
The Psychology of Work and Spirituality

Lloyd Sandelands

Contents

Introduction	2
Research on Work and Spirit	2
The Job Characteristics Model	5
The Spirit of Work	6
What is the Connection Between a Man’s Work and His Spirit?	6
Conclusion	7
Cross-References	7
References	8

Abstract

Work and spirit are not separate as we think of them, but are one together, of a piece. This chapter briefly reviews the largely separate research literatures on the psychology of work and the spirituality of work to note that the latter raises a doubt about scientific naturalism of the former. The chapter seeks a bridge between the two literatures by showing how the most prominent scientific theory of work – the Job Characteristics Model – opens upon the human spirit. The chapter concludes that the psychology of work and the spirituality of work must unite on metaphysical grounds other than those of natural science.

Keywords

Work • Naturalism • Spirituality • Metaphysics • God

L. Sandelands (✉)

Stephen M. Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

e-mail: lsandel@umich.edu

Introduction

The title of this chapter epitomizes how we think about work today: There is work and there is spirit, each unto its own. With this chapter I observe that work and spirit are not separate, but are of a piece, that the life of the one is the life of the other. I conclude that a true study of work must be a study of the human spirit.

The chapter is organized as follows. Upon brief reviews of the separate research literatures on the psychology of work and the spirituality of work, I note how the latter impugns the former by suggesting that the former's metaphysic of natural science keeps it from the supernatural truth that people are "spiritual" beings. I then try to bridge the two literatures by showing how the most prominent theory of work psychology – the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman and Oldham 1980) – opens upon the human spirit. I conclude that the psychology and spirituality of work must unite on metaphysical grounds other than those of natural science.

Research on Work and Spirit

The research literatures on work and spirit differ in a way that troubles the paradox that although we have but one life we are called upon to live two; one of work, the other of spirit; one in a factory or office, the other in a mosque, synagogue, or church; one on weekdays, the other on the Sabbath.

Research on the psychology of work explains work by its causes and effects; where the causes typically consist of workers' psychological states (e.g., instincts, drives, needs, values, attitudes, beliefs, skills, abilities, etc. . . .) and their personal, social, economic, and cultural circumstances (e.g., work design, social support, human factors, opportunities, constraints, roles, norms, ethnic and religious affiliations, responsibilities, etc. . . .) and the effects typically consist of personal and business outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction, motivation, absenteeism, turnover, job performance, creativity, innovation, absenteeism, turnover, morale, etc. . . .) [for comprehensive reviews see (Locke 1976; Ambrose and Kulik 1999; Humphrey et al. 2007; Fried et al. 2008)]. For the better part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, much of this research focused on the deficiencies and ills of work that dissatisfy and dispirit (Mayo 1933; Trist and Bamforth 1951; Whyte 1956; Argyris 1957; Blauner 1964), but with the human potential movement in American psychology founded by Abraham Maslow (1968) and led lately by students of positive organization studies (POS), this researched turned to the positive qualities of work that enable self-actualization and personal fulfillment (Turner and Lawrence 1965; Hackman and Lawler 1971; Griffin 1987; Kahn 1992; Grant 2007; Macey and Schneider 2008; Rothbard and Patil 2012).

Perhaps surprisingly, in view of its great volume and reach, this research is often criticized for its impoverished idea of the human person. Critics complain that there is more to life at work than a science of psychology can say. There remain crucial emotional, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual dimensions of work that are infrequently studied because they cannot easily be objectively measured and put to scientific test

(Fineman 2003; Sandelands 1988; Sandelands and Buckner 1989; Sandelands and Boudens 2000; Dik and Duffy 2009; Bunderson and Thompson 2009; Wrzesniewski 2012; Myers 2013).

