Review

Between Necessity and Vocation: The Meaning of Work in the Field of Tension Between Securing One's Livelihood, Sociality and Transcendence

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Between Necessity and Vocation: The Meaning of Work in the Field of Tension Between Securing One's Livelihood, Sociality and Transcendence

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Abstract: In a time of profound upheavals in the world of work – characterized by automation, crises of meaning and psychological exhaustion – the question of the meaning and purpose of work arises with new urgency. This article undertakes a transdisciplinary reflection that integrates anthropological, sociological, psychological, and theological perspectives in order to understand work not only as an economic necessity, but as an existential site of human self-realization, social participation, and spiritual vocation. Based on classical thinkers such as Aristotle, Marx, Weber and Frankl as well as modern authors such as Rosa, Han and Koe, work is analysed as an ambivalent sphere between heteronomy and freedom, between self-optimisation and self-transcendence. The thesis is: Work acquires meaning where it becomes not only a means, but also an expression, relationship and answer. In this way, an integrative understanding of work is developed that takes into account both the social framework conditions and the potential for personal interpretation.

Keywords: meaning of work; calling; anthropology; alienation; flow; self-transcendence; resonance; new work; artificial intelligence; theology of work; work ethic; agency; industrial sociology

1. Introduction: Work as a Signature of Our Time

In late modern society, work represents much more than mere gainful employment or an economic means of securing one's livelihood. It has advanced to become a total social structure that not only reshapes social order and individual identity, but increasingly also metaphysical questions of meaning, self-realization, and transcendence. In this context, the sociologist Dominique Méda speaks of the "sacralization of work" (Méda, 1995, p. 19), in which the modern world opens up its sources of meaning from economic productivity rather than from religion or philosophy.

This transformation of work into a structure of meaning points to a central paradox: while traditional institutions of life (religion, family, community) are increasingly pluralizing or disintegrating, work – in both senses of the word as an activity and institution – is moving into the center of individual and collective self-assurance. Richard Sennett (1998) observed a paradoxical collision between the desire for continuous identity and the reality of post-industrial flexibility in his analysis of the new world of work as early as the end of the 20th century: "Modern capitalism has no respect for settled ways of life, and it is that instability which corrodes character" (Sennett, 1998, p. 10). At the same time, there is a growing unease about this totalizing position of labor. Terms such as "burnout", "work-life blending", "alienation", but also phenomena such as "quiet quitting" or the search for meaning of the so-called Generation Y (Hurrelmann & Albrecht, 2014) testify to *a collective struggle* for new forms of work that enable subjective fulfilment as well as social responsibility and spiritual depth. The question of the meaning of work is thus not only anthropologically grounded, but also ethically challenging and socio-theoretically explosive.

In an increasingly technologically permeated everyday life – in which artificial intelligence, algorithmic optimization and platform work control central work processes – the traditional understanding of work as a stable way of life is increasingly faltering. In his polemical critique "Bullshit Jobs", the anthropologist David Graeber diagnoses a "spiritual violence" that emanates from

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meaningless work "whose sole purpose is to keep people busy" (Graeber, 2018, p. 29). This critique opens up a space for a new, non-utilitarian view of work, characterized less by efficiency and more by resonance, relationship and vocation (cf. Rosa, 2016). The modern author Dan Koe takes up this discourse from a subjectivist perspective and links it to questions of self-responsibility, life design and inner calling. He makes a precise distinction between a "job", a "career" and a "calling", whereby the latter represents the deepest form of work: "A calling is found at the point where improvement turns into obsession [...] A calling is something others won't understand. Something that must be cared for, protected, and maintained by the one pursuing it" (Koe, 2025, pp. 9–10). Here, the vocation is not only an activity, but an expression of an existential choice that points beyond external constraints.

