

## E. F. SCHUMACHER

(1911-1977)

Ernst Friedrich Schumacher was born in Germany in 1911. A Rhodes scholar at Oxford in the 1930's, he fled back to England before the Second World War to avoid living under Nazism. Although he was interned as an enemy alien during the War, his extraordinary abilities were recognized, and he was able to help the British government with its economic and financial mobilization.

After the War, Schumacher worked as an economic advisor to the British Control Commission charged with rebuilding the German economy. From 1950 to 1970 he was Chief Economic Advisor to the British Coal Board, one of the world's largest organizations, with 800,000 employees. His farsighted planning (he predicted the rise of OPEC and the problems of nuclear power) aided Britain in its economic recovery.

In 1955 Schumacher traveled to Burma as an economic consultant. While there, he developed the principles of what he called "Buddhist economics", based on the belief that good work was essential for proper human development and that "production from local resources for local needs is the most rational way of economic life." He also gained insights that led him to become a pioneer of what is now called appropriate technology: earth- and user-friendly technology matched to the scale of community life.

Schumacher's life was marked by his brilliance in the area of economics and a spiritual journey that continued throughout his life. He was attracted to socialism, particularly Marxism, in the belief that it would help Germany rebuild after the war. That hope did not last long and in the 1950s he declared himself to be a Buddhist. In 1971, following the conversion of his wife and daughter to the Catholic faith, Schumacher was received into the Church. Even before coming a Catholic, Schumacher was well read in the Catholic intellectual tradition, particularly the thought of the early church fathers, Thomas Aquinas, John of the Cross, Josef Pieper, Jacques Maritain and others.

His best-selling book, *Small Is Beautiful* (1973), was republished by Hartley & Marks in 1999. His two other books are *Good Work* and *Guide for the Perplexed*. The following essay is taken from *Good Work*.

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# EDUCATION FOR GOOD WORK

E. F. SCHUMACHER<sup>1</sup>

**I**t is possible to discuss meaningfully the subject of good work (or education for it) only by first clarifying the questions What is man? Where does he come from? What is the purpose of his life?

I know, of course, that such questions are called “pre-scientific”: There is nothing like them in modern physics and most of biology, says the modern scientist, and he is quite right. Maybe he thinks the question What is man? should be answered: Nothing but physics and biology. If this were true there would be no point in discussing “education.” If the question “What is man?” is called pre-scientific, this can mean only that science is not of essential importance for the conduct of human life: good answers to pre-scientific questions are infinitely more important.

What can be the meaning of “education” or of “good work” when nothing counts except that which can be precisely stated, measured, counted, or weighed? Neither mathematics nor geometry, neither physics nor chemistry can entertain qualitative notions like good or bad, higher or lower. They can entertain only *quantitative* notions of more or less. It is easy, therefore, to distinguish between less education and more education, and between less work and more work, but a *qualitative* evaluation of education or of work...? How could that be possible? This, we are told, would be *purely subjective*; it could not be *proved*; it would be anybody’s guess since it cannot be measured and thus be made objective.

The Cartesian Revolution has removed the vertical dimension from our “map of knowledge”; only the horizontal dimensions are left. To proceed in this flatland, science provides excellent guidance: it can do everything except lead us out of the dark wood of a meaningless, purposeless, “accidental” existence. Modern science answers the question What is man? with such inspiring phrases as “a cosmic accident” or “a rather unsuccessful product of mindless evolution or natural selection” or “a naked ape,” and it is not surprising that it has no answer to the question of what this absurd, accidental product of mindless forces is supposed to do with itself, that is to say, what it should do with its *mind*. (Modern science has much to say about what to do with the body of the unfortunate being: “Survive as best you can!”)

What, in these circumstances, can be the purpose of education? In our own Western civilization—as in all other great civilizations—purpose used to be to lead people out of the dark wood of meaninglessness, purposelessness, drift, and indulgence, up a mountain where there can be gained the truth that makes you free. This was the traditional wisdom of all peoples in all parts of the world. We modern people, who reject traditional wisdom and deny the existence of the vertical dimension of the spirit, like our forefathers desire nothing more than somehow to be able to rise above the humdrum state of our present life. We hope to do so by growing rich, moving around at ever-increasing speed, traveling to the moon and into space; but whatever we do in these respects, we cannot rise above our own humdrum, petty, egotistical selves. Education may help us to become richer quicker and to travel further faster, but everything remains as

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<sup>1</sup> E.F. Schumacher, *Good Work* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1979): 112-123. Used with permission.