activities requiring exertion, such as *play* or *worship*. Philosopher Russell Muirhead comments “If not for all, then for most, work is a command, and not an option. We do it because we have to do it, because we are born and remain insufficient.”⁴ Such insufficiency does not dictate regular suffering, though it has for many throughout history. Rather, the reality that work *has to be done* reveals our finitude and fragility as creatures.

At its root, toil indicates one way creaturely beings subsist in the natural world, though it can also describe our experiences in built environments. As such, toil itself is not evil, even if unjust social structures have relegated the worst of it to whole classes of people. In its most basic sense, such work requires strenuous effort or attention stemming from our embodiment and the stubborn order of the natural or built environment. To be a finite creature is to be thrown into an environment operating according to its own laws within which we must labor to survive. We toil because we are not masters of the ecosystem, whatever stewardship of creation humanity may assume it has been granted.

Philosopher Hannah Arendt notes the character of toil in her address, “Labor, Work, Action.” In the passage below, she describes the most basic form of work, what she names “labor.”

Labor is an activity which corresponds to the biological processes of the body . . . the metabolism between man and nature or the human mode of this metabolism which we share with all living organisms. By laboring, men produce the vital necessities that must be fed into the life process of the human body. And since this life process, though it leads us from birth to death in a rectilinear progress of decay, is in itself circular, the laboring activity itself must follow the cycle of life, the circular movement of our bodily functions, which means that the laboring activity never comes to an end as long as life lasts; it is endlessly repetitive.⁵

When considering our fragility and finitude, the curse of Adam comes to mind: the sweaty brow, hunched shoulders, calloused hand, scared shin, sunburnt neck as he wrests nutrients from

³ Catholic Church. *Pope (1978-2005 : John Paul II). On Human Work : Encyclical Laborem Exercens. Washington, D.C. (1312 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington 20005): Office of Publishing Services, United States Catholic Conference, 1981.*

⁴ Muirhead, 5.

⁵ Arendt Hannah. “Labor, Work, Action.” In *Amor Mundi*. Eds. Bernauer S.J.J.W. Boston College Studies in Philosophy, vol 26. Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-3565-5_2

hard soil, amidst a hot sun, biting flies, slow growing seeds, etc. The toll of toil on the body is not reserved for agrarian work, but is present in our urban environments of industrial factories, office cubicals, and so called “dirty jobs.” While toil need not be outright suffering, the strain can be experienced as a kind of violence. Studs Terkel’s conclusion, after interviewing scores of workers across as many professions for his famous book *Working*, is that “work is about violence-to the spirit as well as to the body . . . It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us.”⁶ The reality of creaturely bodies confronting the natural order is familiar to ancient philosophical and biblical writings. The teacher in Ecclesiastes considers “What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?” Toil, *amal* in Hebrew, denotes trouble, hardship, and the seemingly unsatisfying character of work. The teacher reflects with humility on such work and our delusion to hope that our efforts must *mean* something more significant. It is a vanity to make toil into a calling or purpose. In contrast, we can let toil be what it is: repetitive exertion necessary so we may live another day.

That said, and this is crucial, such exertions need not result in “daily humiliations” or violence but, properly limited, can be their own joy. The teacher in Ecclesiastes 3:9-11,

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with . . . I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. (NRSV)

Relishing hard work, feeling one’s body through tired muscles and successfully completing minute tasks, these too are creature comforts. Arendt is not naïve to the difficulty of such work, or the suffering many experience when an unjust imposition of toil bears down on the totality of a person’s attention or life, but she too notes a distinctly human joy that can come from such labor.

Since labor corresponds to the condition of life itself, it partakes not only in life's toil and trouble but also in the sheer bliss with which we can experience our being alive . . . insofar as we too are just living creatures, laboring is the only way we can also remain and swing contentedly in nature's prescribed cycle, toiling and resting, laboring and consuming, with the same happy and purposeless regularity with which day and night, life and death follow each other. The reward of toil and trouble . . . lies in nature's fertility, in the quiet confidence that he who in "toil and trouble" had done his part, remains a part of nature in the future of his children and his children's children.⁷

⁶ Terkel, Studs, 1912-2008. *Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel about What They Do*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1974. P. viii

⁷ Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action”