In view of these developments, the guiding question of this article arises: What function(s) does work fulfil in the context of human self-realisation, social participation and spiritual meaning? In doing so, the text will take a transdisciplinary perspective that systematically relates basic anthropological assumptions, ethical implications, sociological diagnoses and theological patterns of interpretation. The methodological structure of this text is neither purely historical nor empirical, but systematic and heuristic: the aim is to develop a multidimensional understanding of work through categorical precision and critical examination of classical and contemporary positions, which leads neither to neoliberal self-marketing nor to romantic fantasies of retreat, but seeks to productively unfold the dialectical tension between necessity and vocation. In this way, work is thematized for what it has always been at its core: an anthropological hinge between body and spirit, world and self, this world and transcendence – a form in which the human condition is actualized under the conditions of historical temporality and social order.

2. Clarification of Terms: Work—Necessity, Profession, Vocation

The academic discussion about the meaning and function of work suffers not least from the conceptual ambiguity of the concept of work itself. In everyday semantics, "work" is usually used as a synonym for gainful employment, but a closer look shows that work is a historically, culturally and normatively charged concept that oscillates between different spheres: coercion and freedom, hardship and creativity, external control and self-development.

2.1. Etymological and Cultural Origin

The etymological roots of the term already reveal an ambivalent relationship: the Latin word *labor* refers to effort, suffering and effort, while the medieval German *arabeit* is closely related to need and service. The French term *travail* is derived from the Latin *tripalium* – an instrument of torture – which already suggests the historical link between work and coercion and pain (Arendt, 1960, p. 104). But even in pre-modern cultures, there was a profound difference between different forms of activity: the ancient distinction between *poiesis* (making), *praxis* (acting) and *theoria* (contemplation), for example, shows that work was by no means universally regarded as valuable. Rather, as with Aristotle, it was often seen as a necessary area of life that belonged to the sphere of *the oikos*, not the *polis* (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253b).

2.2. Threefold Differentiation: Work – Profession – Vocation

In the context of modernity, a functional threefold structure has emerged, which is central to this contribution:

1. **Work as a necessityWork is understood here as a fundamental act to secure one's livelihood. It serves the material reproduction of the subject within an economic system. Their characteristics are exchange value, heteronomy and mostly instrumental**

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rationality. In this perspective, work appears as a compulsion to integrate into social structures, often associated with alienation (Marx, 1844/1968, p. 510).

2. **Work as a professionThe term** *profession* is not only a sociological category, but has profound cultural and theological roots. In his famous work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Max Weber distinguishes* between the profession as a "vocation to secular work" and mere earning a living. In this sense, "occupation" refers to a social role that is associated with specific qualifications, responsibilities and ethical expectations (Weber, 1920/2002, p. 30). Here, work becomes the source of order, discipline and self-respect.
3. **Work as a vocation (Calling)**

   The deepest level opens up in the spiritual conception of work as a "vocation". The Reformation concept of *vocatio* refers to an individual goal in life instituted by God, in which work is not a means but an expression of a higher task. Dan Koe updates this term from a psychological-existentialist perspective: "A calling is work you can't pull yourself away from and others can't help but pay you for" (Koe, 2025, p. 9). Accordingly, vocation cannot be delegated, cannot be planned and cannot be rationalized. It is an expression of an inner urge for self-transcendence through creative work.

2.3. Intermediate Instruments: Job, Career, Calling

The differentiation between "job", "career" and "calling" introduced by Dan Koe offers an instructive heuristic for the structural analysis of modern forms of work. A "job" is short-term work to satisfy needs – "a survival mechanism" (Koe, 2025, p. 8). A "career" is a career designed for development with increasing responsibility. It creates order and personal meaning through hierarchy, achievement and progress. Only a "calling", however, transcends the logic of external reward and leads to the fusion of activity and identity. It is what Viktor Frankl describes as "the fors of life, for the sake of which it is worth enduring everything" (Frankl, 2005, p. 122). However, this semantic tripartite division is not without its problems. It operates with ideal-typical distinctions that are often blurred in real biographies. Many people experience work as an existential necessity, social role and individual longing at the same time. In addition, the idea of vocation – especially in neoliberal narratives of self-realization – is in danger of degenerating into a duty of passion: "Love what you do" becomes an imperative under which economic pressure is concealed (Illouz, 2011, p. 87).

