Ferris Bueller's Vocation

In an attempt to confront the student loan debt bubble, most Democratic presidential candidates have promised some variant of "free" college, and Republicans are countering with their own proposals. Citing a statistic that the cost of a four-year degree doubled between 1986 and 2016, Marco Rubio proposes to regulate or privatize tuition funding sources.

Given the nature of political pandering in a democracy, we can reasonably expect that no candidate or proposal will acknowledge the trade-offs that happen in countries that treat college as a public good: the elimination of intercollegiate athletics or luxurious student accommodations, for example. Americans may get buyer's remorse when they realize that fewer students attend college in countries where postsecondary education is provided by the government.

The real solution to college costs may therefore have less to do with who pays, or what is provided to those who attend, but instead with *why so many students attend college in the first place*. The explanation for our fascination with universal college enrollment, ironically enough, may be found in a classic film whose release date, and its thirty-year celebration, parallel Rubio's statistic: *Ferris Bueller's Day Off.*

Classic Comedy, Cultural Critique

For those unfamiliar with the 1986 film, high school seniors Ferris Bueller, his girlfriend Sloane, and his best friend Cameron successfully play hooky from high school in order to tour Chicago's finest attractions. At the end of their remarkable adventure, Cameron says to Sloane, "I don't know what I'm gonna do." "College!" she replies. "Yeah, but to do what?" Sloane replies. He admits that he's not particularly interested in anything at all. The vivacious Sloane replies,

“Me neither!”

This dialogue reveals a stubborn problem afflicting not only the typical American teenager but also many others who have long since forgotten their locker combinations: they have no sense of vocation. They don’t know what they are supposed to be doing in the world.

John Hughes’s classic comedy was actually a critique of our all too prevalent solution to this problem: send everyone to college. In fact, the exchange above about college makes more sense if connected with other scenes in the film. When Ferris feigns illness to get out of going to school, for example, a faux lament reveals what’s at stake. He says to his mother, “I have a test today. I have to take it. I want to go to a good college so I can have a fruitful life.” When Ferris talks to the audience later in the film, he admits that college will not only break up their friendships but also the likelihood of his marrying Sloane. In another scene, Ferris foresees the anxiety that plagues aimless college students and says of his friend Cameron, “He can’t be wound this tight and go to college. His roommate’ll kill him.”

In the original script, Hughes continued this motif. What motivates Ferris and his friends to “stop and look around” is not just their dislike of high school but the looming threat of college. A window display in the store where Ferris’s mother works features a mannequin father congratulating a mannequin son, who is dressed in a mortarboard and gown, while the accompanying sign encourages saving for college. In another deleted scene, during a cruise down the Chicago River, Cameron and Ferris compare the start of college to nuclear holocaust; these events are equally terrible, they conclude, but college is more certain.

Work and Flourishing

Of course, there is no reason to think that the increasingly popular march to college will impart any sense of vocation to Sloane, Cameron, or any other student arriving without direction in the first place. Cameron and Sloane have spent almost their entire lives in school, and school has prepared them for … well, what else but more school? Our presidential candidates can promise Cameron and Sloane a free trip to college, but they cannot help them know what to do once they get there, or after they graduate.

To justify the crushing work schedule or debt load increasingly demanded by four or more years at college, students increasingly default to "useful" degrees such as business, engineering, or health professions that now greatly outnumber traditional studies, such as the humanities or social sciences. Whereas the number of baccalaureate degrees in philosophy has varied by only 20 percent since 1971, degrees in "parks, recreation, leisure, and fitness studies" have increased by 3,000 percent in the same timeframe.

Whether or not such degrees guarantee a satisfactory income, one still has to find satisfaction in the work itself. Ryan Avent argues that millions of young men have abandoned the workforce altogether, preferring virtual achievements in video games to the rewards of a typical job. Other twenty-somethings simply tolerate unserious and transitory employment through their "emerging" adulthood to pay for a second adolescence without marriage or children. Work has become, like Glaucon's and Adeimantus's initial conception of justice in Plato's *Republic*, a means to an end – and a particularly individualistic end – rather than an end in itself.

How can we find satisfying work, including work that doesn't require everyone to go to college? While relativistic and subjective solutions like "Work is what you make it" or

“Follow your passion” aren’t entirely wrong, they don’t ground work in any objective or shareable concept of flourishing or beatitude.