In a largely separate and parallel development, research interest has lately gathered about the spirituality of work. This research interest is surely motivated in part by the idea just noted that there is more to work than psychological theories can say, but it may be motivated in larger part by a longing to find in work some of the same spiritual possibilities that are loved and savored elsewhere in life (for reviews, see Paloutzian 1996; Mitroff and Denton 1999; Fry 2003; Giacalone and Jurkiewicz 2003; Rosso et al. 2010; Sandelands 2012). Whereas the research on the psychology of work can be catalogued by the cause and effect relations established among its independent and dependent variables, the research on the spirituality of work is perhaps best catalogued by its contending ideas of spirit. On one side are *immanent spiritualities* which contend that spirit inheres in being and is to discern by the enlightenments of meditation or contemplation. These spiritualities divide between those that focus on the self and those that focus on the whole of existence. Among the former, the most familiar has to be Maslow's (1968) idea of "self-actualization" which locates spirit at the peak reaches of personal experience:

Human beings strive perpetually toward ultimate humanness . . . Achieving basic-need gratification gives us many peak-experiences, each of which are absolute delights, perfect in themselves, and needing no more than themselves to validate life. (p. 154)

Among the latter are the ideas of writers influenced by philosophers such as Wilber (1985) and Peck (1988) who locate spirit in the whole of cosmic being. Nodding to Wilber, Steingard (2005) develops a spiritually informed theory of business upon a holism that finds spirit in all things, while Mitroff (2003) idealizes spirituality as a feeling of being "totally integrated and connected with the entire universe such that there are no boundaries between where one starts and where one leaves off" (p. 378). And nodding to Peck, Mirvis (1997) speaks of the spiritual unity of organizations as the "company as community."

On the other side are *transcendent spiritualities* which contend that spirit lies neither in the self alone nor in the totality of the cosmos but in the person's relationship to a superior force or power and is to discern both by experience and special revelation. These spiritualities divide between those that conceive this superior force indistinctly as a "beyond" and those that conceive this superior force distinctly as a "personal God." Among proponents of the former, Paloutzian et al. (2003, p. 124) identify spirituality with "the tendency to guide thoughts, feelings, and behavior by the gist or idea of whatever is beyond and seen as ultimately important, which can be expressed religiously and non-religiously," while McCormick (1994, p. 22) characterizes spirituality as ". . .the inner experience of the individual when he senses a Beyond, especially as evidenced by the effect of this experience on his behavior when he actively attempts to harmonize his life with the Beyond." Among proponents of the latter are the innumerable adherents of the personal God professed by the world's great monotheistic religions:

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In these religions spirituality inheres in a person's relationship to God who creates and sustains all being, including his/her human person and communion with others. In view of the global dominance of the three great world religions, it is surprising that work-related examples of this God-centered transcendent spirituality are few (Cavanaugh 1999; Delbecq 1999; Ali et al. 2000; Zaman 2008; Sandelands 2009, 2014).

For being new on the scene and still inchoately formed, it is no surprise that the spirituality of work comes in for criticisms of its own. Many complain that its central concept of spirit is underdeveloped, observing that it is often described abstractly (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz 2003; Ashforth and Pratt 2003), if not vaguely, so to not offend anyone committed to a specific and certain idea of it (Sandelands 2012). Indeed, a number of writers insist that spirit be whatever one wants it to be just so that it is not restricted to any religious dogma (Mitroff and Denton 1999; Giacalone and Jurkiewicz 2003). *Spirituality*, they insist, is one thing and *religion* is another. In light of these and other equivocations, more scientifically minded observers question whether the idea of spirit is articulated well-enough to permit its objective measurement and scientific study (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz 2003; Dean and Fornicari 2003).

Nevertheless, what is most important and intriguing about the research on the spirituality of work is that its very existence exposes a metaphysical problem for the research on the psychology of work – namely, that if people are supernatural spirits, then they cannot be described by a natural science of causes and effects. What is “above” nature cannot be explained by what is “of” nature. “Nature,” as C.S. Lewis (2001) astutely observed, “is a word of varying meanings, which can best be understood if we consider its various opposites. The Natural is opposite of the Artificial, the Civil, the Human, the Spiritual, and the Supernatural” (pp. 68–69). “Nature,” he continues,

