OSCAR WILDE

THE SOUL OF MAN UNDER SOCIALISM

and Other Essays on the Purpose of Modern Work



Edited and annotated, with essays, by

JULIAN DELPHIKI

Thinking School

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Oscar Wilde on Work, Machines and Freedom in the Age of AI

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First edition

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To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.

OSCAR WILDE

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PREFACE

A Playwright Who Would Not Punch the Clock

REMEMBER when technology was going to make us work less? I remember it several times. With email, with the company phone, with the cloud, with remote work. Now they say it about artificial intelligence, and they say it with the same straight face.

In 1891 an Irish playwright who was the wittiest man in London published, in a serious review, an essay nobody expected. Oscar Wilde, the man of dinner-party epigrams, wrote about property, the state, charity and machines. And about work, of which he said something that still makes people uncomfortable: that there is nothing necessarily dignified about it, and that most of it is degrading.

"The Soul of Man under Socialism" is his only openly political text. It baffled his rich friends with what it said and his socialist friends with how it said it. It did not propose working harder or working smarter. It proposed that machines should do the ugly work, that nobody should have to live for others, and that each person should be free to become who they are. Wilde put it in two words: "Be thyself."

I came to this essay late, and by the back door. I was looking for Wilde's epigrams, like almost everyone, and found him where most of my reading ends up: in a file of notes I have been feeding for years, thousands of passages underlined from people who knew more than I did. By then I had

spent a long time in digital commerce, explaining in meetings and classrooms how to sell more. Reading in an 1891 text that "machinery competes against man" made me smile. Then it stopped making me smile.

WHY NOW

The essay is a hundred and thirty-five years old and has not aged in the part that matters. What has changed is that we can now measure what Wilde could only suspect.

Wilde wrote that most people exist, that is all. Gallup estimates that in 2025 only 20% of the world's employees were engaged at work, and 12% in Europe. He wrote that machinery competes against man and that, under proper conditions, it will serve man. In 2026, American companies blamed more job cuts on artificial intelligence than ever before, while economists searched the data for an effect that still does not clearly show up. And he wrote that the question was not technical but one of ownership: who keeps what the machine produces.

That question is the question of this book.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS, AND WHAT IT ISN'T

This is not an anti-work manifesto. There is one of those in this catalogue already: Bob Black's *The Abolition of Work*, which is far more radical than Wilde. Nor is it a productivity manual, or one of those books that promise that if you change your attitude, Monday will feel like Friday.

It is an edition. It contains "The Soul of Man under Socialism" complete, in Wilde's original English, with notes explaining what a reader today has no reason to know: who Mommsen was, which scandal Wilde had in mind when he attacked the press, what it meant in 1891 to "go on the rates."

And it contains nine essays of mine on the purpose of modern work, in three parts that follow Wilde's three questions. The first, "The Machine," deals with artificial intelligence and hours: who owns the hour the machine saves, what happens to beginners when the machine does their tasks, and why the working week doesn't shrink by itself. The second, "Things," deals with what we make and buy: useless jobs, kilos of clothing, holding two

jobs. The third, "Living or Existing," deals with what we do with what is left: engagement, the cult of busyness, and the news. Wilde alone is not enough to think them through, so I call on some of his neighbors: William Morris, who proposed weighing work on a pair of scales; Robert Louis Stevenson, who defended idlers; Henry David Thoreau, who warned that nearly every way of getting money leads downhill. Their lines are quoted in the essays, and their full texts are in the reading list at the end.

At the end there is a section of Counterpoints, because Wilde was wrong about quite a lot and it should be said. He wrote his praise of individualism between society dinners, at the height of his success. That doesn't invalidate what he said, but it obliges us to read it carefully.

HOW TO READ IT

Wilde's essay comes first, complete. The essays can be read before or after it, and in any order. Each starts from a line or two of a classic, argues with it and with today's data, and ends with a question, the one Wilde would put to the reader. None ends with a moral; if one seems to, it's an editing error.

Remember when technology was going to make us work less? Wilde didn't believe it. Or rather, he believed it could happen, but not by itself. What follows is why, and whether he was right.