

Transforming Calling into Vocation and Vocation into Calling:
Austin Farrer's Double Agency Model

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Abstract

Austin Farrer's model of double agency explains how God acts in the world through the actions of creatures. According to Farrer, double agency describes a God who is all that God sees it best to be, both a God who can care for God's creatures and at the same time allow the creatures total freedom. Persons acting as double agents align their own wills with God's will in order that they can be both fully persons and fully agents of God. This paper applies the double agency concept in the economic sphere to describe how normal work activities (vocation) can be transformed through double agency into acts of love expressed by God for God's creatures (calling).

1. Introduction

In his analysis of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus quickly surmises the difficulty for the philosopher of work. Because of his disobedience to the gods, Sisyphus is given an eternal punishment. He is to push a massive boulder up a hill. When Sisyphus reaches the top of the hill, he must release the boulder, which immediately rolls back to the bottom of the hill. Then Sisyphus must walk slowly back down the hill, put his shoulder against the rock and begin the slow arduous walk back up the hill again. Up the hill with the rock, then back to the bottom again for all of eternity. Camus's analysis of the myth is both surprising and unconventional. He believes that while pushing the rock uphill, Sisyphus becomes one with his work, his total concentration being needed to accomplish the difficult task. According to Camus, while he is pushing, he is happy. Only in the walk back down the hill, forced to contemplate the hopelessness of his eternal work, is Sisyphus unhappy (Camus, 1955).

Camus' view of work differs from the rule of St. Benedict: *Laborare est orare* (To work is to pray.) A medieval Christian attitude toward work had none of the ambivalence toward the meaning of work expressed by Camus. The work of the Benedictine monks was one of the ways they came to know God. And to know God was the ultimate aim of mankind. As Luther put it, the work of the milk maid is as important to Providence as is the work of a monk.

The Benedictine rule provides the structure and specialization on which modern corporations are built. But modern economic thinking has managed to separate prayer from work and work from spirituality. There is some irony in the fact that while our modern approach to corporate business life originated in the rigid schedules and regimented work routines of the monasteries, their simple understanding of the meaning of work has been lost to most of us.

Work has religious significance. God works us through God's grace to make us complete. It is not our work that perfects us, but God's work through us that makes us acceptable to be with God forever. Work is not merely a means of providing for our physical necessities, but work is also the means by which we cooperate with God's grace to sanctify ourselves and incorporate ourselves into the mystical body of Christ. Our paid work, our work as students and scholars, our work as parents and children, and even our "work" at play are all gifts of loving God and serving others that allow us to be perfected in Christ.

Work and "good works" have been separated in the modern world. Work, especially work done for profit, and most especially work done for business, is viewed as completely separate from the good works we do, for example as volunteers or in some cases as service workers. Physicians and teachers are viewed as performing good works as part of their secular work, while lawyers and accountants are generally not so viewed. Both kinds of works are vital, and both can be transformed into the work of God in the world. It is the attitude of love with which the work is done that allows it to become the work of God, not the type of work that is being done.

The distinction between good works and ordinary work cannot be made so clear as the distinction between profit and non-profit, or service or manufacturing. What makes work into good works is not the nature of the work itself, but the sense of calling which goes into the work.

2. Allowing God to Work through Our Work

The neo-Thomist model of double agency was developed by Aquinas and elaborated on by Austin Farrer. Double agency is the method by which God turns our work into good. Double agency is defined as action that occurs when we freely submit ourselves to the will of God. God works through us to accomplish God's work in the world, but never by taking away our freedom to refuse to do the work we are called to do. God communicates the work we are called to do through the revelation, both in the scriptures and in nature, and by our ongoing contemplative consideration of our calling and the relationship between our calling and the work of God in the world.

What allows our work to be transformed into the work of God in the world, then, is an open mind which listens to the call of God to sacrifice our own desires and to care for the needs of our fellow humans. Our vocation must always be held up to the Christ's summary of the law: We are to love God with all our heart and our neighbors as ourselves. If our work is only for us, and not for our neighbors and for the glory of God, our work may not transform us, but may merely sustain us.

