

Reflections on Purposeful Work

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Somewhere previously in my notes I have given it as my opinion that the reasons modern man is so prone to frustration and other emotional problems is that in the technological society he lives a life that is highly abnormal; as compared with the life to which evolution has adapted him, namely, the life of a hunter-gatherer. I still hold this opinion; but it leaves open the question of which factors in modern society are the most important sources of psychological trouble. I have by this time concluded that the two main problems are (A) absence of a real purpose in life, and (B) lack of personal autonomy. I think that for most of these people who are dissatisfied with modern society, the most important factor by far is absence of purpose; but that for certain individuals, including me, the lack of personal autonomy is more important (but these two problems are not completely independent.)

What we discuss here is the problem of purpose. In what follows I will make a number of statements that are unproved. I am not absolutely certain that all these statements are correct, but in order to avoid being tiresome I will generally omit phrases like “in my opinion,” “I think that,” and so forth, which I usually use to indicate unproved statements. Also, the following discussion is meant to apply especially to men. I am uncertain how far it is applicable to women.

Most people (to a greater or lesser extent depending on the individual) need to make a purposeful effort at something in order to have a fulfilling life. Note the adjective purposeful — the person must feel that his activity is not merely a game. Solving crossword puzzles, for example, requires an effort but cannot form the basis for a fulfilling life, because the activity has no purpose external to itself — one does it only in order to have something to do. The same is true of games and statements generally. What is needed is purposeful work requiring a reasonable amount of effort and self-discipline.

Among the bulk of the population in modern society (that is, among people who are more-or-less normal though not necessarily leading satisfying lives) it is probable that many or most emotional problems are troublesome only because of a lack of sufficient genuine purpose. A man who has a purpose, and who feels that he is succeeding in attaining his purpose, typically will have high morale, and when one has high morale, hardships (whether physical or psychological) are easy to bear. When a man’s work is going reasonably well, and he believes in the value of that work, his guilt feelings or his sex problems or his conflict with his wife usually will not seem overly important. He is able to endure these feelings cheerfully along with other hardships. But a man without purpose will have flabby morale and a vacuum in his life. He is likely to brood on his problems, and may be made seriously uncomfortable by problems that would seem trivial to a man with high morale.

In the hunting-gathering life, the most important purpose motivating work is to procure the necessities of life and some minimal comforts. Especially food. Those who are ignorant of that kind of life tend to assume it is miserable, and for this opinion they give reasons of the following type: (a) hunter-gatherers’ work is monotonous; (b) the work doesn’t utilize intelligence; (c) the object of the work is purely materialistic,

therefore has no “higher values” and is unfulfilling; (d) the yield of the work (amount of food obtained, etc.) is very low, so that the hunter must find his work discouraging; (e) the hunter lives from hand to mouth and has no long term purpose.

On the basis of prolonged personal experiences of living at the subsistence level, I assert that the foregoing arguments are based on completely misunderstanding of the psychology of the hunting life. It is not my principal purpose here to defend hunting-gathering as a way of life; however, I will discuss separately each of the above points ((a) through (e)) because the discussion will involve certain instructive comparisons between primitive work and work in modern society.

(a) “Hunter gatherers work is monotonous.” Hunting itself is not typically monotonous (though it can be in certain circumstances), and it involves ranging over the country, rather than working always in the same place. On the other hand, some hunter’s work is indeed monotonous (e.g., picking berries, digging roots, softening animal skins). Monotony is not ideal, but (for one who is accustomed to it) monotony does not destroy the value of work or prevent it from being satisfying.

When I first took to the woods, I found burdensome the monotonous task of dragging poles to the cabin and cutting them up for firewood. But I became used to the work, and I now feel that it makes a real contribution to the fulfillment that I get from this way of life. This does not mean that I actually feel any pleasure in doing the task. It does mean that, though the work is monotonous, it does not bore me, because it is purposeful. And cutting a load of firewood gives me a sense of accomplishment — NOT pride in my ability (anyone but a cripple can cut firewood), but simply a feeling that I have done something worthwhile. When I say “worthwhile” I am not referring to any abstract philosophical notions about the value of work, or any such nonsense. The accomplishment is worthwhile solely and exclusively because it is my only means of fulfilling the physical need for winter fuel. If I had a lot of money and didn’t need to conserve cash, I wouldn’t cut my own firewood. There would be no point in it. No fulfillment in cutting firewood unnecessarily. Thus, if I were wealthy, I would be missing the fulfillment of this kind of purposeful work.