Toil in its proper place offers something else to the worker: a bodily *intimacy* with our environment. To work the land is to come to know one's dependence upon it through touch, smell, and our haptic sensibilities. To "swing contentedly in nature's prescribed cycle" is no abstract notion to the farmer. Eco-feminists cite this basic element of human labor to argue that much of women's work throughout the world has put them into more regular contact with the natural environment than men's work. The toil offers intimate local knowledge of natural processes of which others are ignorant. It also puts them at disproportionate risk of pollution and unhealthy ecosystems.⁸

Together, the strain, joy, and intimacy with the world that we experience in toil, can be a school of ecological virtues and vices. According its proper measure, toil schools us in a humility before the natural world and an honest assessment of our creatureliness. This perhaps boils down to the experience of *touch*. Christian philosopher Norman Wirzba's description of touch gets at the virtuous humility that comes from being a creature in creation.

[Touch] defines us as creatures that must touch and be touched in order to be . . . It is in terms of the vast and deep memberships of creation, what ecologists call "webs of interdependence" that we derive our nurture and inspiration, our very being . . . Indeed, the intimacy and ubiquity of our touching earthly bodies is conveyed in the etymologies that identify humanity (*adam*) with the humus or life-giving layer of soil (*Adamah*) that makes the earth come alive."⁹

Toil cultivates humility through an attentive intimacy with the land, uniting our circadian and ecological rhythms. It brings forth a respect for the stubborn resistance of creation's order and the wonder of our sensitivity to it. Toil also can lead to suffering, vices, and injustice. When you consider those who toil solely in anemic artificial environments, toil alienates us from creation. Across professions, toil for some so dominates their lives that it does not produce virtuous humility, but the "daily humiliations." These encourage vices of apathy and anger, but also greed and the distractions of consumption, desperate as we are to escape the exhausting daily grind.

Work as Production

⁸ Many authors could be cited here. One helpful article connecting these themes is by Vandana Shiva, "Women's Indigenous Knowledge and Biodiversity Conservation." *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 1/2, 1992, pp. 205–214. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23002230. Accessed 22 Aug. 2021.

⁹ Norman Wirzba, "The Touch of Humility: An invitation to Creatureliness." *Modern Theology*, 2008. P. 232.

Toil allows us to survive to the next day, but what allows for human culture, progress, or flourishing? For this, humans must make, produce, create, and shape the environments we live within. Human beings not only make artifacts and manufacture commodities, but also design rituals, artistic works, and entire built environments including cities and digital worlds. Such *productive work* changes the world in meaningful and enduring ways. In the language of Aristotelian virtues, such work entails *poiēses*. *Poiēses* is a human activity that results in goods distinct from that activity: e.g. weaving a sweater, building a bridge, writing an song. As creators and producers, we pour our emotional, rational, and spiritual capacities into something outside ourselves, thus creating human cultures within which to dwell. These artifacts in turn orient further human behavior beyond the original productive process – sweaters enable access to mountain peaks, bridges connect otherwise distant villages, songs sung lend music to a silent land. None of these activities consumes the made thing – but rather brings each to fruition.

The potential for such work stems from a distinct mode of being-in-the-world and bespeaks to another ontological character of creation. If toil binds our bodies to wrestle with the *order* of creation, productive work exercises our creative imagination given the organic *malleability* of the natural world. Ecosystems are dynamic, adaptable, full of redundancies, and wildly innovative in repurposing their own elements. Our creative imaginations participate in these very characteristics and add to them.¹⁰ As Arendt notes,

The work of our hands, as distinguished from the labor of our bodies, fabricates the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice, the world we live in. They are not consumer goods but use-objects, and their proper use does not cause them to disappear. They give the world the stability and solidity without which it could not be relied upon to house the unstable and mortal creature that is man.¹¹

The enduring quality of the products of work can compliment or interfere with the surrounding environment. Artifacts that endure may do less harm to the ecosystem than ephemeral commodities to be quickly consumed. The said, the endurance of the built environment may or may not fit the temporality of the surrounding ecosystem. A log home will eventually decay back into the soil of the land from which it was built, while products made of plastics and “forever chemicals” endure far too long to be reincorporated. Further problems arise when an obsession with productive labor leads to the exploitive extraction of natural resources and hegemony of built environments. As

¹⁰ The artist, sculpture, and environmentalist Andy Goldsworthy is a paradigmatic example of such creative work. <https://www.livingyourwildcreativity.com>

¹¹ Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action.”