3. Anthropological Foundations: Work as an Expression of Human Nature

The anthropological reflection on work touches on the fundamental question of human existence: What is the human being – and what does it mean that he works? Work is not a purely functional necessity, but an expression of a specifically human relationship to the world that oscillates between design, toil, purpose and transcendence. Anthropology, understood as the study of the

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nature of man, therefore forms the philosophical foundation of every theory of work. This chapter unfolds three paradigmatic perspectives—Aristotle, Augustine, and Hannah Arendt—to outline the depth of this field of tension.

3.1. Aristotle: Man as "Zoon Ergon Echon"

For Aristotle, man is essentially a *zoon politikon*, a community being – but also a *zoon ergon echon*, a living being with a specific work (*ergon*) and purpose (*telos*). In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he formulates: "For as for a flute player or sculptor [...] the good and the 'well-being' obviously consists in the unfolding of the corresponding work, so also for man" (Aristotle, *EN* I.7, 1097b22ff.). The *ergon* of man, however, is not mere manual work, but rational activity (*energeia kata logon*). Work in the modern sense – i.e. physical hardship to satisfy needs – belongs to the sphere of necessity in Aristotelian thought and is therefore assigned to the household (*oikos*) on the one hand and subject to social subordination on the other. Those who have to work to survive – slaves, craftsmen – are considered unfree because they cannot pursue the contemplative life, which for Aristotle is the highest form of human existence (*EN* X.7, 1177a12). Nevertheless, his conception implies that activity is a constitutive feature of human self-realization – as long as it is purposeful, virtuous and oriented towards the common good. This thinking is still effective today in humanistic ideas of work as a possibility of moral education and social integration.

3.2. Augustine: Work as Toil and Discipline After the Fall of Man

The Christian anthropology of Augustine marks a profound reinterpretation of the work. In his *Civitas Dei*, he distinguishes between the paradisiacal state before the Fall, in which man lived in contemplative union with God, and the post-lapsarian state, in which work becomes a punishment: "In sudore vultus tui vesceris pane tuo" – "In the sweat of your brow you shall eat your bread" (Genesis 3:19; cf. Augustine, *CD*, XIV, 20). Work is not ontologically but theologically justified here – not as an expression of human dignity, but as a consequence of original sin. Nevertheless, Augustine's work also assigns a disciplining function: it serves to tame the *concupiscentia*, the disordered desires. Through physical hardship, man can purify himself and practice humility before God. Work thus acquires an ambivalent position: it is a consequence of fallen nature, but it is also a place of spiritual probation. This figure of thought continues to have an effect on Protestant ethics and shapes an understanding of work as a moral practice in which divine order, self-discipline and responsibility for the world are combined.

3.3. Hannah Arendt: The "Vita Activa" and the Tripartite Division of Human Activities

In Vita activa oder Vom aktive Leben (1960), *the political philosopher Hannah Arendt offers* an in-depth analysis of the basic anthropological forms of human activity. It distinguishes between three modalities: labor, work and *action*. Work – understood as a cyclical activity for self-preservation – is at the lowest level: "Laboratory is the activity that corresponds to the biological life process" (Arendt, 1960, p. 103). In contrast, production (*work*) aims at permanence and worldliness: man creates artefacts, things, institutions. For Arendt, it is only action that is genuinely political and free – it is the dialogical appearance in public space. For Arendt, work in the narrower sense – as toil and necessity – is de-individualizing and related to the realm of nature. She writes: "The biological conditionality of man is expressed in work, his relationship to the world is expressed in production, his freedom in action" (ibid., p. 127). This triad has far-reaching consequences: it contradicts any idealization of work and instead calls for a rehabilitation of *practice* in the sense of active participation in the political public sphere. In times of a total working society, in which all areas of life are permeated by work logics, Arendt's perspective becomes a critical resource.