In the following section, I offer the example of Austin Farrer as a person who throughout his life exemplified the kind of career that integrated work and faith.

3. Integrating Meaning in Work: The Life of Austin Farrer

Austin Farrer was born in 1904. His parents were Baptists, and his father was an Old Testament Professor. His parents recognized his genius at a young age, and moved him to London so that he could study at St. Paul's School. His parents regretted that decision for a time when exposure to the Anglican tradition led young Farrer to leave the Baptist church for the Church of England. From St. Paul's he went on to Oxford, where he was baptized as an Anglican. Upon his graduation from Oxford, he attended Cuddesdon Theological Seminary. Upon completion of seminary, he was ordained a Priest in the Church of England, and served for one year in a parish church in London.

He served the remainder of his career was at Oxford University. He served as Chaplain at Trinity College for 25 years and then as Warden at Keeble College from 1960 until his death in 1968. While he worked as a chaplain, he was not an ordinary chaplain. He was a chaplain to philosophers as well as students. His calling, simply stated was to answer the challenge of heterodoxy, agnosticism, and sentimental atheism that was prevalent at Oxford. Once a week for over thirty years, he preached a brief sermon to all the students at his college (which they were required to attend) in which he made the same point consistently, but in many varied ways. The point was simple and yet profound: Modern philosophical and scientific findings can be fully reconciled with orthodox Christian belief. In an atmosphere where traditional Christianity was often dismissed as mere superstition, Farrer met the philosophers on their own ground, and answered their arguments in a consistent, clear, and intelligent manner.

For example, in his sermons to undergraduates and in his book *Faith and Speculation*, Farrer addressed the commonly held belief that Christianity is incompatible with philosophy. His answer to the philosophical challenge to Christianity was to develop an extensive philosophical theory based upon the premise that we can develop a belief in God that is consistent with philosophical demands appropriate to the task. Instead of answering to calls of the logical positive for empirical proof of God, he provided metaphysical evidence for the metaphysical existence of God.

Despite the tendencies of both local and continental philosophers to develop a theology that was abstract and impersonal, Farrer insists that the form of belief must be personal.

God is not, indeed, out there in space beside us like one of our neighbors; he is at the causal root of our being, and of every being; and it is through our root ... that we receive his grace. But his otherness for us lies in this, that his life is personal to him, it is not ours that he has a will after which we inquire, a forgiveness we implore, a succour we seek; that the personal character of our relation with him is the very form of it, not a metaphorical trapping which can be thought away while any substance remains. *Faith and Speculation*

Farrer also addressed the question of theodicy: the existence of evil in a world created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and loving God. According to Farrer, evil exists as a result of God's attempts to bring creatures out of a physical world in which they have freedom into a perfect afterlife.

The divine goodness desires the existence of creatures that shall be excellent. Not, however, that shall be of the highest excellence; for the highest belongs to the divine nature alone. God fulfills in himself all that is possible on the supreme level. To realize the divinest good, he has not to create, but to live. But there are lower levels of excellence possible, and it is better that they should be filled, than lie empty. ... It is better that a physical universe, with its inevitable flaws, should be than not be ... *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, p. 65-66.

Both of these examples are illustrative of Farrer's attempts to use his job as a chaplain, priest, and philosopher to follow God's commandments to care for his students and other

scholars looking for a way to believe. In caring for his students, he also made himself better. Farrer willingly submitted his ability as a philosopher to the demands of his calling as a chaplain. He exemplified the use of double agency.

3.1 The Solution of Double Agency

Double agency is the term used to describe Farrer's theory of how God interacts with the world in order that the world might be completed and incorporated into God. Farrer describes double agency as God acting in our free obedience. By freely submitting our free will to God's will, sacrificing our wishes for the commandments of God, we are able to be the hands of God in the world. Our work, done in submission to God, is God's work.

3.2 What is our work in the world?

If we are to submit ourselves fully to do the work of God, we must first understand what it is that God has in mind for the world. In other words, what is meant by God's providence, his loving-kindness for us? Farrer first makes it clear what providence is not.