Arendt notes, “[Productive labor] is no longer the earning of one's bread "in the sweat of his brow," in which man may indeed be the lord and master of all living creatures but still remains the servant of nature, his own natural needs, and of the earth. *Homo Faber* becomes lord and master of nature herself insofar as he violates and partly destroys what was given to him.” The making of the human world, however careful, always involves some element of destruction of the natural world. This need not be catastrophic where the human transformation of the world threatens the very structures that sustain human culture and their biomes. But we must acknowledge that as toil always takes a toll on the human body, so productive work takes its toll on the land.

Productive work can, when properly realized, offer its own school of ecological virtues. Creative work forms a person to be more mindful of their ethical place on the earth. Attentiveness to the land from which our creations are made can be incorporated into the laboring process. Even a modern national park is the result of productive labor that aims to preserve land and cultivate ecological virtues in the citizens. Consider how mechanic/philosopher Matthew Crawford appeals to craftsmanship and the trades to stir the moral imagination.

Because craftsmanship refers to objective standards that do not issue from the self and its desires, it poses a challenge to the ethic of consumerism . . . The craftsman is proud of what he has made, and cherishes it, while the consumer discards things that are perfectly serviceable in his restless pursuit of the new . . . Being able to think materially about material goods, hence critically, gives one some independence from the manipulations of marketing, which typically divert attention from *what a thing is* . . . Knowing the production narrative, or at least being able to plausibly imagine it, renders the social narrative of the advertisement less potent.”¹²

Work as Reproduction

The final form of work that helps frame an ecological ethic is reproductive-labor. The biblical charge to “be fruitful and multiply” comes to mind. This command, however, cannot be limited to biological reproduction of couples as if those who do not or cannot have offspring are left out of the vocation. Reproductive labor refers to the broader array of human experiences including the labor of procreation and giving birth, the daily and generational “reproduction” of workers necessary to keep the economy running, and the work that cares for the fecundity of the earth and its members.¹³ This is distinct from the immediate necessity and monotony of daily toil as well as the creative world-making of productive labor. Whereas toil is primarily oriented toward the present

¹² Matthew Crawford, “Shopclass as Soulcraft: A Case for the Manual Trades,” in *The New Atlantis*. 2006. <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/shop-class-as-soulcraft>

needs of one's self, reproductive work is other oriented and future oriented. In the most general sense, "reproductive labor" refers to work that *renews, restores and cares for life that is primarily not one's own.*

Consider first, the sexual connotations of reproductive labor in light of human vitality. If toil stems from the stubborn order of the natural world and productive labor from its malleability, reproductive labor stems from the fecundity and regenerative capacity of creation. Human sexuality itself is rooted in this. Regardless of whether any one of us has or will have children, our drive to participate in the regeneration of life occur through a variety of practices: growing food, feeding others, being hospitable to others in our homes, sexual union, having families and children of our own, adopting the children of others, or caring for others in sickness and health in their journey between birth and death. When virtuous, our individual sexuality is integrated into the larger good of the continuation of life within our familial, social and ecological communities. As Wendell Berry remarks in his essay "Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community", "Sexual love is the heart of community life. Sexual love is the force that in our bodily life connects us most intimately to the Creation, to the fertility of the world, to farming and the care of animals. It brings us into the dance that holds the community together and joins it to its place."¹⁴

When we consider work that cares for life, it is helpful for ecological ethicists to engage the literature of Social Reproductive Feminism.¹⁵ Feminist social theorists over the last few centuries have drawn attention to unjust patriarchal economic structures, not least of which is how worklife has come to be organized in capitalistic economies. Two key critical questions that animate this scholarship include "Which kinds of work are valued and compensated within an economy?" and "Who within the population has access to such work?" According to these thinkers, the gendered character of the economy results in injustices to women and, to a lesser extent, to men. Though capitalism's ecological impact is not a primary focus of this literature, one can imagine the connections. As capitalism took hold first within European and now global contexts, *commodity producing labor compensated through wages* became the dominant form of work recognized in the public sphere and men became the predominant publicly recognized laborers. This not only concentrated economic power among men (who received wages) but also social power (i.e. paid workers gained status within their community.) In turn it tied the production of commodities to economic and

¹⁴ Wendell Berry. "Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community," in *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992. P. 133.