3.4. Anthropology in the Present: Work as Openness to the World

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In modern anthropology, work is increasingly understood as a structuring form of human cosmopolitanism. Arnold Gehlen sees an anthropological necessity in it: "Work is the primary way of opening up the world through the active human being" (Gehlen, 1956, p. 84). Man is a "deficient being" who stabilizes himself through active appropriation of the world. Hartmut Rosa also formulates an anthropologically founded claim to work in his concept of resonance: work can – under certain conditions – become a *sphere of resonance* , i.e. a successful relationship with the world. The prerequisite is that people experience themselves as effective, heard and connected in their work (Rosa, 2016, pp. 298–302). Dan Koe ties in with this tradition on an existential psychological level when he writes: "Work is energy invested in solving a problem. Humans love to solve problems, but not just any problem, problems we deem meaningful and interesting" (Koe, 2025, p. 11). Work is understood here as an intentional act that aims not only at survival, but also at self-formation, creativity and shaping the world.

4. Sociological Perspectives: Work as a Structural Principle of Modernity

While anthropological reflection anchors the ontological status of work in the human condition, sociology analyzes work as a historical and structural category of social organization. Since modernity, work has not only formed the basis of material reproduction, but also the central axis of social integration, identity formation and political-economic power relations. In sociological theory, work thus emerges as a "category of order" (Beck, 1999, p. 94) – a social formation in which individual, institution and ideology are mutually constituted. In the following, four paradigmatic perspectives are examined: Karl Marx (alienation), Max Weber (professional ethics), Richard Sennett (flexibility and loss of character) and Hartmut Rosa (resonance and alienation). This analysis is supplemented by postmodern diagnoses such as that of Zygmunt Bauman.

4.1. Karl Marx: Work as an Alienated Activity in Capitalism

For Marx, work is the "eternal natural emergency" (Marx, 1867/1962, p. 57), through which man produces his world and at the same time objectifies himself. In the capitalist mode of production, however, labour loses its creative character. In the "Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts", Marx analyzes fourfold alienation:

1. alienation from the product (it belongs to the capitalist),
2. of the activity (it is compulsion, not expression),
3. of the species (the creativity of man is suppressed),
4. of fellow human beings (competition instead of cooperation)(cf. Marx, 1844/1968, pp. 511–519).

Alienation is thus not merely a psychological feeling, but a structural reality. Work becomes a commodity – an "external activity that does not belong to the nature of the worker" (ibid., p. 514). Marx's analysis still provides the critical foundation against the economization and instrumentalization of human lifetime.

4.2. Max Weber: Protestant Ethics and the Rationalization of Work

Weber pursues a completely different approach: work is not criticized as alienated, but analyzed as the bearer of a cultural structure of meaning. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1920), Weber argues that ascetic Protestantism – especially Calvinism and Pietism – developed an inner professional ethic that elevated diligence, discipline, time economy and willingness to perform

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to religious virtue: "Profession in the world was understood as a task set by God" (Weber, 1920/2002, p. 62). The religious idea of *vocatio* was secularized and became the basis of modern gainful employment. Weber sees in this the genesis of an "inner-worldly asceticism" that prepared the ground for the rationalization, bureaucratization and efficiency orientation of the capitalist economic order. Modern man "is condemned to live in a steel shell of bondage" (ibid., p. 123) – an expression of the survival of religious imperatives under secular auspices.

4.3. Richard Sennett: The Corrosion of Character in Flexible Capitalism

Sennett updates this development in the context of post-industrial flexibilization. In *The Corrosion of Character* , he describes how traditional forms of work – characterized by reliability, continuity, and identity – are being replaced by project-based, mobile, fragmented activities in the neoliberal era. This undermines long-term self-images: "What kind of human being does a flexible capitalism need?" (Sennett, 1998, p. 5). The loss of institutional stability creates psychological erosion: character – understood as the ability to bond, to be reliable and to form a narrative self-image – is decomposed. Work is becoming freer, but also more unstable, meaningless, arbitrary. Sennett observes an erosion of work as a way of life in favor of short-term functionality.

4.4. Hartmut Rosa: Alienation, Resonance and the Crisis of Acceleration

In his resonance theory, *Hartmut Rosa combines* a critical analysis of society with a normative anthropology. Modern societies, according to Rosa, are characterized by "social acceleration": technological innovation, rising expectations, more frequent intervals. This dynamic leads to the "unavailability" of the self – and to alienation: "We live in a world that has become mute to us" (Rosa, 2016, p. 298). However, work can – under certain conditions – become a resonance relationship: When people experience themselves as responsive, effective and connected, a dialogical relationship with the world develops. It is not only the *what*, but the *how* of the work that is decisive : autonomy, meaningfulness, social integration. In this way, Rosa becomes the central reference of a theory of successful work in the 21st century.