... seems to be the spatial and temporal, as distinct from what is less fully so or not so at all. She seems to be the world of quantity, as against the world of quality; of objects as against consciousness; of the bound, as against the wholly or partially autonomous; of that which knows no values as against that which both has and perceives value; of efficient causes (or, in some modern systems, of no causality at all) as against final causes. (p. 69)

What if, as Aristotle originally proposed and St. Thomas Aquinas later confirmed, the human person is not only or truly of nature? What if, as these giants of metaphysics maintained, the human person has a finite material body like that of animals that can be described in material terms and located in time and space, but is absolutely set apart from animals by an infinite spirit that is above and beyond nature, a spirit that is literally “supernatural”? Then for want of metaphysical awareness and vocabulary, the scientific psychology of work can say nothing of the human spirit at work. While it can locate the finite human body in coordinates of time and space so to model its causes and effects, it cannot locate the infinite human spirit in either time or space and so cannot model its causes and effects. Between the metaphysical realms of animal and man yawns an abyss that scientific psychology

cannot bridge and the paradox with which we started, that our one life looks to be two.

The Job Characteristics Model

To comprehend the infinite spirit that is our human essence, the study of work must set out anew, with fresh eyes and a revised vocabulary attuned to spiritual being. Most likely such a revised outlook will not come easily, but it might come more easily if it began upon familiar ground. Perhaps the most familiar ground of all is the theory of work called the “Job Characteristics Model” (JCM) outlined by Hackman and Oldham (1980) – about which there have been hundreds of empirical studies (Fried and Ferris 1987; Humphrey et al. 2007) and to which there have been several attempts at modification and enlargement (Griffin 1987; Parker et al. 2001; Morgeson and Campion 2003; Morgeson and Humphrey 2006; Grant 2007; Grant and Parker 2009; Oldham 2012. If we are to unite the study of work with the study of its spirit, we would do well to begin here.

At the heart of the Job Characteristics Model is a notion of how people experience their work consisting of three “critical psychological states”: experienced meaningfulness, experienced responsibility, and knowledge of results. These experiences are said to mediate the effects of objective job characteristics of skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback on personal and organizational outcomes of job satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, absenteeism, and turnover. However, while the JCM is advertized as a scientific theory, as an objective and deterministic theory of work, its inner workings – the three critical psychological states – are anything but objective and deterministic. This indeed was the argument of a well-known critique of the model by Salancik and Pfeffer (1978). For our purpose the key point is that the three critical psychological states are not finite material things of the kind that a natural science of psychology can model as caused effects of finite material job characteristics. To the contrary, they are immaterial ideas – infinite spiritual things without duration or place – that a human person who stands apart from and over their job can discern or read into it. Indeed, to press on these ideas, even just a little, is to enter into profound metaphysical questions such as “What is the meaning of meaning?” and “How can meaning exist?” or “What is it to be responsible?” and “What is the nature of the freedom that responsibility implies?” and, finally, “What can one know about results?” and “What is to say that a given result is ‘good’ or ‘evil’?” These are questions of human spirit, questions that are beyond the science of psychology to answer because they come even before psychology itself.

Thus the Job Characteristics Model whispers what its scientific pretense cannot admit, namely, that work is not material and natural, but is spiritual and even supernatural. While the model’s proponents may overlook or minimize the spiritual and supernatural aspects of work to defend the model’s scientific bona fides, they do so at the expense of the human truth and good of work. When we look into the heart of the model we glimpse its metaphysical assumptions about human essence and

existence. We see that in spite of its clunky scientism, the model manages to ask and to answer basic questions about spirit at work. For one, it asks: “whose work is it?” Its concern for the psychological experience of responsibility is a concern for whether man is the subject or object of work. For another, it asks: “Does work bring man into being as Man?” – as the only being on earth (so far as we know) able to know the truth and act for the good. Its concern for the psychological experience of “meaningfulness” is a concern for whether work is true and good. And for another still, it asks “What is work for?” Here its concern again for the psychological experiences of “responsibility” and “meaningfulness” is also a concern for the reason why people work (what Aristotle would call its “final cause”). These are not scientific questions about man’s finite nature; they are metaphysical questions about man’s infinite spirit.