But theologians talk seriously of providence. What do they mean? Do they mean that by the help of good angels, most accidents turn out fortunately? That if we are easy-going and careless, we shall secure advantages which care and foresight would frustrate? ... Do they mean that God somehow takes care of those marginal difficulties which cannot be controlled or met by a little man handing out insurance checks? That neither sin, unhappiness, war, sickness, nor death will be allowed to embarrass us? We sin every day, and bitterly regret it. Many people are terribly unhappy, some are incurably ill, all suffer at last the supreme object of natural terror, physical death.
Saving Faith. p. 26.

Farrer makes it clear that Providence does not mean that God will be a cosmic cleaning lady, cleaning up the mess we make of our lives without any effort on our part. As Farrer puts it, It is not silly, childish, or superstitious that God attends to your prayer or your conduct like a parent watching an infant when the parent has nothing else to do. It is merely to credit God with being God. What is silly, childish, and superstitious is to imagine that, in giving you the undivided attention of his heart, your creator will forget his other creatures; that he will be ready to disregard their interests, or the very laws of their being, while he arranges little providences for you, all leading to lollipops." *Saving Belief*, p. 33.

Instead, we trust that God will do the best for those whom God has made. God will not provide for our physical needs like a vending machine with an unlimited supply of quarters so that you can get all you want just by pushing a button. But God will provide for us by doing what is necessary to bring us into his presence for eternity. The meaning of providence is not then that God gives us everything we want, but that by following the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves, that God will use us to care for our neighbors and our neighbors to care

for us. By obeying, we manage to care for the whole world, bringing everyone into the love of God. Ultimately, we will become one with God by our obedience.

First, heaven must be genuinely made out of earth, without forcing the natures of the earthly constituents... Second, salvation must effectively embrace all rational persons who are willing to have it in the shape in which God offers it... But what this process is designed to effect is not the general salvation of mankind. It is the completion of Christ's Incarnation. Christ is made whole in head and members; this is the Israel of God, the core and substance of heavenly being, a reality sufficient to act as the touchstone of judgement for all the souls of men, assimilating to itself and embodying in its own life those who are found able to respond – and none will be found unable but by their own fault.

Reconciling the concept of divine agency with the reality of the corporate environment is not easy. A typical business student might respond to the above quote something like the following: “All this sounds well and good, but I want a real job. I can't spend all my life doing good. I must also do well. I have to earn a living. What about maximizing my wealth? What about earning a promotion? What about working overtime to impress my boss? How will I ever get a nice car or a big house or a new boat if I spend all my time loving my neighbor instead of making lots of money?”

A tentative answer to this question requires us to attempt to reintegrate our vocation and our calling. Our lives are not segmented into profit work and volunteer work, good works for God and real work for ourselves. Work is just work. And all our work, whether paid or unpaid, secular or sacred, has one ultimate purpose: to make us into new creations wholly acceptable unto God. God uses our work, all of our work, to make us what God wants us to be. Our work makes us fit for heaven, and the more we align our work to God's will, the more our work allows us to become more perfect. Each of us, in every job we do, is a co-creator with God of the whole universe. And in co-creating, we also meet our own needs. There is no conflict between doing what God wants us to do and doing what is best for ourselves. God wants us to live the life that is best for us, but only by following the commandments can we attain that life. We must choose our calling carefully, listening to God for inspiration. Whatever job we do, we must do it well. Whatever our economic interaction with other people, we must attempt to act in a way that demonstrates God's love for the employee or customer or manager.

In Rabbi Marc Gellman's book, *Does God Have a Big Toe?*, the story *Partners* illustrates the role of human work as part of the creative process of God.

... God made a man and a woman from some of the dust and said to them, “I am tired now... Please finish the world for me...really it's almost done.” But the man and the woman said, “We can't finish the world. You have the plans and we are too little.”

“You are big enough,” God answered them. “But I agree to this. If you keep trying to finish the world, I will be your partner.”

....

The angels asked God, “Is the world finished yet?” and God answered, “I don't know. Go ask my partners.”

