One of the difficulties with business ethics research and business ethics courses is the emphasis on topics that are of primary interest to top-level managers. Unfortunately, most of our readers and students are not yet, and a considerable number will never be, senior vice presidents or chief executive officers. We need books that connect with where students and colleagues are now. Thus it is a pleasure to have two recent books on work, Al Gini’s My Job My Self and the work under review here, Joanne Ciulla’s The Working Life. After all, most of us work and, to a large extent, our personal identity is defined by our work roles. Thus scholarly insights into the history, current nature, and future of work are of immediate relevance to us all.

The Working Life is an important book from a scholar who has already made a mark in the leadership area of business ethics. The book is exceedingly readable and is rich with examples and stories. No review could adequately discuss all the provocative ideas that are found within, so in this review I will focus on what I take to be the most important thesis.

In my opinion, the subtitle of Professor Ciulla’s book captures the central theme in her analysis. The subtitle is The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work. What is the promise and where is the betrayal? Let’s begin with the promise. Although I think the main outline of the promise is present in section one, “The Meanings of Work,” it receives its full expression in section three. Perhaps it is not too farfetched to characterize section one as the origins of the promise, section two as the betrayal of the promise, and section three as the hope for the promise fulfilled. Let’s follow that logic. As Professor Ciulla points...
out, work has often been viewed as a curse. The early Greeks looked at work that way. I should add that the Adam and Eve story reflects the same view in another tradition. Work is often considered, even now, as just something we have to do to maintain ourselves and stay alive. It is with good reason that Ciulla begins her discussion of work with the parable of the ant and the grasshopper. Our language reflects a negative view of work as well. TGIF marks the end of the workweek and Wednesday is hump day—more than half way to Friday.

If language reflects reality, then we need to know what work would need to look like for us to change our negative attitude toward it. Professor Ciulla reminds us that in the Protestant tradition, work was viewed as a calling and as God’s commandment.

How can this historical view of the nature of work be summarized? The promise of work is the promise of meaningful work. It is, as Professor Ciulla says in one place, a purpose of living. That, I would suggest, is the promise of work as articulated in section one. In saying this, Professor Ciulla is not denying that one works in order to make a living. As Ciulla points out in chapter 4, the first feature of the work ethic is that fairness requires that we support ourselves. And the second feature of the work ethic is that we work to the best of our ability. However, these two aspects of the work ethic are perfectly consistent with work as a curse. What gives promise to work is the third feature of the work ethic—that work itself has moral and spiritual value.

What is one to make of all this and how should it be evaluated? Professor Ciulla owes much to Rousseau and Marx, whom she discusses in chapter 4. As she points out, Rousseau believed that human beings want to work and are naturally creative. However, that creativity and the desire to work are destroyed once one begins to work for another. And Marx believed that the essence of a human being is to be productive, but in a capitalist system one becomes alienated from his or her work. Indeed for Ciulla, the essence of the romantic vision of work is to be independent of the work of others.

But why? What is it that makes working for others so undesirable? Over a third of the book (section two) focuses on this issue of working for others. Here Ciulla’s writing, always crisp and clear, becomes an expression of moral outrage. After explaining how Taylorism worked, she then considers the techniques of enlightened management, TQM, teamwork, empowerment. Ciulla condemns them all and the basis of her condemnation is nicely summarized in the final chapter of this section, chapter 9, “Betrayal.” The American worker has been betrayed by “reductions in benefits, longer hours, increased workloads, downsizing and skyrocketing executive compensation.” She excoriates corporations for demanding commitment in the age of downsizing. “It is ironic that the less stability and loyalty companies have to offer employees, the more commitment they demand from them” (p. 153). She cites a Conference Board survey that reveals that CEOs think most employees can be satisfied by recognition but that senior executives need to be satisfied with money. “There is something dishonest about an organization where workers create profits for the company
and get a party, while senior management receives huge bonuses and stock options” (p. 160). She laments the lack of public outrage over these conditions and longs for the rise of unions. This is good stuff and I endorse both Ciulla’s normative conclusions and the tone in which she expresses them. Ciulla builds the moral case for applying a term like betrayal. And she will not let American corporations off the hook by letting them cite the competitive global economy as the cause of all the carnage. Citing the work of economist David Gordon, Ciulla points out that “by comparing the growth of real hourly compensation in manufacturing, in the United States with that in ten European countries and Japan, . . . the United States was the only one with a growth rate close to zero” (p. 156).

