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**THE WORKMANSHIP IDEAL  
A Theologico-Political Chimera?**

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**I**AN SHAPIRO, IN HIS ARTICLE “Resources, Capacities, and Ownership,” shows that the workmanship ideal (the notion that work creates property rights) is at the center of both liberal and Marxian theories of distributive justice; moreover, he tries to account for the paradox of “our collective inability to let go of the ideal, despite major conceptual difficulties.”<sup>1</sup> He “deconstructs” the foundations of the workmanship ideal by arguing that “it rests partly on causal and moral fictions”; at the same time, however, “in a constructive spirit” he argues on consequentialist grounds that “the workmanship ideal can defensibly be part of our thinking about distributive justice.”<sup>2</sup>

I propose to extend and to deepen Shapiro’s “deconstructionist” reflections by further undermining the logical and theological foundations of the “workmanship ideal”; and, where Shapiro offers a “limited and conditional” defense, I propose to attack this ideal on consequentialist grounds by showing that it distorts economic justice both in theory and practice. Shapiro’s article and my response therefore raise the important issue of the relation between the foundations and consequences of norms of justice: does the workmanship ideal have desirable consequences despite its dubious foundations?

I will show, first, that Locke’s attempt to ground logically his ideal in Christian theology fails because it is neither sufficiently logical nor sufficiently Christian. Second, I will show that because the workmanship ideal defines productive activity as a function of an individual’s relation to nature rather than as a function of social relations, because it falsely defines the goal

of work to be the generation of a thing rather than the meeting of a human need, this ideal wrongly links labor to the production of things rather than to service to society. Moreover, while the workmanship ideal may provide criteria for adjudicating claims to the extrinsic product of work, this ideal provides no criteria for evaluating the intrinsic process of work itself; this one-sidedness leads both liberalism and Marxism to overemphasize distributive justice and to neglect justice in production. As is evident in Shapiro's title, "Resources, Capacities, and Ownership," both liberal and Marxian political economy focus all attention to the ownership of capital rather than to the use of capital in production. In the endless debates about distributive justice, the question of whether the worker is truly the subject of his work or merely a means of production is conveniently ignored.<sup>3</sup>

Shapiro follows Tully's argument that Locke's "workmanship model" derives from the Christian theology of creation and, if we accept these Christian premises, that this account is logically tenable: "Locke's theory of property was elegant, coherent, and — if one accepts the premises to which he was committed — compelling."<sup>4</sup> And Shapiro notes that these premises are theological: "The attractiveness and coherence of Locke's view depended on theological assumptions that have long been jettisoned in the dominant intellectual traditions of the West."<sup>5</sup> Locke argues from the premise that God owns the universe because He made it to the conclusion that a human craftsman owns whatever he makes: God's relation to man is that of a Maker to His workmanship.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, Locke's description of creation in the *Second Treatise* is more Platonic than Christian; moreover, it embodies the same logical fallacy as Plato's analogy between human workmanship (*techne*) and divine craftsmanship.

Plato's divine craftsman (*demiurgos*), when making the universe, looks to the eternally given forms and incorporates them into the eternally pre-given matter. As M. B. Foster describes the Demiurge: "His activity is that of realizing the forms by embodying them in matter, but neither the forms, nor the matter in which they are embodied, are the product of his activity."<sup>7</sup> Like Locke, Plato grounds his doctrine of human workmanship, and especially the highest and royal craft of politics, on his doctrine of divine workmanship. The craftsman, like the Guardians (whom Plato calls the "best possible craftsmen"), informs the pre-given matter with the eternal ideas. Plato insists that all workmanship is informative and has value precisely insofar as it is not creative.<sup>8</sup> The Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is radically opposed to any notion of workmanship. Again, Foster describes the Christian Creator: "Creative activity is free not from one only, but from both of the limitations to which the activity of the Demiurge is subject. It is neither limited by a

given matter, nor determined by a given form.”<sup>9</sup> St. Augustine, the father of both Catholic and Protestant Christianity, emphasized the profound contrast between creation and production:

But by what means did you make heaven and earth? What tool did you use for this vast work? You did not work as a human craftsman does, making one thing out of something else as his mind directs. . . . Nor did you have in your hand any matter from which you could make heaven and earth, for where could you have obtained matter which you had not yet created, in order to use it as material for making something else? . . . It must therefore be that you spoke and they were made. In your Word alone you created them.<sup>10</sup>

I am not suggesting that Locke accepted Plato’s account in the *Timeaus* of the construction of the cosmos from eternal matter; I am only arguing that Locke’s analogy between divine creation and human workmanship resembles Platonic theology more than it does Augustinian Christian theology. The description of God as “Maker” is a commonplace of Christian piety, but Christian theology since Augustine has distinguished creation from production. Locke is not able to ground his workmanship ideal in Christian theology but only in a quasi-Platonic popular Christian piety.<sup>11</sup> The description of creation as divine workmanship is adequate for the purposes of poetry and liturgy but is quite inadequate for the purpose of grounding theologico-political argumentation.

The closest human analogy to God’s creation is, of course, procreation: parents do not merely inform matter, like the workman, but create a new and unique being; this is why God is called Father. The next closest analogy to God’s creation is art as opposed to craft: whereas the craftsman knows in advance what he hopes to achieve, it is the essence of fine art that the artist does not execute according to a preconceived plan.<sup>12</sup> Fine art, like God’s creation, is the product of a mysterious dialectic of form and matter, not the imposition of form on matter. This is why artists ever since Michelangelo have compared their activity to God’s.

Locke’s analogy between God’s creation and human production thus confuses several distinct kinds of causal relations, a confusion shared by Tully and Shapiro. This confusion is surprising because Locke himself distinguishes four kinds of causation in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: namely, creation, generation, making, and alteration.<sup>13</sup> If we were to bring Locke’s theory of right in line with his theory of causation, we would see that each of these causal relations entails a different set of rights and duties: God’s creation entails a covenant with his people; parenting entails both the moral covenant and the legal contract of family; making entails dominion of various kinds over material objects, and so on. Unfortu-

nately, all of these different relations are collapsed in the *Second Treatise* to the view that workmanship creates property rights because men are “the Workmanship of one Omnipotent, and infinitely wise Maker . . . They are his Property.”<sup>14</sup> Although popular piety describes creation as the property of God, biblical theology describes God’s relation to creation as covenantal; a workman has dominion over his property but God has a covenant with creation.

Locke’s theology simply reflects his workmanship ideal, just as Plato’s theology simply reflects his view of *techné*. In short, Locke’s analogy between divine creation and human workmanship, far from being “coherent” and “compelling,” as Shapiro says, is a simple logical fallacy: Locke is able to “ground” his workmanship ideal in theology only because he has already grounded his theology in the workmanship ideal. Locke’s argument assumes what it is supposed to prove: a simple *petitio principii*.<sup>15</sup>

Having “deconstructed” its theological and logical foundations, I will now attack the workmanship ideal on consequentialist grounds. This ideal of workmanship or fabrication represents a profound distortion of concrete social and economic activity for two reasons: first, because work (that is, fabrication) is but one species of labor (that is, social service), and second, because workmanship takes as its end (the production of an artifact) what is actually only a means to meeting a human need. To discern the shortcomings of the “workmanship ideal” we must first discuss Locke’s own distinction between work and labor: “The labour of his body, and the work of his hands.” Although both Locke and most of his commentators conflate this distinction in their articulation of the “workmanship ideal,” I will suggest that we can grasp the specific difference of work only in light of the genus of labor.<sup>16</sup> Labor refers to any exertion in service to socially defined needs, from childbirth to watchmaking, from homemaking to lawyering, from prayer to manual toil. Workmanship is the special case of labor whereby a social need is met through the fabrication of an artifact. The workmanship ideal has wreaked havoc with economic theory because it confuses a special case of economic activity (the production of a physical object) for the whole. As Arendt rightly notes, workmanship is the basis for Adam Smith’s distinction between productive labor that “issues in a vendible commodity” and unproductive labor that “perishes in the very instant of its performance.”<sup>17</sup> From this dubious distinction came two centuries of economic doctrine maintaining, first, that only physical commodities have value (thus excluding all services), and second, when this became untenable, that only market activities have value (thus excluding homemaking).<sup>18</sup>