The Spirit of Work

What is the Connection Between a Man’s Work and His Spirit?

As we have just seen, work is spiritual. Ours is a single human being, one aspect of which is a finite body, another aspect of which is an infinite spirit. These two aspects are sides of a coin, united as an “embodied spirit” and a “spirited body.” Our human spirit thus is not a nicety added to our work, but is its essence. As we have also just seen, the estrangement of spirit from work is a legacy of the scientific naturalism of psychology. While the origin of this estrangement is to trace all the way back to the Enlightenment (and particularly to its overthrow of Aristotelian and Thomist metaphysics) (Feser 2008), its nearer history in thinking about business is to chart in the schism between the finite materialism of Fredrick Taylor’s (1911) “scientific management” movement on the one hand and the infinite spiritualism of Elton Mayo’s (1933) “human relations” countermovement on the other. As philosopher Matthew Stewart (2010) observes, today’s thinking about business replays the old: “According to my scientific sampling you can save yourself from reading about 99 % of all the management literature once you master this dialectic between rationalists and humanists. The Taylorite rationalist says: Be efficient! The Mayoist humanist replies: Hey these are people we’re talking about! And the debate goes on.” It may be well to add that if at this late date we have not escaped this schism, then perhaps our thinking about work and spirit has gotten off on the wrong foot.

It is therefore of considerable interest that a clear statement of the integral relationship between work and spirit exists and that it is to find in the Old Testament of the Bible, the one spiritual text that joins the world’s three great monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Let us heed this statement, if not as a revealed truth of God, then at least as a working hypothesis to try on for size. According to the Book of Genesis, human work is spiritual in the precise and absolute sense that it is a means by which we come into being with God. As related by Pope John Paul II: “Man is made to be in the visible universe an image and likeness of God Himself, and he is placed in it to subdue the earth” (1981, p. 5).

From the beginning he is called to work and by his work to be the image of God. This means that no matter what the work happens to be – no matter its objective contents – the subject of work and its fundamental purpose is man himself. By God’s design, if not always realized by man, work is for man rather than man for work. Thus the true human good of work is to judge by “the measure of dignity of . . . the individual who carries it out.” (1981, p. 17)

Moreover, to see that work and spirit are of a piece – that work is meant for spirit and spirit is meant for work – is to see that they cannot be separated without doing violence to both. Work without spirit is a grim slavery of perspiration without inspiration. It is the alienation in talk of work as “labor,” or of persons as “workers” or “employees,” and not least of people as “factors of production” or as “human resources.” Spirit without work is a cheap and insipid inspiration without perspiration. It is the hollowness in talk of charismatic or “transformational” leadership that is not grounded in the real work of getting things done. Once work and spirit are separated, there is the Humpty-Dumpty problem of putting them back together, something that not even all the king’s horses and all the king’s men can do.

Conclusion

We cannot but be drawn to the idea that work is spiritual by being an image of God. Indeed, it is an idea that we can hardly escape when even our most scientific theories of work – such as the Job Characteristics Model – cannot evade the spirit that unites us with the Divine. It seems then that the study of work must be the study of spirit. Whatever the portentous vocabulary of finite science, the infinite spirit of work will out.

Returning finally to psychology, we are reminded of the wisdom of Aristotle and Aquinas whose metaphysical understanding of human being is more truthful than our scientific understanding of human being today. Ironically, psychology is a word of Greek provenance. Its root – psyche – means spirit, the breath of life. We would do well to understand the study of work today as the study of the spirit and the breath of life.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Being and Doing: How Virtue Shapes work](#)
- ▶ [Spirituality in Organizational Management: Cases and Experience](#)
- ▶ [Virtue and the Case for Meaningful Work](#)
- ▶ [Virtue of “Human Being” in Organizations](#)
- ▶ [Work and Happiness](#)