Partners illustrates the concept of double agency at a level even a child can understand. Our work is to do God's work. God's work is done primarily through God's creatures. God does not force the creatures to do God's work, but encourages them softly, in such a way that they are often unaware that what they are doing is even part of God's plan.

3.3 *Knowing God's Will for our Work*

How do we know God's plan? Farrer responds that "a man brought into the union with divine life which beats in the pulses of Christ, hopes to be inspired; he hopes that the Creator's will may come through into his, and form it." (*Saving Belief*, p. 101). We come to know God's will through prayer and listening. But Farrer recognizes that rarely is inspiration direct.

Inspiration is, to Christians, a matter of faith. In the degree and manner in which they commonly receive it, it is not anything that could be publicly proved; and it is difficult to conceive what tests could be devised that would provide the evidence. God convinces, somewhat as our friends convince us, not by evidence but by quality. The profound seriousness by which Christians in fact take their inspiration is seen in their acknowledgement of the Holy Ghost as a Person of the Godhead." *Saving Belief*, p. 102.

"If we wish to define what happens, we must say that the action of God's will lives in the action of ours, so that we say, 'The more it is God, the more it is I, and the more it is I, the more it is God.'" *ibid*, p. 103.

Thus Farrer thinks that we learn God's will by thinking our own thoughts, and the more pure those thoughts become the more they are God's thoughts, and the more they are God's thoughts, the more they are the right thoughts for us. Farrer does not believe that God's will is always crystal clear, but that we can feel God's approval if what we are doing in our work is a pure act of love.

Farrer held that the clearest model that illustrates how we can align our will with God to do God's work in the world is the model of Christ himself. In Farrer's paraphrase of Jesus, he states, "The sovereign work of the divine majesty is already in action. There is something better than keeping the rules: join the work, march with the coming kingdom.' And so he told the rich young ruler to sell up and become an apostle" (*The End of Man*, p. 176). And of course, Jesus followed his own advice. Jesus is the supreme example of the God accomplishing providence through the work of a very special type of double agent: Christ himself. Jesus could have chosen to refuse to do the work that God had given him to do. He even asked to be relieved of the burden. But he was willing to pay ultimate sacrifice. He let God work through him to provide a way for all humans to see the way to God.

4. **The Problem of Work in the Modern World**

The problem with work in the modern world is that technology and business practice has systematically, if not intentionally, managed to remove our sense of meaning from our work. Our work becomes seen as a merely economic exercise, completely cut off from any spiritual meaning. We depend on direct religious experience as our only source of spiritual experience,

and we fail to recognize that religious experience is intended to “prepare us for the work we are to do,” not serve as a replacement for that work.

In *The Severed Wasp*, Madeleine L’Engle uses the analogy of a wasp which has had its abdomen severed from its body to describe the relationship between work and the soul. The wasp is unaware that it has been severed in two until it attempts to fly. Similarly, our inability to connect our every day working lives with our religious experience means that we cannot sense the spirituality of work. Economists tell us the meaning of work is to maximize owner’s wealth. Management scholars tell us that we work in order to meet our hierarchy of needs. Marketers tell us we work in order to fill the desires of our customers. While all of these points of view are partially correct, none of them provide us with a connection between our work and our finitude. To find that connection, we must turn to a spiritual view of work.

4.1 Technology and the dehumanization of work

Technology has made our physical labor much easier and contributed greatly to our productivity. Technology has allowed us (at least thus far) to avoid the Malthusian conclusion that geometric population growth will outstrip the linear growth of food production. Today industrial computer technology gives us instant access to information, improving communication, and freeing people to discover information which might have been forbidden to them in earlier generations, such as democracy movements in China. But Karl Marx also pointed out that industrialization results in alienation of the worker from the worker’s social support network, and of the producer from the product. The worker thus alienated, particularly in cultures characterized by political repression, is cut off also from the means of freeing himself to become fully human, becoming a wage slave, unable to improve his condition through frugality, political action, or labor union activity. Thus technology which is intended to free people from the burden of their labors can instead be used to enslave them.