4.5. Zygmunt Bauman: Precarity and the "Liquid Modernity"

In Liquid Modernity, *Bauman describes* postmodern society as a state of permanent instability. Work becomes a temporary resource – a means of short-term satisfaction of needs, no longer a continuum that creates identity. The "homo laborans" of modernity is transformed into a "homo consumens" who offers his labor power flexibly, opportunistically, and often out of necessity (Bauman, 2000, pp. 134–137). The result is an existential uncertainty: "Flexibility may mean freedom for the powerful, but it means insecurity for the weak" (ibid., p. 161). Precariousness is becoming the norm. In this perspective, work no longer appears as a source of dignity, but as a place of neoliberal self-valorization.

4.6. Dan Koe: Agency or Mental Servitude?

Koe takes up this criticism and transforms it into an individual-psychological appeal for self-responsibility. He distinguishes between "low-agency individuals" – people who conform to traditional work patterns in an externally determined manner – and "high-agency individuals" who actively shape their work and charge it with meaning (Koe, 2025, p. 17). His diagnosis of the "default path" mentality is reminiscent of Sennett's concept of corrosion: "People climb the ladders placed in front of them because their mind craves challenge [...] But once they reach their limits, they justify comfort by saying: I just like the stability of a job" (ibid., p. 19). Koe argues for a radical reorientation: work not as an externally assigned structure, but as a space of subjective evolution – a perspective that remains ambitious in terms of individual ethics, but sociologically undercomplex.

5. Psychological Perspectives: Flow, Agency and the Concept of "Life's Work"

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While sociology analyzes work primarily as a structural phenomenon, psychology directs attention to subjective experience, motivational dynamics, and the cognitive-emotional prerequisites of human activity. Work is not understood here as an external necessity, but as an inner need for effectiveness, self-congruence and meaning. The psychological perspective sheds light on the internal structure of work that oscillates between functionality and existentiality: When does work become fulfilling? When does it cause stagnation, overwhelm or even depression? When does it give depth to life? This chapter focuses on three paradigmatic concepts: Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory, Viktor Frankl's psychology of meaning, and Dan Koe's vision of a "life's work" embedded in the agency paradigm.

5.1. Flow: The Psychological Optimum of Successful Work

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, one of the founders of Positive Psychology, uses his Flow concept to describe a state of consciousness that is characterized by complete absorption, self-forgetfulness and intrinsic motivation. Flow occurs when there is a balance between the demands of an activity and the subject's abilities. In his words: "The best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times [...] The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 3). This state is not a by-product, but the actual goal of successful activity. Flow is an indicator of meaning because it is accompanied by a form of inner order, self-transcendence and experience of time that is perceived as deeply fulfilling. Work – if it is experienced as a challenge and not as a constraint – can become a source of life satisfaction.

5.2. Viktor Frankl: Work as Existential Self-Transcendence

The Viennese neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl developed an existential-psychological theory of meaning with his logotherapy. For Frankl, man is a "seeker of meaning" whose central question is: "What is it worth living for?" In his conception, work appears as one of the three main sources of meaning – along with love and suffering: "Meaning can be realized [...] in doing, in experiencing and in suffering" (Frankl, 2005, p. 122). Frankl recognizes a transcendent movement especially in creative work: "Only to the extent to which man forgets himself – whether he devotes himself to something or to love for a person – is he a human being in the full sense" (ibid., p. 138). Here, work becomes a bridge between the self and the world, between the individual and transcendence. This perspective stands in clear contrast to utilitarian models: work is not merely a means to an end, but a place of existential proof – "the human being becomes the "I" in the "you" (Buber, 1923/2002, p. 17), and in the work a witness to his meaning.

