WILLIAM MORRIS

USEFUL WORK

VERSUS

USELESS TOIL

Meaningless Jobs, Consumerism and the Age of AI

ANNOTATED, WITH ESSAYS BY

Julian Delphiki

Thinking School

USEFUL WORK VERSUS USELESS TOIL

WILLIAM MORRIS · JULIAN DELPHIKI

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William Morris on Meaningless Jobs, Consumerism and the Age of AI

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"Useful Work versus Useless Toil" (1884), as collected in *Signs of Change* (1888). Text by William Morris (1834–1896), in the public domain.

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Also available in Spanish as *Trabajo útil, esfuerzo inútil* (new translation by Julian Delphiki).

All other work but this is worthless; it is slaves' work—mere toiling to live, that we may live to toil.

WILLIAM MORRIS, 1884

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PROLOGUE

A Pair of Scales from 1884

In February 2026, the *Harvard Business Review* published the results of an eight-month study at a US technology company of about two hundred employees. The researchers wanted to know what happens when people start using generative AI in their daily work. The answer was not the one in the brochures. Employees worked faster, took on more tasks and stretched the working day into hours that used to be theirs. Nobody had asked them to. They did it because they could.

That same year, Gallup calculated that only 20% of the world's employees feel engaged at work, the lowest level since 2020. And on 27 November, as on the last Friday of every November, millions of people who work without much enthusiasm will spend part of what they earn on things they did not need on Thursday. The National Retail Federation expects Americans alone to spend more than a trillion dollars in November and December, for the first time.

Put the three stories together and you have an ordinary week in 2026. You also have, almost word for word, a lecture William Morris gave in London in 1884.

I have earned my living in digital commerce for more than twenty years. I have worked through performance marketing, flash sales, marketplaces, retail media, and now what we call agentic commerce: AI agents that are supposed to do our shopping for us. In other words, I am paid by the

system Morris describes. I don't say this to apologise. I say it because this lecture reads differently from the inside.

From the outside, Morris looks like a romantic who hated factories. From the inside, what he proposes looks a lot like a dashboard with three columns: how much is produced, how much is sold, and how much of it is any use. The third column almost never appears in the reports. He put it at the centre a hundred and forty years ago, and I go back to it every time someone shows me the next technology that will free us from work. I have my doubts. So did Morris.

THE MAN WHO WEIGHED WORK

Morris was no armchair theorist. He ran a decorating firm that sold wallpapers, tapestries and furniture to the Victorian middle class. He was a best-selling poet. And from 1883 he was a socialist activist who spent his evenings lecturing in parish halls and workers' clubs. He knew what it was to make things, sell them and pay wages. That is why his lecture does not open with a slogan but with an accountant's question: what work is worth doing?

His answer is a tool, not a sermon. Worthwhile work, he says, carries three hopes: the hope of rest afterwards, the hope of producing something worth using, and the hope of pleasure in the doing. If one is missing, work starts sliding towards what he calls "useless toil". If all three are missing, it is slaves' work: "mere toiling to live, that we may live to toil."

With those scales in hand, Morris weighed the England of his day and found it wanting. He saw a rich class that did no work, a middle class that worked but did not produce, and a working class that produced mostly rubbish: absurd luxuries for some and cheap imitations for others. He saw "labour-saving" machines that, instead of saving labour, intensified it. He saw an economy that, if it woke up one morning to find life easy, would set to work at once to make it hard again.

This book does something very simple. It takes Morris's scales and puts them on the table in 2026.

WHY NOW

We have spent years being told that technology would free us from work. Remember when Keynes calculated, in 1930, that his grandchildren would work fifteen hours a week? We are his grandchildren. Remember when the internet was going to cut out the middlemen? Now there are middlemen for the middlemen. AI is the latest instalment of a promise more than a century old. Morris is useful precisely because he heard its first version and did not believe it.

He did not believe it for a reason that is still uncomfortable: machines do not decide how the time they save is shared out. The people who pay for them do. In 1884 that decision turned craftsmen into labourers and lengthened the day of those who tended the machines. In 2026 the scene is different and the argument is the same.

There are other reasons. In the European Union, manufacturers of many appliances and phones have been obliged since 31 July 2026 to offer repairs outside warranty. In the United States, more than a dozen states now have right-to-repair laws. Britain's construction industry says it needs tens of thousands of extra workers a year while teenagers are still told the serious path is university. Each of these has a paragraph in Morris's lecture, written when none of it existed.

WHAT IS IN THIS BOOK

First, a chapter of **context**: who Morris was, why a wallpaper designer ended up selling socialist papers on street corners, and what happened to his ideas afterwards.

Then **the text**, as Morris published it in 1888, with new notes for whatever a reader today has no reason to know: what a workhouse was, why he brings up oleomargarine, where the "reserve army" comes from.