¹⁵ See Susan Fergusson's *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction*. London: Pluto Books, 2020. P.12.

social power. On the other hand, reproductive labor--primarily done by women caring for the lives of others, whole communities, or the land--lost economic and social power. And in so doing, non-commodity producing labor lost significance in the public sphere. The work and the workers themselves became dependent upon the paid productive labor of, almost exclusively, men. Social Reproductive Feminists over time broadened the meaning of reproductive labor from merely "reproducing the worker for productive labor" in a Marxist sense to something akin to an ethic-of-care. "On a fundamental level, the goal of social productive labour is to support life."¹⁶

For the most part, Social Reproduction theorists define such work in terms of caring for human life. I argue that by analogy it can be extended to be the care for the natural environment. Taken more broadly to be a form of creation-care, reproductive work helps us to recognize and promote a form of human labor that entails a) *sustainability*- by protecting the reproductive capacity of the natural environment and species other than humans, b) *ecological dependence* - by acknowledging that the health of the ecosystem is necessary for human productive labor, and c) *benevolence* – by cultivating an orientation of care for the human and non-human creation. Care for the renewal and maintenance of life is at times experienced alongside toil, but its intentionality is distinct. While toil is an attentiveness to the necessity of the task itself, procreative labor is attentive to that which it cares for. The distinct intentionalities shape different virtues. Reproductive work is also distinct from production. Building a house is a creative act that changes the built world. Caring for a home and its inhabitants orients us differently and requires a different skills and virtues. Finally, reproductive labor encourages the virtue of ecological beneficence and love. According to Steven Bouma-Prediger, "The virtue of ecological love, as its etymology suggests, names the settled disposition to care about our house (*oikos*) and its inhabitants-to promote the flourishing of all creatures. It is the care we have not only for people but also for animals and plants and special places." Bouma-Prediger's reference to the *oikos* is crucial, and ties the reproductive labor to reimagining our economy in "its proper place."

In summary, how we attend to our work can connect or distance us from the natural world. In my analysis, I examined above three fundamental experiences of human labor with regard to our relationship to the earth: we toil in it, we remake it, and we care for it. These aspects of our worklife

¹⁶ Isabella Bakker argues such work entails three key components: "the biological reproduction of the species," "the reproduction of the [productive] labor force," and the "reproduction of provisioning and caring needs" (Isabella Bakker, "Social Reproduction and the Constitution of a Gendered Political Economy," *New Political Economy* 12, 4. (December 2007): 541).

are rarely experienced in isolation. Indeed, societies should not be so stratified that individuals or social classes are condemned to experience any single relationship to the earth. Each form of work connects with the character of the earth's ecosystem as ordered, malleable, and life-giving. Each also indicates an aspect of our anthropology as earth-dwellers: we are creaturely, creative, and procreative. These characteristics of our being-in-the-world are fundamentally relational and admit of dependencies, cooperation, and mutual care. While my argument has been a more general philosophical one, defensible from the phenomenology of historical human labor, I think these can fit within a Christian theology of human beings. We are finite creatures of God and bound to creation; we are co-creators with God in creation; and we share in and steward the pro-creative character of creation itself.

Toward and Ethic of Work

From this phenomenology of human labor we must raise the ethical question: "When is work *good* or *just*?" The philosopher Russell Muirhead answers this question in his recent and important book *Just Work*. His analysis of work uses the language of "fit" as the primary ethical criteria by arguing that work is both fulfilling and just when it *fits* us. Muirhead proposes two ways that work fits in a moral sense: social and personal. In expanding upon his useful framework, I suggest we add "ecological fit."

"Social fit" is a necessary condition for a just work ethic. We can say our worklife fits when it "calls on the aptitudes and talents through which we can best contribute to society (or the market). When our abilities are aligned with the tasks or jobs society needs performed, *work fits*."¹⁷ In order for societies to survive, function, and flourish, they need workers accomplishing any number of tasks. Whether it is through toil, productive or reproductive labor, it is ethical for members of a society to work for the goods of that society. In addition, when working for the flourishing of society, our efforts make possible (though do not guarantee) public recognition of our work. Fitting work gives individuals status within a community. This recognition of the worker is no small achievement. As Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to the striking sanitation workers in in 1968,

"You are demanding that this city will respect the dignity of labor. So often we overlook the work and the significance of those who are not in professional jobs, of those who are not in the so-called big jobs. But let me say to you tonight, that whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity, and it has worth."¹⁸

¹⁷ Muirhead, 2.

¹⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr. "Speech at Memphis Sanitation Strike: April 3, 1968," *All Labor Has Dignity*. P. 171.