Professor Ciulla then returns to the promise of work in section three. Ciulla has the courage to address the question of the meaning of life and argues persuasively for the importance and centrality of that question in human life. Her excursions into religious and philosophical interpretations of a meaningful life as well as her discussion of happiness might best be summed up by the following quotation: “Questions about the meaning of work and the meaning of life entail an analysis of why we are here, what we should be doing, and what makes us happy, and the meanings discovered by individuals and manufactured by the culture” (p. 208). Some might consider it unfortunate that Ciulla provides no essential definition of “meaningful work.” I think she does not do so in part because she does not think there is one definition. On such issues Ciulla is pluralistic and pragmatic.

However, I am disappointed that Ciulla does not say more about the concept of meaningful work and how it fits into her overall analysis. The disappointment is especially acute since I think it is tied so closely to the promise of work. The section entitled “Meaningful Work” covers less than four full pages in a book that is nearly 250 pages long. Why is that?

I think we need to look again at the “betrayal.” At the end of the book, Ciulla summarizes her critique. “One reason why I have been critical of modern work goes beyond injustice in the workplace, management manipulation, or economic insecurity. When I look at the historical big picture, I am perplexed at the domination of life by paid employment at a time when life itself should be getting easier” (p. 231). It is hard for work to be meaningful when you work for someone else. I think Ciulla is very much a romantic about work in the sense in which she defines “romantic.” At the end of chapter 4, “Romantic Visions,” Ciulla indicates that the ultimate romantic vision is to be free from working for others. She points out that when people in a business organization talk about changing jobs, they almost always speak of a job that gives them the freedom to work for themselves—as she says, “owning a small vineyard, opening a shop, working as an independent consultant.” One can’t help but wonder if something similar might be in her own mind. Now there is nothing wrong with this romantic vision and this book is all the better for it.

However, my only quarrel with this approach is that it is easy to ignore organizational reform. If one accepts Ciulla’s critique of current management
practice, and if most people in organizations will not have the opportunity to be independent consultants or single proprietors, then I think one needs to address the questions of organizational or managerial reform. The promise of work needs to involve a lot more than simply not having to work for others. What should be changed so that working for others is not subject to Professor Ciulla’s critique? I submit that what we need are the very practices she finds so suspicious. Management has abused team building, participative management, empowerment and the like. But that does not mean that these are not legitimate ideas. The fact that people abuse trust does not show that trust is not a good idea. Thus, for most people, the promise of work that appears in the subtitle is in the very concepts she distrusts. Work should expand human autonomy. Work that does that fits the romantic vision of independence but it is not the independence of not working for others. If the world of the independent businessperson is becoming less plausible for most individuals, how is work that is autonomy-building possible? The answer is that organizations must change, and chief among those changes is a questioning of hierarchical management. Ideas like participative management, teamwork, and empowerment, when properly applied are the ideas that will make autonomous work possible. I doubt that Ciulla would disagree with much of this; I just think that she is less interested in organizational and managerial reform than I—perhaps because she sees that it has failed in the past. After all, much of her analysis in part two of the book shows how the reforms of the mid- and late twentieth century were abused. But frankly I see no alternative except to keep trying. More and more people work for large business organizations and if work in those organizations is to have the characteristics that Ciulla finds morally acceptable, managerial reform is the only way to get there.

The issues discussed thus far hardly exhaust the book’s contents. The reader is treated to a marvelous discussion of work and freedom, work and leisure, and of time itself. The book can be recommended for those chapters alone. The book also has many virtues. The most outstanding one is balance. Even when she is most critical of management, Professor Ciulla recognizes that there are companies that do provide what she calls a “promising workplace.” She does not try to make all work glamorous but at the same time she recognizes that some people can legitimately let their work be the most meaningful part of their lives. Another virtue is the book’s interdisciplinary character. Ciulla’s analysis benefits from the insights of philosophy, sociology, psychology, history, organizational studies, and management theory, and thus her account of work is comprehensive and holistic. Yet another virtue is the clarity and tone of the writing. This book is scholarly without suffering the deadening prose of much scholarly writing. It is a joy to read. Business ethicists should read this book, but the appeal of the book is well beyond business ethicists. It should have wide appeal to any person who works or who has worked or who has managed to escape work. And that is all of us.
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