Let me compare this with my feelings about mathematics. I solved problems in mathematics that had no practical applications; and if they had had practical applications, it would have made no difference. Even if some engineering firm had used my theorems for some purpose, those theorems still would have had no use for me personally, nor for my family or friends.

Mathematical research work was varied and interesting. It was exciting. Some of it required me to use the very best of my intellectual powers, and when I solved a difficult problem, I was rewarded with very intense ego-gratification. Yet, as I grew older, I was increasingly nagged by a sense of purposelessness in the work. Having proven a theorem, I would sit back and think about it, and I would say, “So what? What good does this do me? Now I’ll go work on another problem. But what for?” Thus, I eventually became bored with mathematics.

Mathematics, music (listening, playing, composing), reading (light, serious, fiction, non-fiction), coin-collecting, television — all these eventually led to boredom.

Another example: I hunt the same areas for snowshoe rabbits over and over again. It is very hard work, because the rabbits must generally be hunted on steep slopes. The excitement connected with the first hunts has long since disappeared. Yet I still enjoy hunting rabbits (which is more than I can usually say for cutting firewood), and, like firewood-cutting, rabbit-hunting still gives me solid, substantial satisfaction. If it wasn't for the fact that it is a real, physical hardship to go without the meat, I would long since have grown bored with rabbit hunting.

(b) “Hunter-gatherer’s work does not require intelligence.” Some aspects of the hunting life require little intelligence. Other aspects do require the full use of our intelligence (man didn’t evolve his big brain for nothing), but a different kind of intelligence from that which is most important in modern society. The kind of intelligence most esteemed and most useful in organized society is the capacity for abstract verbal or symbol-manipulating reasoning. (This is my own strongest area of intelligence.) In the hunting life, it is intuitive intelligence that is most important, because the required knowledge and skills are mostly of a type that cannot be dealt with or transmitted verbally, except in a partial way.

It seems reasonable to conjecture that the average hunter-gatherer possesses an amount of skill and knowledge comparable to that of a modern engineer, though of a very different kind. Be that as it may, it seems probable that the average hunter possesses much more organized, useful skill and knowledge than that of the average modern man, since most people today (including petty technicians) do work that requires only a limited amount of skill or knowledge, and few people cultivate any learning outside of what is required for their jobs.

(c) “The object of hunters’ work is purely materialistic, has no higher values, and therefore must be unfulfilling.” This is intellectual snobbery. Let us distinguish between the materialism of hunter-gatherers and the “materialism” (so-called) of modern society.

Hunters’ materialism is directed toward obtaining the physical necessities of life, and some minimal comforts that actually contribute to his physical well-being and his happiness. The “materialism” of modern society is directed toward the accumulation of a surplus of luxuries that contribute little or nothing to anyone’s physical well-being. There are various motivations for this accumulation of luxuries: desire for social status; a need that exists in modern society for constant distraction and diversion (note how many of our luxuries are toys — that is, are designed for entertainment); artificial fulfillment of psychological needs that are otherwise stifled (e.g., riding a powerful motorcycle provides a spurious sense of power); and then there is the fact that shopping in itself is a form of entertainment. Observe that in each of these cases, material goods are bought as a means to psychological ends, not physical ones. In some instances, material goods are sought in order to alleviate the few-residual physical discomforts remaining in modern society, but the great mass of modern products are desired mostly for the psychological effects to be obtained through them. In this sense,

modern “materialism” is not materialism at all, because its goals are not physical, but psychological. In any case, this “materialism” is something quite different from the materialism of primitives.

I suggest that the intellectuals’ scorn for “mere materialism” is due to the fact that most of them have always been provided with an abundance of material things acquired at the cost of minimal effort. Take food as an example. The intellectual virtually has his food supply guaranteed to him by organized society; his palate is jaded by all sorts of delicacies that are standard fare for everyone today. He need not exert himself to get food. Thus, he gets only a limited and superficial pleasure from eating, so that he looks on eating as a lowly and superficial pleasure that provides no deep fulfillment.