One could imagine a host of jobs associated with environmental protection and restoration that should be raised in esteem in our culture. According to social fit alone, our worklives can be evaluated as morally good if the communal needs served are morally just and we the workers are capable, if not excellent, at our tasks. Muirhead has primarily the needs of human beings in mind here, and thus his framework could, at best, advocate for anthropocentric environmental ethic.

In addition to social fit, *personal fit* is necessary in just work whereby one's work practices "contributes to [one's] own development and expression." Not all work practices do this even if the cause they serve is noble. Adam Smith saw the power of work to sharpen one's mind and encourage a spirit of innovation, but he also saw how the division of labor he defended on a macroeconomic level to more efficiently meet social needs also prevented individuals from realizing their full humanity. "The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects are perhaps always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become." Just work requires due consideration be given to the desires and interests of individuals.

A minimal standard of personal fit is that societies should allow individuals to have sufficient *choice* over their own jobs or career paths. A slightly more robust standard would be that personal fit occurs when we *enjoy* our worklife. This historically recent criteria for discerning one's vocation is still morally thin for a robust work-ethic and easily fuels, as noted by Robert Bellah in *Habits of the Heart*, a hedonic individualism. Critiquing freedom and personal enjoyment as insufficient guides for a work ethic, Muirhead claims personal fit is attained when the practices of our worklives possess intrinsic goodness and contribute to virtues in the worker. This opens a space to consider the ecological virtue formation that may happen in work, whether or not the work itself contributes directly to ecological flourishing. Our virtues are not standalone character traits that are praiseworthy simply in themselves. A virtuous person is not just splendid to behold, they are good – for themselves, for others, and for the earth. Virtues are both *constitutive of* and *conducive to* human flourishing, and thus they are naturalistic (grounded upon human nature) and teleological (aimed towards certain ends.)¹⁹ Another way of putting this is that virtues are excellent and praiseworthy

¹⁹ See Ronald Sandler's treatment of the virtues in Chapter 1 of *Character and Environment*.

character traits that are *fitting to us* as human beings and *fit us* to the contexts within which we dwell.²⁰ Even personal fit implies connection (not isolation), complexity (not simplicity), and mutuality (not autonomy).

Going further than Muirhead's analysis, I would argue that a third criteria of "ecological fit" is necessary to formulate a work ethic keeping with the relationship inherent between human labor and the earth. Consider the logic so far. If work fits personally, it engages my distinct capacities to directly and indirectly benefit me in light of my needs and desires. Such work is good because my wellbeing has inherent worth, and thus good work fits my human dignity. If work fits socially, it directly and indirectly benefits society. Here too, my community as such has moral considerability: i.e. human community is good and worthy of maintaining. Along the same lines, ecological fit should be third criterion by which to assess the justice of our worklives, because the wellbeing of non-human life and the earth as a finite ecosystem has value itself. In addition, human labor holds an integral function in the flourishing of the earth, and not as an exceptional practice alien to the earth's ecological dynamics. A worklife that fits the needs and interests of our ecological community to bring about its flourishing should be one that contributes to the ecosystems integrity, biodiversity, adaptability, and sustainability. Of course a worklife that fits ecologically may be personally fulfilling because it fits our own values and may also serve society and the common anthropocentric good. But the moral criteria of ecological fit is not reducible to either, for the ecological community is a good worthy of our labor.

In an ecologically just world, personal, social and ecological fit could be found together in one's worklife, simultaneously or over time. It is obvious that these rarely do align, or even if two or three consistently do. But in our ongoing attempt to survive as a species, achieve justice in a rich human culture, and be loving members of the earth's community, it is crucial that we evaluate our worklives and the economies according to these criteria.

The Diversity of Ecologically Impactful Work

²⁰ The language of "fit" with regard to the virtues is also used by Ronald Sandler's definition of a virtue in his book *Character and Environment*: "A human being is ethically good (i.e., virtuous) insofar as she is well *fitted* with respect to her (i) emotions, (ii) desires, and (iii) actions . . . ; whether she is thus well fitted is determined by whether these aspects well serve (1) her survival, (2) the continuance of the species, (3) characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment, and (4) the good functioning of her social group-in the way characteristic of human beings. (5) her autonomy, (6) the accumulation of knowledge, (7) a meaningful life, and (8) the realization of any non-eudemonic ends) in the way characteristic of human beings." (Sandler, 17)

The successful application of these ethical concepts to our worklives must take into account that there are many *kinds* of ecologically impactful work. The virtues that contribute to ecoflourishing can be cultivated in a variety of work settings and activities. We need not limit our imagination of ecological work to the more obvious jobs of, say, working for an environmental advocacy or policy organization, or a for-profit sustainable energy company, or volunteering in a native prairie restoration project. Ecological impact happens in both personal and public ways, directly and indirectly, and on different levels of scale. We can propose here a preliminary typography of ways that work practices and structures contribute or inhibit to ecological flourishing and satisfy the ethical criteria of “ecological-fit.” The list below not exhaustive and these categories overlap in any given job.