References

- Ali AJ, Camp RC, Gibbs M (2000) The ten commandments perspective on power and authority in organizations. *J Bus Ethics* 26:351–361
- Ambrose MI, Kulik CT (1999) Old friends, new faces: motivation research in the 1990's. *J Manag* 25:231–292
- Argyris C (1957) *Personality and organization*. Harper & Brothers, New York
- Ashforth BF, Pratt MG (2003) Institutionalized spirituality: an oxymoron? In: Giacalone RA, Jurkiewicz CL (eds) *Handbook of workplace spirituality and organizational performance*. ME Sharpe, Armonk, pp 93–107
- Blauner R (1964) *Alienation and freedom*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Bunderson JS, Thompson JA (2009) The call of the wild: zookeepers, callings, and the dual edges of deeply meaningful work. *Adm Sci Q* 54:32–57
- Cavanaugh GF (1999) Spirituality for managers: context and critique. *J Organ Chang Manag* 12 (3):186–199
- Dean KL, Fornicari CJ (2003) Research in spirituality, religion, and work: walking the line between relevance and legitimacy. *J Organ Chang Manag* 16(4):378–395
- Delbecq A (1999) Christian spirituality and contemporary business leadership. *J Organ Chang Manag* 12(4):345–354
- Dik BJ, Duffy RD (2009) Calling and vocation at work. *Couns Psychol* 27(3):424–450
- Feser E (2008) *The last superstition*. St. Augustine's Press, South Bend
- Fineman S (2003) *Understanding emotion at work*. Sage, London
- Fried Y, Ferris GR (1987) The validity of the job characteristics model: a review and meta-analysis. *Pers Psychol* 40:287–322
- Fried Y, Levi AS, Laurence G (2008) Motivation and job design in the new world of work. In: Cooper C, Cartwright S (eds) *The Oxford handbook of personnel psychology*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp 586–611
- Fry LW (2003) Toward a theory of spiritual leadership. *Leadersh Q* 14:693–727
- Giacalone R, Jurkiewicz CL (2003) Towards a science of workplace spirituality. In: Jurkiewicz CL, Giacalone R (eds) *Handbook of workplace spirituality and organizational performance*. ME Sharpe, Armonk
- Grant A (2007) Relational job design and the motivation to make a prosocial difference. *Acad Manage Rev* 32:393–417
- Grant AM, Parker SK (2009) Redesigning work design theories: the rise of relational and proactive perspectives. *Acad Manag Ann* 3(1):317–375
- Griffin RW (1987) Toward an integrated theory of task design. In: Staw BM (ed) *Research in organizational behavior*, Greenwich, CT: JAI Press vol 9. JAI Press, Greenwich, pp 79–120
- Hackman JR, Lawler EE (1971) Employee reactions to job characteristics. *J Appl Psychol Monogr* 55:259–286
- Hackman JR, Oldham GR (1980) *Work redesign*. Addison-Wesley, Reading
- Humphrey SE, Nahrgang JD, Morgeson FP (2007) Integrating motivational, social, and contextual work design features: a meta-analytic summary and theoretical extension of the work design literature. *J Appl Psychol* 92:1332–1356
- John Paul II (1981) *On human work*. Pauline Books, Boston
- Kahn WA (1992) To be fully there: psychological presence at work. *Hum Relat* 45(4):321–349
- Lewis CS (2001) *The abolition of man*. Harper Collins, San Francisco
- Locke E (1976) The nature and causes of job satisfaction. In: Dunnette M (ed) *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology*. Rand McNally, Chicago
- Macey WH, Schneider B (2008) The meaning of employee engagement. *Ind Organ Psychol* 1:3–30
- Maslow A (1968) *Toward a psychology of being*, 2nd edn. Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York
- Mayo E (1933) *Human problems of industrial civilization*. Macmillan, New York
- McCormick DW (1994) Spirituality and management. *J Manag Psychol* 9(6):5–8