Thus the workmanship ideal, because of its inherent logical fallacy of *pars pro toto*, has led to a fundamental perversion of economic theory and practice: the production of vendible artifacts has an unduly hegemonic role in social and economic valuation to the point where many people argue that the provision of services does not constitute wealth. Moreover, since workmanship consists in a relation between the craftsman and his artifact, whereas the labor of services consists in a relation between individuals, the workmanship ideal champions things over persons: "Fabrication, the work of *homo faber*, consists in reification."<sup>19</sup> The reification of social relations that Marx attributed to capitalism is actually embodied in the workmanship ideal shared by liberals and Marxists alike.

The reification characteristic of workmanship also stems from the second shortcoming of this ideal: the confusion of the means for the ends of labor. In the workmanship ideal, the end of activity is the completion of an object; everything else is subordinated to this end: "The fabricated thing is an end product in the twofold sense that the production process comes to an end in it ('the process disappears in the product,' as Marx said) and that it is only a means to produce this end."<sup>20</sup> But in the reality of social life, the artifact is only a means to the true end of workmanship—namely, the meeting of socially defined human needs. The false teleology of workmanship suffers from what is called the displacement of goals: like the bureaucrat who takes the rules to be the end of his labor, the workman takes the artifact to be his end—yet in both cases, the true end is social service. Obviously, for those involved in the production of useless or destructive products, the workmanship ideal conveniently focuses attention on the product rather than on the human need allegedly served.<sup>21</sup> To define labor in terms of social service rather than as workmanship might well reduce esteem for some activities and raise esteem for others; in particular, traditionally male forms of labor are defined as workmanship, whereas traditionally female forms of labor are defined as social service. This fact no doubt contributes to the "powerful hold" of the workmanship ideal on the "Western political imagination" (p. 48).

Although this displacement of goals is regarded as a pathology in bureaucracy, in the case of workmanship it becomes a rational ideal. As we have seen, the false teleology of workmanship reifies social relations in two ways: first, the social relations of the productive process are reduced to mere instruments of physical productivity—the worker becomes a mere means of production; second, the social relations defining the needs to be met are reified as the product. This two-fold reification in turn perverts social justice in two ways: first, the product fetish leads to an exclusive concern for

distributive justice and to the neglect of justice in production; ever since Locke, liberals and Marxists alike debate the *ownership* of the product and capital (distributive justice) but never the *use* of capital in the processes of production (productive justice). In short, once we see that the true end of labor is to meet human needs, it becomes evident that one of these needs is for meaningful labor characterized by responsible autonomy and social solidarity. Second, the product fetish obscures the role of nonproductive ways to meet human needs, such as hobbies, art, and prayer; if the goal of labor is human happiness, then leisure could well create more wealth than productive work.

Because the workmanship ideal abstracts work from the concrete social system of needs, it is to be expected that this ideal should similarly abstract property rights from the concrete system of social cooperation. The notion that the worker owns what he makes is plausible only in the case where there is no nonmarket cooperation in production; where there is such cooperation, as within a family and within a firm, the product is not assignable to a specifiable person. Shapiro notes this shortcoming in the case of the family but not in the case of the firm; several economists, however, have conceded that a firm cannot measure individual contributions to the joint product.<sup>22</sup> The workmanship ideal, then, creates property rights only where there can be no property and no right, namely, on the island of Robinson Crusoe—which is why Crusoe has always been the exemplar of the workmanship ideal in economic theory.