5.3. Agency: Self-Determination and the Psychology of Choice

In modern psychology, the concept of agency has become central. It describes the ability of the subject to act in a self-determined way, to make decisions and to actively shape his or her own life. In this context, Albert Bandura speaks of "personal agency" as a key component of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001, p. 2). In the context of work, agency means not only adapting to predetermined structures, but also shaping or transcending them. Autonomy, clarity of purpose, meaning construction and personal relevance are decisive factors for motivation and commitment (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

Dan Koe systematically takes up this idea in his work and links it to a culturally critical diagnosis: modern man too often lives in "low-agency states" – externally determined, reactive, passive. Only those who see themselves as a "high-agency individual" can turn work into a vehicle for inner growth: "You must become the one who defines the problem, not the one who reacts to it" (Koe, 2025, p. 21).

5.4. The "Life's Work" as a Psychological Integration Figure

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At the heart of Koe's thinking is the concept of "Life's Work" – the activity in which passion, ability, contribution and income opportunity are intertwined. "Life's work is what you do when you realize that fulfillment is found in contribution, not comfort" (Koe, 2025, p. 79). In this way, Koe overcomes the dichotomy between work and private life, between functionality and transcendence. Work becomes a meaningful way of life. Life's Work is not a product of calculation, but of inner clarification: "You must get clear on what you value, what problems you are obsessed with, and what change you want to see in the world" (ibid., p. 82). In this perspective, work is not just a question of task, but of identity. You are no longer an engineer, teacher or consultant – you live a vision, a contribution, an inner calling.

As powerful as these psychological concepts are, they are not without dangers. The absolutization of self-determination can lead to a new form of pressure to perform. The idea that everyone has to find their "life's work" can seem unattainable for people in precarious circumstances. The flow logic must also be critically questioned: Not every activity that generates flow is ethically or socially sensible – the addiction to flow can lead to the alienation of responsibility. Nevertheless, these concepts open up a crucial horizon: they show that work can be more than toil – that under the right conditions it becomes a source of dignity, depth and joy. As Rosa puts it: "Resonance is not available, but it is possible – and work can be a place where it arises" (Rosa, 2016, p. 301).

6. Theological Dimensions: Work as a Vocation

Hardly any other term has had such a lasting influence on the Protestant-influenced Western understanding of work as that of vocation. Originally anchored in a genuinely theological horizon – as *vocatio*, divine call to discipleship – "vocation" became a term in the course of the Reformation that integrated secular activity into the religious understanding of salvation. Work was thus elevated from the sphere of mere necessity and transferred to an existential-ethical dimension. Especially in times of growing alienation and crisis of meaning, this origin gains a new relevance.

Martin Luther emphasizes in his Reformation theology that every secular activity carried out properly can be a place of divine calling. In his work "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" (1520), he emphasizes that the difference between spiritual and secular work is theologically illegitimate: "All estates that are led with a Christian faith and conscience are divine" (Luther, 1520/WA 6, p. 406). The profession – whether farmer, judge, mother or teacher – becomes the arena of divine participation in the world. Work is not the way of salvation, but it is an expression of the ethics of creation: man participates in the maintenance of the world order (*ordo creationis*). In Luther's conception, however, the vocation remains radically tied to obedience to the word of God and is thus not an expression of subjective self-realization, but theocentrically motivated fulfillment of duty. It's about loyalty, not passion – about responsibility, not fulfillment. It is precisely in this tension that there is a theological depth that is often lost in the modern subjectivation of vocation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, ties in with this understanding when he understands vocation as "guidance into concrete obedience" (Bonhoeffer, 1937/1994, p. 96). Man's place in the world is not determined by his desires, but by God's address.

In Calvinism, on the other hand, the emphasis shifts. Profession now also becomes a sign of divine election – success and discipline in work are considered indications of grace. In this theological economization of vocation, as Max Weber astutely analyzed, lies the cultural root of modern capitalism. The "inner-worldly asceticism" of Puritanism developed an unparalleled work ethic, whose rationality and discipline became the basis of capitalist accumulation: "The fulfillment of one's profession is [...] the purpose of life provided by God" (Weber, 1920/2002, p. 62). The consequences of this transformation are ambivalent: grace became achievement, vocation became career, devotion to life became self-optimization. A spiritual anthropology that operates beyond functionalist instrumentalization would have to uncover the deeper source of vocation. Bonhoeffer speaks of the fact that man "is not called out of himself, but by the free grace of God" (Bonhoeffer, 1937/1994, p. 98). The vocation is therefore neither a subjective project nor spiritual self-aggrandizement, but a response – an existential "Here I am", spoken in the horizon of a "you" that calls and sends the human being.