1) **Work that affects the natural environment as such.**

Direct: Human activity that directly and immediately contributes to ecological flourishing by nourishing, restoring, or protecting ecosystems and their members. For example, a worker cleaning up an oil spill or planting native plants in a city park.

Indirect: Work that will eventually lead to reducing ecological destruction, but itself does not involve the worker in direct action within or upon the to-be effected environment. For example, a scientist researching the effects of potential toxins on a watershed, an architect designing LEED certified buildings, perhaps even a welder building a bridge that will reduce commuting miles for a community.

2) **Work that affects the worker themselves.**

Knowledge: Work that results in educating the worker on socio-ecological flourishing or destruction. For example, a teacher designing lessons plans to promote eco-literacy, a farmer learning about the need for soil conservation by tilling the land, a political staffer learning from their constituents on the effects of pollution in their district.

Character: Work that shapes the moral character of the worker to be more sensitive, aware, or committed to their own ecological virtues and action. For example, A photographer gaining a sense of wonder of the natural environment, a restaurant worker becoming frugal regarding food waste in light of practices they witness, a computer programmer committing volunteer hours in a national park to cultivate their biophilia in contrast to their typical artificial work environment.

3) **Work that affects the broader economy.**

Work that addresses the macro-economic structures of employment (paid and unpaid) and resource use and distribution. For example, economists designing economic incentives for environmentally friendly practices; activists protesting unjust and ecologically destructive labor practices or advocating for new government policies; local cooperatives sharing resources/labor in new ways to disrupt patterns of over-consumption.

4) **Work that affects a community's philosophical/theological/political worldview.**

Work that engages others in examining their worldviews and equipping others to reframe how they think about their worklives and democratic commitments. For example, artists that help reframe cultural narratives and aesthetic sensibilities about the natural world; pastors, philosophers, theologians who help reshape the moral imagination of their local communities; political activists that amplify marginalized voices in the creation of environmental policy.

A rich ecological philosophy of work could speak into each of these categories of human labor. Naming them can equip people to intentionally situate their worklives into the broader commitment toward ecological flourishing, whether the affects are direct and immediate, educational or character forming, or more systemic.

Conclusion

A Christian ecological ethic would do well to explore more deeply how our vocations, and the economic systems that they prop up, contribute to the earth's flourishing. With that in mind, how should we then counsel the next generation on their future employment? How shall we process our own crises of worklife dissatisfaction, tedium, workaholism, and alienation? In the end, as I advise my undergraduate students: seek work that promotes and does not interfere with the love of neighbor. This is a virtue approach to work that will have systemic consequences when applied writ large. Seek work that fits what you, your community, and your environment need to flourish. This may or may not align with a paid-job. But in the larger picture of your work life, be humble enough to toil alongside others and embrace the fragility of our mortal bodies and the natural world. Be courageous enough to contribute new creations to ease other's suffering, delight the senses, enrich our histories, and challenge our imaginations. Be kind enough to promote and protect the lives of others, human, animal and otherwise.

My second piece of advice to these students is to *keep work in its place*. Guard your time for play, for sabbath, for friendship. For this is how we can “subordinate economic life to life as a whole.” There is a wonderful scene in a favorite movie of mine, *A River Runs through It*, when a 12 year old Norman MacLean is receiving his daily instruction on writing from his father. After working all morning on drafting and redrafting an essay, receiving regular corrections from his paternal editor, his father finally reads a draft worthy enough and replies, “Good. Now throw it away.” The script continues,

There was a balance to my father's system. Every afternoon, I was set free, untutored and untouched till supper, to learn on my own the natural side of God's order. And there could be no better place to learn than the Montana of my youth. It was a world with dew still on it, more touched by wonder and possibility than any I have since known.²¹

²¹ *A River Runs through It*. Dir. Robert Redford. Columbia Pictures, 1992. Film.