But when good nutrition is not to be taken for granted, and when a good meal is the result of real effort, then food is really soul-satisfying. The hunter’s enjoyment of food is not only physical, but psychological, and involves not only the meal itself but the process by which it was acquired — the effort and self-discipline involved in hunting the meat and picking the berries, and certain satisfactions (which might be called aesthetic) that are connected with having contact with nature and are probably instinctive in human beings. If intellectuals lived this way of life (long enough to become adapted to it), perhaps they would not scorn its materialism.

Of course, though the activities of hunting and gathering themselves are materialistic, it is true that hunter-gatherers usually have other activities of an artistic and spiritual order. On the other hand, it would seem that the artistic and spiritual concerns of the hunter tend to revolve around his materialistic concerns. For example, animals and plants depicted in his drawings tend to be those that he uses for food. It can be argued that, rather than lowering the value of his spiritual life, this materialistic orientation actually enhances it. The physical, social, spiritual, artistic, and other aspects of primitive man’s life all tend to be bound together in a unified whole. The various aspects of modern man’s life tend to be unconnected and separated into compartments: His food is not experienced as a direct result of his labor; the act to which he is exposed typically is not expressive of his daily work; the people with whom he socializes often are not those with whom he works; and so forth.

Before I took to the woods, I never drew pictures except to make humorous cartoons. But after I had been in the woods long enough so that the country got into my blood, so to speak, I became interested in drawing or carving representations of the animals with which I was most familiar. My most important source of meat, and the animal that I was most skilled at hunting, was the snowshoe rabbit, and it was this animal that I was most interested in drawing. The snowshoe rabbit has a special psychological significance for me, and in my desire to depict it, I felt I somewhat understood the motivation of the ancient hunters who left their beautiful drawings of animals on the walls of caves.

(d) “The yield of the hunter’s work is so low that he must find it discouraging.” The yield of the hunter’s labor may seem small to us; but usually he gets as much as he

needs to live (otherwise man would not have survived). That is all he expects and all he is accustomed to; hence the yield does not seem small to him.

In another sense, the yield of the hunter's labor is far greater than that of the modern worker. Because the hunter's work makes the difference between survival and death by starvation, the yield of his labor is nothing less than life itself. The yield of the modern worker's labor is only a lot of toys like television sets, air conditioners, and so forth, these being the things that he purchases with his salary.

(e) "The hunter lives from hand to mouth and has no long term purpose." Probably this is largely true.

When I was in my teens I often indulged in daydreams of living as a hunter-gatherer. In my imagination, the round of labor needed to feed myself in such an existence did not seem sufficient to fill my life, and I imagined myself setting up artificial long-term purposes for myself — for example, building systems of primitive bridges over streams. Not that I thought I would need the bridges, but I thought I would need a long-term purpose.

Now, having had the experience of hunting for meat, gathering herbs and berries, cutting firewood, and so forth, as a matter of practical necessity, I look upon such artificial purposes as silly. I found that when you go out to hunt knowing that you will or will not have meat to eat according as you succeed or fail in the hunt, your need for purpose and importance is fully satisfied — you have no need whatever to look forward to a goal that is five or ten years in the future. When you have to really exert yourself to procure the necessities of life, nothing else seems as purposeful or important.

The need that exists in many civilized people for long-term large-scale purpose probably results from a need to magnify our goals in an attempt to make ourselves feel that we have a significant purpose. (But we work for something over a period of years, and when we finally obtain it, the reward somehow seems ridiculously small in proportion to the length of time it took to get it.)

(This concludes our comparison of purposeful work in hunting-gathering societies with that in civilization.)

I suggest that our own biological predisposition — the purpose that is more-or-less built into us — is to pursue practical, material, physical objectives. But practical work is almost impossible today, because The System takes care of all practical problems. The system is so vast, that the contribution of any one individual to the system's practiced work, is insignificant. Thus, no individual can do any significant practical work. (The argument is oversimplified, but it contains a large element of truth, and indicates one of the main themes of this essay.)

This (the suggested predisposition to pursue practical, material objectives) may be part of the reason for the so-called materialism of modern society. Most people pursue material wealth because material wealth represents to them a practical, physical goal. These people don't think about the fact that wealth today provides only psychological gratifications such as entertainment and social status — which are not what we call

practical objectives. (Still, there is reason to suspect that the majority suffer from a vague sense of purposelessness that they never analyze.)

There are certain other people to whom the purposelessness of wealth today is quite obvious; these people accept certain artificial goals that society has set up — goals like Art, Science, Humanitarianism, etc. But, again, one suspects that to the majority of these people too, their artificial goals are not fully satisfactory, and they are vaguely troubled. Being essentially bored, they brood on their psychological problems and often lead frustrated, unhappy lives.