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This theological depth is often lacking in secularized concepts of vocation, such as those encountered in New Work ideologies or in the coaching discourse. There, "vocation" often becomes a functional narrative of self-realization. Dan Koe, for example, writes in his book *Purpose & Profit* that a vocation is given "when you can't stop working because your vision pulls you magnetically" (Koe, 2025, p. 9). Although Koe rightly refers here to the passion and energy that can arise from meaningful activity, his description ultimately remains in a psychological internal logic. What is missing is the transcendent relation – the responsiveness through a beyond of the self. Especially in a world in which work often becomes a source of overwhelm and meaninglessness, a theologically renewed theory of vocation could provide a counter-impulse. Not in the sense of a relapse into pre-Enlightenment heteronomy, but as a reminder that work can be not only an expression of wanting, but also a place of receiving. Man works – but he is at the same time worked. He shapes – but he also receives a place, a mission, a border. Work in the theological sense, therefore, is not merely action, but gift, not only productivity, but presence, not merely an end but a response. It is – in Bonhoeffer's sense – a space of freedom in bonding. A vocation that does not grow from the depths of the psyche, but from the depths of the divine call, can become the source of a deep, non-instrumental structure of meaning, precisely in the midst of the fragmentation of new working worlds.

7. Time Diagnosis: Between Burnout, AI and New Work

The current world of work is under double pressure: on the one hand, under the pressure of technological transformation – keywords such as automation, digitization and artificial intelligence mark tectonic shifts in the structure and content of work; on the other hand, under the pressure of growing psychological stress – manifested in phenomena such as burnout, exhaustion, crisis of meaning and identity diffusion. In this tension, a profound crisis of work unfolds, which must be understood not only functional-economically, but culturally and anthropologically. The question is no longer just: What are we going to do? Rather: What remains of the work – and of the working subject?

The growing psychological stress caused by work is not a marginal phenomenon. According to studies by the WHO, work-related stress and burnout are among the most common causes of illness in Western industrialized countries (cf. WHO, 2020). The sociologist Alain Ehrenberg describes this development as a shift from the "neurotic guilt subject" of the disciplinary society to the "exhausted performance subject" of the present (Ehrenberg, 2004, p. 15). The modern subject fails not because of prohibitions, but because of its own demands. The duty to self-actualize mutates into the duty to succeed. Work becomes a projection screen for total availability, control, growth – and yet leads to an "exhaustion of self-realization" (Han, 2010, p. 28). At the same time, the material conditions of work are shifting. Advancing automation – algorithmic control, machine learning, artificial intelligence – is calling into question not only industrial professions, but increasingly also creative, consulting, medical and even educational professions. The philosophical point, however, lies not only in the replaceability of certain activities, but in the question: What else distinguishes human work from machine process logic? If efficiency, reproducibility and speed are the main criteria, humans become a "slow machine". The loss of moments of non-availability – of presence, meaning, resonance – deprives work of its human dimension (cf. Rosa, 2016, p. 217).

The much-vaunted New Work movement is responding to these developments with alternative working models: flexibility, home office, flat hierarchies, meaning orientation and self-leadership are at the center. Founders such as Frithjof Bergmann express the hope that work could once again be "what you really, really want to do" (Bergmann, 2004, p. 22). But in practice, this model also threatens to become the new ideology: those who fail in flat hierarchies fail "because of themselves". If you can't find meaning, you obviously haven't worked enough on yourself. The old disciplining through external control is replaced by the more subtle self-optimization in free choice – a paradoxical freedom that becomes a new burden. Dan Koe picks up on this development and analyzes it as "Default Path Mentality" – an inner program that steers people into familiar paths, even if they make them unhappy. For him, the path to liberation lies in the recovery of clarity, inner guidance and

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creative energy: "The default path is the programmed path. But clarity breaks programming. You don't need permission to create your own work" (Koe, 2025, p. 26). Koe sees the real future of work in the radical reformulation of work as a creative act – not in security, but in design, not in stability, but in meaning.