While this scenario sounds like something from Charles Dickens, the growth of telecommuting, far from being the freeing enterprise that it is intended to be, can become a new form of white collar sweat shops, with investments in computer equipment being repaid only by long hours of mind-numbing data entry tasks paid per entry at little more than minimum wage. Damage to the labor movement and the shift to a service economy that is difficult to organize will result in this problem getting worse.

4.2 Motivation and Materialism

While the lot of workers is only slightly improved since the days of debtor prisons, the lot of those of us privileged enough to have “good” jobs with higher wages seems to be getting better and better, so much better than we seem to have become addicted to stuff. Home improvement magazines promote not just a better refrigerator, but multiple better refrigerators, even including tiny refrigerators for the bedroom. Our economy is built on the need for ever-increasing levels of consumption, which can hardly be sustained as the wealthy bourgeois extends from Northern Europe and the United States to the rest of the world.

As Gilkey (1975) points out, the growth of the leisure class also results in alienation of a different type, where work means nothing because it seems no longer necessary. The accumulation of wealth causes work to lose its economic necessity. Without hunger to encourage the wealthy to work, what is left? Bereft of the meaning of work, they turn to other forms of entertainment, including the abuse of sex, drugs, and alcohol. To the wealthy that have

no connection between their work and their spirit, life can be as desperately meaningless as it is to the poor and oppressed, although the rich do get to drive fancier cars.

5. The Problem of Evil in Our Work

From Enron to WorldCom, the business press constantly reminds us that business models are easily corrupted. Even if we are able to perfectly understand the will of God for our lives, our attempts to accomplish God's work are frustrated by the presence of evil in the world. Evil is real, but in *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, (p. 21) Farrer states the evil is not caused by some fallen angel, but by the very existence of our freedom. Farrer gives as an example of the presence of evil the housing conditions in the industrial sections of London. "Many physical evils have followed from the careless housing of multitudes in large cities. It may be hard to say how far mere ignorance of hygiene was to blame, and how far a callous selfseeking on the part of the great employers of labour. If the second factor was a cause, then sin was a cause; and not so much the particular wickedness of individuals, as an attitude towards private gain which had become second nature; and this is 'original sin'" (*Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, p. 155-6). Here Farrer reveals his recognition of the fundamental error of modern economics: the belief that selfishness alone is enough to provide for the economic needs of the world.

In his remembrance of his good friend Hugh Lister, priest and soldier, Farrer also reveals his concern for the poor, and his disbelief of the ability of economics alone to meet their needs. Lister, a moderately wealthy man who graduated from Cambridge and worked as a railroad engineer, was assigned to work at the steel works. "he was simply amazed by two things: the warm humanity of the ordinary workers, and their entire estrangement from the Gospel. Obviously there was only one thing a man with his undeserved advantages could do. He must devote his life to breaking the barrier between these men and their Redeemer." Lister went to seminary, and upon his graduation, he became a priest at the toughest parish in the East End of London. There he contracted tuberculosis. Upon recovering, he went back to the East End, where he "bought an awful old house, lived in great squalor in two rooms of it, and turned the rest of it into a Trade Union headquarters. Lister organized workers. And after the trade union meeting, Lister would offer a Bible class. Lister devoted his life to the will of God, fighting evil in the factories and tenements of East London, and ultimately dying in the invasion of Normandy during World War II.

Farrer, whose espousal of freedom of persons is amongst his highest theological points, obviously is no economic libertarian. His views seem not dissimilar with those of the social gospel movement in the United States, and of the liberation theologians of Latin America. The work of God through the work of creatures is not merely then to work on souls, but to feed hungry mouths and work to alleviate unacceptable social conditions as well. Farrer believed that the work of God through the work of creatures requires the creatures to fight against the oppression of workers.

What are the sources of evil that corrupt our work? In addition to Farrer's mention of selfishness, we can add the evils of indifference, greed, and ambition. These evils can be understood in two ways, first as general evils which corrupt the economic system itself, and second as particular evils which interfere with our ability to live within the will of God. As general evils, they are present and their effects must be fought against through social action, but with the realization that any economic system will suffer from these evils. As particular evils that reside in us, they must be eliminated through prayer and sacrifice.