We shall now develop in detail the thesis sketched in the foregoing 3 paragraphs. We begin by discussing a certain psychological trait.

Some people have more than other people of a psychological trait that I shall call close organization. If a person has a closely organized mind, then each item of information that he possesses is closely integrated into his thoughts, feelings, and behavior. If a person has a loosely organized mind, then many items of information that he possesses are not well integrated into his thoughts, feelings, and behavior. In a closely organized mind, verbally formulated beliefs or values very readily affect feelings and behavior. A man with a loosely organized mind may verbally profess certain beliefs or values, but may fail to make the connection between these verbal formulations and his feelings or behavior.

We illustrate with examples:

1. X believes in law and order. If his mind is closely organized, he is careful to obey the law himself. If his mind is loosely organized, he may commit a petty theft without ever worrying about the contradiction between his belief and his action.
2. X cheats on an examination and gets an A. If X has a closely organized mind, he feels no pride in his grade, because he knows it does not represent his real level of achievement. If X has a loosely organized mind, he may feel pride in his A even though he realizes it does not represent his real level of achievement.
3. X visits a prostitute; she puts on a good act and makes a vigorous show of enjoying the intercourse, but X knows very well that she is only doing it for the money. If X has a closely organized mind, his pleasure with the prostitute is likely to be dampened by his knowledge that she is only putting on an act. If X has a loosely organized mind, his knowledge that the prostitute is only putting on an act may not affect his feelings in having intercourse with her.
4. Suppose that a certain philosophical scholar accepts the principle known as the “criterion of verifiability” — or suppose that, if he does not entirely accept it, he at least agrees that in order to fully understand a statement we must examine to what extent the statement is “verifiable.”

At the same time, this scholar may profess certain political principles or ideologies without ever having examined these principles in light of the criterion of verifiability.

If his mind were very closely organized, he would not have omitted such examination.

5. An example that I have seen myself: A certain mathematician felt strongly that “serious” music was very superior to the “popular” forms of music. He attempted to justify this by asserting that the pleasure obtained by the “common man” from popular music is of a smaller order of magnitude than that obtained by intellectuals from “serious” music. Yet he had no evidence to support this assertion. He was only guessing. In the scientific realm he never would have accepted such an unsubstantiated statement. Yet he did not seem to question such a statement in his personal ideology.

If he had had a very closely organized mind, he would have been aware of the sloppiness of his thinking here.

We trust that these examples make it fairly clear what we mean by the distinction between “closely” and “loosely” organized minds.

We make two points:

- i. While more intelligent people tend on the average to have more closely organized minds, common experience would seem to indicate that there are quite a few individual exceptions. Intelligence, apparently, is not at all rigidly related to closeness of organization.
- ii. Close organization seems to be closely related to thoughtfulness, introspection, and a tendency to re-examine one’s own thought-processes; but I am not convinced that close organization always accompanies these other characteristics. In any case, close organization is not identical with these other characteristics. For instance, the closely-organized response in Example 3 is not the same thing as being thoughtful or introspective, or examining one’s own thought-processes.

Now let us study the way in which closeness of organization is related to the problem of purpose.

(alpha) Consider first a person having subnormal intelligence and a very loosely organized mind. Suppose this fellow is given each day the task of stacking up wooden blocks in a certain configuration. At the end of the day, his keeper comes and knocks down all the stacks of blocks, and next day our moron has to stack them up all over again. Let us suppose that this fellow is not too stupid to realize that his work accomplishes nothing. Nevertheless, it is possible that he may get fulfillment from his work: Each day he simply absorbs himself happily in his task and doesn’t bother to think about whether it has any purpose.

(beta) Next take the case of a fellow I once knew who discussed his ambitions with me and said that his hope was simply to keep on increasing his income indefinitely. When I asked his motive for this, he answered to this effect: “I have studied economics! I know that man’s economic wants are never satisfied. No matter how much I have, I will always want more.” He made no claim that the indefinite increase of wealth would bring happiness or any other particular benefit. He seemed to realize in a way that the indefinite increase of wealth was simply a kind of game people play, having no definite external purpose. Yet this did not prevent him from absorbing himself in the game and feeling purpose.