- Mirvis PH (1997) 'Soul work' in organizations. *Organ Sci* 8:193–206
- Mitroff II (2003) Do not promote religion under the guise of spirituality. *Organization* 10 (2):375–382
- Mitroff II, Denton EA (1999) *A spiritual audit of corporate America*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco
- Morgeson FP, Campion MA (2003) Work design. In: Borman W, Klimoski R, Ilgen D (eds) *Handbook of psychology, vol 12, Industrial and organizational psychology*. Wiley, New York, pp 423–452
- Morgeson FP, Humphrey SE (2006) The work design questionnaire (WDQ): developing and validating a comprehensive measure for assessing job design and the nature of work. *J Appl Psychol* 91:1321–1339
- Myers VL (2013) *Conversations about calling: advancing management perspectives*. Routledge, New York
- Oldham G (2012) The design of jobs: a strategy for enhance the positive outcomes of individuals at work. In: Cameron KS, Spreitzer GM (eds) *The Oxford handbook of positive organizational scholarship*. Oxford University, New York, pp 651–663
- Paloutzian RF (1996) *Invitation to the psychology of religion*. Allen & Bacon, Boston
- Paloutzian RF, Emmons RA, Keortge SC (2003) Spiritual well-being, spiritual intelligence, and healthy workplace policy. In: Giacalone RA, Jurkiewicz CL (eds) *Handbook of workplace spirituality and organizational performance*. ME Sharpe, New York, pp 73–92
- Parker SK, Wall TD, Cordery JL (2001) Future work design research and practice: towards an elaborated model of work design. *J Occup Organ Psychol* 74:413–440
- Peck MS (1988) *The road less traveled: a new psychology of love, traditional values and spiritual growth*. Touchstone, New York
- Rosso BR, Dekas KH, Wrzesniewski A (2010) On the meaning of work: a review. In: Staw BM, Brief AP (eds) *Research in organizational behavior*, Greenwich, CT: JAI Press vol 30. JAI Press, Greenwich, pp 91–127
- Rothbard NP, Patil SV (2012) Being there: work engagement and positive organizational scholarship. In: Cameron KS, Spreitzer GM (eds) *The Oxford handbook of positive organizational scholarship*. Oxford University, New York, pp 56–68
- Salancik GR, Pfeffer J (1978) A social information processing approach to job attitudes and task design. *Adm Sci Q* 23:224–253
- Sandelands LE (1988) The concept of work feeling. *J Theory Soc Behav* 18(4):437–457
- Sandelands LE (2009) The business of business is the human person: lessons from the Catholic Social Tradition. *J Bus Ethics* 85:93–101
- Sandelands LE (2012) In God we trust: a comparison of spiritualities at work. In: Cameron KS, Spreitzer GM (eds) *The Oxford handbook of positive organizational scholarship*. Oxford University, New York, pp 1001–1013
- Sandelands LE (2014) *Being at work*. University Press of America, Lanham
- Sandelands LE, Boudens CJ (2000) Feelings at work. In: Fineman S (ed) *Emotions in organizations*. Sage, London
- Sandelands LE, Buckner GC (1989) Of art and work: aesthetic experience and the concept of job satisfaction. In: Staw BM, Cummings LL (eds) *Research in organizational behavior, vol 1*. JAI Press, Greenwich, pp 105–132
- Steingard DS (2005) Spiritually-informed management theory: two profound possibilities for inquiry and transformation. *J Manag Inq* 14(3):227–241
- Stewart M (2010) The management myth. *The Atlantic Online*, June 2006, p 6. <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/print/200606/stewart-business>
- Taylor FW (1911) *Principles of scientific management*. WW Norton, New York
- Trist E, Bamforth W (1951) Some social and psychological consequences of the long wall method of coal-getting. *Hum Relat* 4:3–38

-
- Turner AN, Lawrence PR (1965) *Industrial jobs and the worker*. Harvard Graduate School of Business, Boston
- Whyte WH (1956) *The organization man*. Simon & Schuster, New York
- Wilber K (1985) *No boundary: eastern and western approaches to personal growth*. Shambhala, Boston
- Wrzesniewski A (2012) Callings. In: Cameron KS, Spreitzer GM (eds) *The Oxford handbook of positive organizational scholarship*. Oxford University, New York, pp 45–55
- Zaman A (2008) *Islamic economics: a survey of the literature*. University of Birmingham, Religions, and Development Research Programme, working paper no. 22. Available at SSRN <http://ssrn.com/abstract=128786>