Nevertheless, his perspective remains ambivalent. For even the creative act is not free of social conditions. The ability to shape oneself requires resources: education, time, mental health, economic security. Those who act in survival mode can hardly find their "Life's Work". The neoliberal glorification of freedom often fails to recognise the structural inequalities in which freedom must become concrete. Freedom to vocation needs space – and protection. The synthesis of this diagnosis of the times shows that **the future of work is not a technical project, but a deeply anthropological one.** It will be decided by whether it is possible to design work in such a way that it becomes neither a mere function nor a fetish. That it is neither reified nor romanticized. That it opens up places in which people create something that points beyond them – and at the same time shapes them themselves. The question ahead is not: How do we avoid work? Rather: How do we transform it – into a medium of world relations, of co-responsibility, of spiritual presence?

8. Critical Synthesis: Between Self-Optimization and Self-Transcendence

In the previous chapters, reflection on the meaning and purpose of work has proven to be a transdisciplinary balancing act – between anthropological anchoring, sociological structural criticism, psychological self-design and theological transcendence. Work is neither merely an economic fact nor a mere individual decision, but an expression and a place of that dynamic tension that constitutes man in his relationship to the world and to himself.

In a first approximation, one could say: Work is what happens when man inscribes himself productively into the world. But this productive inscription is not neutral. It can lead to unfolding or alienation – to the experience of resonance or to exhaustion. In his work, man is ordered towards the more-than-himself – be it in the other, in the work, in God or in the mind. The current working society, however, tends to colonize this "more": through efficiency paradigms, through self-optimization, through goal orientation without transcendence. Working life thus becomes the arena of a paradoxical model of existence: hyperactive and meaningless, promising freedom and yet structuring coercion. Psychology responds to this tension with concepts such as flow, agency or "life's work". These offer important impulses for the rehumanization of work – but they often remain stuck in a subject logic that ignores structural conditions. Those who do not find meaning in their work, it seems, have not yet achieved their "inner clarity". The danger lies in an individualizing morality that declares structural impositions to be psychological deficits. The old wage labor may have been alienating – but it was embedded in collective security. The new work promises freedom – but it dissolves, atomizes and overwhelms.

Sociological perspectives – such as those of Marx, Sennett or Rosa – provide urgently needed correctives here: they show that work does not happen in a vacuum, but in fields of power, inequality and ideology. Its strength lies in the structural framing of subjectivity. But even these perspectives reach their limits when they see the subject only as a product of social conditions. Where is the possibility of an inner response, of vocation, of metaphysical depth?

This is precisely where theology comes in – and offers a provocation. It reminds us that work is not justified solely by functionality or self-design, but also by being held. Man is not merely a doer, but a called. He shapes – but he also receives. The meaning of work lies not only in its productivity, but in the possibility of encountering the other, the higher, the divine in action. Bonhoeffer puts this succinctly: "Vocation is a commitment to a place, to a task, to a responsibility – it is not arbitrariness, but an answer" (Bonhoeffer, 1937/1994, p. 98). In the synthesis, a complex picture emerges: work is necessary – for securing one's livelihood, for social integration, for self-formation. But it only becomes meaningful when it points beyond itself. Meaning arises not only through activity, but through interpretation. The subjective experience (flow), the social structure (justice), the spiritual dimension (vocation) – all this belongs to an integral understanding of work that does not fragment, but

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integrates. In the present, however, in the age of platform economies, digital exhaustion, the hunger for meaning in the midst of prosperity – this understanding is under pressure. The big question is not: How do we organize work more efficiently? But: How do we make it more meaningful? How do we create spaces in which work not only "works" but flourishes – as a place of responsibility, design, relationship and transcendent depth? The answer to this will not lie in one discipline alone. It requires a way of thinking that is anthropologically grounded, sociologically sensitized, psychologically deepened and theologically broadened. Only then can work become what it is in the best case: not just a means, but an expression; not only duty, but gift; not only a burden, but an opportunity for world and self-realization.

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