(gamma) For another example we can take any one of a number of young researchers in pure mathematics whom I knew of in the 1960’s. These fellows would grind out papers one after another, each being of interest only to a tiny group of specialists in a narrow area of mathematics, and none having any practical applications. For the most part they never thought about the purpose of all this. If pressed, they might claim that mathematics has “aesthetic” value. Of course, the supposed aesthetic value in most of the papers they published was accessible only to the tiny group of specialists who had the knowledge to read these papers. The obvious question is, why should society pay these fellows comfortable salaries to gratify each other’s supposed aesthetic sensibilities in a way that was of no benefit whatever to the public? Nevertheless, like the moron building his piles of blocks, these guys would happily absorb themselves in their work and churn out papers without worrying about what, if anything, they were accomplishing. Presumably, if their minds had been sufficiently closely organized, they would not have been able to feel a sense of purpose in their work without first specifying to themselves some definite goal that they were pursuing.

(delta) Now we take a more complex example: a research scientist whose work has clearcut practical applications. Suppose that he describes his purpose as this: to benefit humanity by contributing to technological progress. (For the sake of argument, we shall assume for the present that technological progress does benefit humanity.)

Human beings have an instinct that leads them to want to do good for their own family and immediate circle of friends. But we feel safe in asserting that human beings do not have any innate instinct to do good for humanity at large, which consists of vast masses of unknown, unseen strangers. (This assertion is confined by the fact that, until very recently on the historical time-scale, nearly all people hold the attitude: “My family comes first, then my clan, then my nation, and to hell with the rest of the human race.” I am not criticizing this attitude, which is natural and instinctive for human beings.)

So, what is the scientist’s motive for wanting to benefit humanity? He needs to have work to do, and he needs to feel that work is purposeful. He decides to benefit humanity only in order to fulfill his need for purposeful work. But this means that benefiting humanity is not his real purpose — his real purpose is simply to fulfill his need for work. In other words, he is working merely for the sake of working — his work

has no purpose external to itself. “Benefiting humanity” is only an artificial purpose that he has set up in order to make himself feel that his work is purposeful.

Now, it may be that our scientist is a thoughtful man and is aware of everything that we have just said. But (perhaps) he is able to absorb himself contentedly in his work and push the question of purpose out of his mind. (Here again we have the moron piling up the blocks.) On the other hand, if our scientist has a very closely organized mind, it may be that the problem of purpose will always be too much present in his consciousness for him to feel content in his work.

The foregoing discussion is oversimplified and incomplete. We will now try to analyze the problem of purpose in more detail.

Let us roughly divide the modern man into two types.

Type I. Those who have routine jobs, who work only because they have to, who make no effort to excel in their work, and who have no job-related ambitions.

Type II. Career workers. Those who have ambitions, put a real effort into their work, and try to excel in it. In Type II we also include those people who try to satisfy their need for purposeful work through non-money-earning activities, whether hobbies, or community service, or whatever.

(Of course, some people may be hybrids between Type I and Type II, but that does not invalidate our argument.)

First, we consider Type I. These people do work that is purposeful for them only to the extent that they must work in order to avoid the humiliation of going on welfare. They feel that they are working to avoid a punishment, not that they are exerting themselves to gain a reward. To judge from my own personal observation, morale among type I workers often is extremely low. This is not always the case — in some companies I thought morale was pretty good. But it does not seem to me that Type I work provides an adequate sense of purpose in life for any but the most placid and unambitious personalities.

Various manipulative tricks are being tried on Type I workers to make them have a more positive attitude toward their work. For example, one company, whose employees would formerly each assemble one section of a telephone book, is now having each employee assemble a whole telephone book, and this is supposed to give them a sense of accomplishment in their work. It’s almost a sick-joke. If cheap devices like this actually succeed, then so much the worse. It would be better for people to be miserable at their work than to have the company manipulate them in this way.

In any case, if any employee begins to take pride in his work, to try to excel in it, or to have job-related ambitions, then this will put him into Type II, which we are about to discuss.

Type II: Career workers. We shall begin by discussing these career workers whose work is what is generally called “practical.” This type of worker we shall call, for brevity, a PCW (Practical Career Worker). In order to be definite, we will take, say, an aeronautical engineer. Let us suppose he is improving the design of an aircraft.

What is his purpose in doing this work? Ostensibly it is to make a more efficient plane.
A practical ...

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A critique of his ideas & actions



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