Since we saw that Locke's quasi-Platonic theology of creation led to a false view of production, we should ask whether biblical theology may provide a more adequate basis for a true view of production. Locke's view of God's role in creation mirrors Locke's view of the worker: a solitary individual who informs matter and thereby claims dominion. God, like the workman, has a subject-object relation to his creation, which is why Locke says that we are God's property. In biblical theology, by contrast, God has a subject-subject (or "I-Thou") covenantal relation to his creation, which is why the Bible says that we are children of God and the Church is the Bride of Christ. This profound contrast between creation as possessive dominion and creation as covenant leads to the contrast between labor as dominion over things and labor as service to other persons, between labor as appropriating and labor as giving. In the end, all of these contrasts hinge on the question of whether labor is embedded in the social context of language or is not. Locke's God is a craftsman who is mute as he informs matter; the biblical God is a father and husband who creates by speaking of love: "In your Word alone you created them."

## NOTES

1. Ian Shapiro, "Resources, Capacities, and Ownership," *Political Theory* 19 (1991): 47-72, at 47.
2. *Ibid.*, 48.
3. Despite radically different patterns of property ownership and distributive justice in liberal and the former Marxian nations, the use of capital and technology in the process of production embodies Taylorist principles in both capitalist and communist economies. Speaking of the "materialistic economies" of both East and West, Pope John Paul II says, "Man is treated as an instrument of production, whereas he — he alone, independent of the work he does — ought to be treated as the effective subject of work and its true maker and creator. Precisely this reversal of order, whatever the program or name under which it occurs, should rightly be called 'capitalism.'" For the text of John Paul's encyclical *Laborem exercens* and a commentary, see Gregory Baum, *The Priority of Labor* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 107.
4. Shapiro, "Resources, Capacities, and Ownership," 49.
5. *Ibid.*, 48.
6. As Tully says, "Two conditions must be met if Locke is to employ the workmanship model in the way he suggests in the *Essay*. First, the archetype idea of our maker should be a normal description in common use; thus constitutive of the maker relation in seventeenth-century society. Second, there must be a God such that 'maker' is truly predicated of Him." Tully, *A Discourse on Property* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 35.
7. M. B. Foster, *The Political Philosophies of Plato and Hegel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1935), 181. For Plato's doctrine of the Demiurge, see *Timeaus* 28A and 29A; *Republic* 530A.
8. On techné as informative and not creative, see *Republic* 596B.
9. Foster, *Political Philosophies*, 181.
10. Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk. 11, chap. 5.
11. A good deal of popular Christian piety derives not from biblical theology but from Platonism: for example, the Platonic doctrine of the immortality of the soul apart from the body is a part of popular Christian piety; biblical theology, by contrast, teaches the resurrection of the body. This is why Nietzsche called Christianity "Platonism for the masses."
12. Thus Picasso famously advises the artist: if you know in advance what you want to achieve, do something else.
13. See Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, bk. 2, 26.
14. Locke, *Second Treatise*, chap. 2.
15. The Christian theology of creation ex nihilo, however, is not a simple projection of human ideals, since no human activity is truly analogous to creation — although some activities come closer than others.
16. Hannah Arendt, however, devotes two chapters of her book *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) to Locke's distinction between labor and work. She sees them as different kinds of activity, whereas I see work as a species of labor.
17. Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, bk. 2, 3.
18. Shapiro admits that the neglect of homemaking and of other values is a consequence of the workmanship ideal. See "Resources, Capacities, and Ownership," 57-58.
19. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 139.
20. *Ibid.*, 143.
21. It is precisely this aspect of the workmanship ideal that enabled individual Germans to focus conscientiously on the means rather than the ends of the Final Solution.



22. According to Armen Alchian and Harold Demsetz, "there is a source of gain from cooperative activity involving working as a team, wherein individual cooperating inputs do not yield identifiable, separate products which can be summed to measure the total output." See "Production, Information Costs, and Economic Organization," in *The Economic Nature of the Firm*, edited by Louis Putterman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 114.

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