Unfortunately, some of our earliest answers about flourishing in the Western canon, drawn from Greek and Roman philosophy, hinder rather than help. Aristocracy and slavery in the ancient world blunted the value of work. In the *Republic,* Plato compares irrational and shameless appetites to a “money-making” class in his kallipolis. The city’s leaders are shielded from the “corruption” of work, especially insofar as the love of wealth begins a precipitous decline into dissolution and tyranny. Disciplined but avaricious oligarchs raise dissipated and undisciplined children and entice others into debt by leveraging what little capital they have. Plato’s student Aristotle acknowledges that wealth is necessary for generosity or magnificence, but the only virtue pertaining to good work—art—is eclipsed by leisurely contemplation. Only slaves are born to manual work. Cicero’s *De Officiis* prescribes both virtue and an active life, even using commerce as a case study for moral reasoning. In his imagined dialogues between Diogenes and Antipater, however, Cicero exalts an abstract brotherhood of man over the merchant’s defense of market prices and the cost of capital. He hopes that his son will pursue a political life.

Work as Service to God and Neighbor

Christians discouraged such classical ambitions in favor of work prayerfully and providentially considered: *ora et labora*. Ancient slavery faded. Leisurely aristocracy was tempered. In his *Confessions*, Augustine’s classical ambition for status gave him less happiness than the mirth of a drunken beggar. He, St. Thomas, and the Schoolmen praised ordinary labor.

In the fourteenth century, Dominican Johann Tauler and Deacon Geert Groote anticipated Luther’s extension of vocation beyond

the monastery walls to include ordinary work. Though Luther's robust idea of the "calling" (*beruf*) has its shortcomings (particularly its criticism of commerce, capital, and profits), he imparts divine significance to our work. Speaking to the "common run" of men whom ancient philosophers held in disdain, Luther argued that God is pleased with a man who "works at his trade . . . for the nourishment of his body or for the common welfare." Luther's suggestion that work is a catalyst for virtue – an obvious point to which the ancients seem oblivious – was first argued by John Chrysostom. Calvin likewise cast work as an instrument for virtue, particularly self-denial, and argued that vocation was a gift of the Holy Spirit. Even the chambermaid's sweeping, however much it might be disparaged by the world, was a holy and pure oblation if performed as an offering to God.

Puritan William Perkins, whose popularity surpassed Calvin's and Shakespeare's in his day, published an elaborate treatise on vocation in 1605. In it, Perkins emphasized that God distinguished persons by their "particular" or "special" providence: their individual vocation. These individual vocations sustained our general callings to our neighbors and to God. What made work valuable was not the social status of that work but "the heart of the worker." Every calling, Perkins wrote, must be "fitted to the man" and every man "fitted to his calling." These individual vocations worked together to sustain the common goods or "estates" of the family, political society, and the church. Vocations did not exist outside of these estates. Perkins, therefore, did not envision us working for a "macroeconomy," an abstraction as vacant as the voice of Ben Stein's *economics* teacher in the film: "Bueller, Bueller … Bueller." John Mueller therefore rightly argues that laboring for family and neighbor was the scholastic basis of economics, not some "Gross Domestic Product."

Work and Modernity

Centuries of Christian thinking, therefore, gave work dignity and purpose, but the commercial republic and industrial revolution presented new challenges. Arguably, nowhere are these challenges more evident than America.

Alexis de Tocqueville's Americans appear orderly, moral, and religious, but they are given to injurious individualism, manic materialism, careless conformity, softness of spirit, pestering poverty, and omniscient avarice. Nagged by fear, envy, restlessness, and imperfectly satisfied desire, their work improves everything but degrades themselves. Tocqueville's disciplined democrat resembles Plato's oligarch: willing to deploy his reason *only* in search of wealth. But that wealth is rarely enjoyed because it is subordinated to a thousand everyday desires bought low to sell high. The soul grows bored, restless, and agitated amid the exaltation of the senses. Tocqueville is so frustrated by his experience with American Christians that he wonders if the growth of Christianity was owed more to Roman luxury and Epicurean philosophy than to violent persecution.

Contemporary social science offers a few band-aids. Deirdre McCloskey, for example, touts "bourgeois virtues," though these seem like means to productive ends rather than ends in themselves. A new wave of psychologists promote work-related virtues such as Grit or Flow; Martin Seligman's recovery of virtue and flourishing is now institutionalized in workplaces through Positive Organizational Scholarship. But such reimagined virtues retain the means/ends problem: do managers institutionalize these virtues as ends in themselves, or as means to greater production and profit?

Vocation or Vacation?

When Ferris calls Cameron, who is miserable in bed, to rouse him for their big adventure, he tells him, “You’re not dying, you just can’t think of anything good to do.” While we envy the three friends’ day off, their problem would have been solved more by a *vocation* than by a *vacation*. The problem may become even more complicated if AI and a proposed Universal Basic Income provide a *very long day off*. We must still find work to do in the world—we must answer the call of our vocations.

Before getting out of bed, Cameron responds to Ferris by singing a modified few bars of an old spiritual: “When Cameron was in Egypt’s Land… Let My Cameron Go.” If Cameron never found his vocation, his days must have felt as futile as making bricks without straw.

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