Because our work is corrupted by evil, we must constantly be on guard against imperfections of our economic system. For example, poverty, oppression, and materialism have been present in varying degrees in every economic system in history. As Farrer's example of the life of Hugh Lister illustrates, we must work to liberate people from these problems not because of the innate problems themselves, but because of the effect these problems have on the ability of the individuals to find communion with God. The purpose of liberation is not merely to replace one form of oppression with another. True Liberation must be liberation to God, not merely liberation from evil economic forces.

5.1 The Challenge of Economic Libertarianism

Some libertarian scholars will dismiss the arguments of ethical responsibility of business in the world. For example, Michael Novak (1981) claims the economics of democratic capitalism has solved the problem of poverty. Poverty can be eliminated, according to Novak, simply by encouraging the expansion of democratic capitalism in every corner of the world. Novak claims that there can be no more a Christian theory of economics than there can be a Christian theory of bridge engineering.

Farrer does not address this problem directly, since the economics of his day was much closer to the social engineering of John Maynard Keynes than to the libertarianism of Michael Novak. But Farrer made it clear that money is a good servant, but a poor master (*The End of Man*, p. 81). Eaton (1991) finds Farrer's double agency model to be supportive of liberation theology. To argue that because most people are better off under democratic capitalism in no way relieves us of our need to work to eliminate oppression and poverty among those who are cast aside by economic policy. To argue that economic policy should be of no more ethical concern than bridge engineering begs the question, for what purpose is the bridge being built? Bridges can carry butter and bridges can carry guns. Just as an engineer should know for what purpose a project is to be used, so too must the business person seeking to do the will of God person know the outcome of the work they are doing.

5.2 The Contribution of Work

Work does not have to exist in a perfect economy run only by those who follow after Christ in order to be useful. Despite our flawed economic system and the flawed people who work within the system, our work still allows us to help others. From the milk maid to the corporate president, from the village rabbi to the village carpenter, each of us contribute a little to the material needs of others. Providence is not merely about the life to come. In monarchies, capitalist democracies, or socialist countries, work must still be done to meet our material needs. In the words of St. Paul, he who does not work will not eat. Our work allows us to minister to others needs, both physical and spiritual. And more importantly, our work is an act whereby we feel the presence of God in our lives, express the love of God to our fellow humans, and see the face of God in those we serve.

The economic value of work is a subject of little dispute in the disciplines of psychology, sociology, economics, or business administration. Work provides a means by which individuals provide for their needs and needs of others. Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*, points out that economics allows our own selfish desires to be put to good use for in meeting our own needs, and also to provide for our fellow humans.

Modern scholars also find that work is valuable. Sociologists have found a strong link between employment and stable family structure, and a strong association among unemployment

and family dysfunction, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide. Work is a way of providing structure and order to our lives. The gift of work is that it not only feeds us, but that, even in the presence of evil, it lifts us towards perfection. A good example of this is the development of welfare to work programs which are intended not only to save money, but to return to people a sense of dignity and self-control that working can provide.

6. Conclusion

Our work in the world is far from complete. We face hunger and ignorance, alienation and oppression. Farrer points out that even in these conditions, we should not despair, but get to the work that God has given us to do.

Christ said of the blind man, that his misfortune was an occasion for the word of God to be manifested in him; and that they (that is Jesus and his disciples) must work at God's work while the light held. How I wish that, every time I am confronted with another man's trouble, or another man's faithlessness, I could remember this truth. It is not something for me to be disturbed by, or discouraged by, still less, annoyed or grieved by. It is an opportunity the heart of God covets, to do his loving work; and he has appointed me, with whatever capacity I have, to be his instrument. ... When I am met by my own faults of character or temper, or in work: a heavenly opportunity for the grace of God! I am not to grieve over old mysteries, but submit myself to healing hands, and give the healer the joy for which he longs." The Day's Work, *Essential Sermons*, p. 109.

All work can be transformed to holy work, provided we allow our wills to follow God's will. The transformation requires us to reject the service of self alone. It requires all of us to dedicate ourselves to do our work in truth and beauty and for the common good.

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