Then **twenty-one essays**. Each takes one of Morris's ideas and sets it against a problem of today:

- meaningless jobs, and the surveys that try to count them;
- Marx's four estrangements, which Morris described without naming them;

- the history of the duty to work, from the Vagabonds Act of 1547 to Spain's law on vagrants;
- the measurement of work, from Taylor's stopwatch to the algorithm;
- AI and the work it leaves behind (or adds);
- the pride of craft, when no one can find a plumber;
- the pleasure of doing one thing well, now that even hobbies can be outsourced;
- the culture that repeats itself and the AI that reheats it;
- school, and what work it prepares us for;
- the surroundings of work, from logistics warehouses to garden cities;
- the loop of working to consume and consuming to keep working;
- planned obsolescence and the right to repair;
- the puffery of wares, now a trillion-dollar industry;
- the decent house, which Morris placed among the first forms of wealth;
- the work nobody wants, and what the essential-worker lists of 2020 taught us about it;
- the work that isn't paid and therefore doesn't count;
- the commons, from the Valencian water court to the tool library;
- co-operatives, with Mondragon as a test of what Morris got right and what he didn't;
- leisure, which was won and then put up for sale;
- what it means to spend a life well;
- and Morris's own utopia, *News from Nowhere*, reread in 2026.

They are grouped in five parts: meaning, craft, things, the commons and life. Each essay ends with a question for the scales.

A chapter of **counterpoints** follows, with the best objections to Morris and to me, an **epilogue** with concrete options and an **appendix** with one question per essay for using the scales without rereading the book. There are no recipes.

WHAT IS NOT IN IT

There is no manifesto. Morris wanted a revolution and thought it was near. He was wrong about the timing and about a good deal more, and this book says so when it matters. There is no invitation to quit your job, break rules

or start a co-operative on Monday either. If that is what you want, there are better books (and worse ones).

What there is, is a question Morris asked in 1884, one worth asking now and then, quietly, on an ordinary Tuesday afternoon: of everything I did today, what had hope in it?

The answer is usually uncomfortable. That is why the scales are still useful.

Julian Delphiki

CONTEXT

The Designer Who Became a Socialist

A RICH BOY FROM WALTHAMSTOW

William Morris was born on 24 March 1834 in Walthamstow, then a village in Essex and now part of north-east London. His father was a partner in a firm of bill brokers in the City, and the family lived comfortably. Morris went to Marlborough and then to Exeter College, Oxford, where he met Edward Burne-Jones, who would be his friend and collaborator for life.

At Oxford he read John Ruskin, in particular one chapter of *The Stones of Venice* (1853), "The Nature of Gothic". It argued that the beauty of medieval cathedrals came from the freedom of the masons who carved them. The argument stayed with Morris for good: the quality of a thing depends on the life of the person who makes it.

FROM WORKSHOP TO FIRM

In 1856 he was articled to the Gothic Revival architect George Edmund Street. He did not last long as an architect, but there he met Philip Webb, who later built him the Red House at Bexleyheath, where he lived with Jane Burden after their marriage in 1859. Furnishing that house started

his working life: he could find nothing in the shops he liked, so he and his friends made it themselves.

In 1861 they founded Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., a decorating firm that made stained glass, furniture, embroidery, tapestry and, above all, wallpaper. In 1875 Morris took control and the business became Morris & Co. He learned the crafts he sold with his own hands: vegetable dyeing, weaving, embroidery. He was said to come home with his hands blue from indigo.

One line of his now circulates on mugs and prints: "Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful." It comes from an 1880 lecture, "The Beauty of Life", and is usually quoted as decorating advice. Read in full, it is something else: an attack on the bad work behind cheap objects.

THE CONVERSION

By the early 1880s Morris was nearly fifty, with a prosperous business and a solid reputation as a poet (*The Earthly Paradise* had been a best-seller). Then he made a turn that scandalised his class. In 1883 he joined the Democratic Federation (soon the Social Democratic Federation), Britain's first modern socialist party. That same year he read Marx's *Capital* in French, since there was no English translation yet.

It was not a weekend hobby. Over the next years he gave hundreds of lectures around the country, sold papers in the street, paid for publications and turned up at demonstrations. His reasoning was Ruskin's taken to its conclusion. If art depends on the life of the worker, and the worker's life is miserable, no reform of taste will fix anything. Work has to change, and to change work, society has to change.

At the end of 1884, after a quarrel with the Federation's leader, Henry Hyndman, Morris and others (Eleanor Marx among them) broke away and founded the Socialist League. Its manifesto, largely written by Morris, appeared in February 1885. The League launched a paper, *Commonweal*, which Morris edited and largely paid for.

THE LECTURE

"Useful Work versus Useless Toil" belongs to that moment. Morris first gave it in 1884 to the Hampstead Liberal Club, a liberal middle-class audience that was probably expecting a talk about art. In 1885 the Socialist League published it as a pamphlet, no. 2 in its "Socialist Platform" series. In 1888 Morris included it in *Signs of Change*, a book of seven lectures. This edition reproduces that text.

Two things are worth knowing as you read it.

First, it is a lecture, not a treatise. Morris is speaking to a room. He repeats ideas so they stick, raises his voice and lowers it, allows himself jokes (the lunacy commission against civilization) and exaggerations (lawyers as "undisguised" parasites). It is best read aloud, or at least with a picture in mind of a burly, bearded man in a blue serge suit, speaking without a microphone.

Second, it is a fighting text. In 1884 Morris believed the revolution was near and might not be peaceful. The final paragraphs say so plainly. This book does not share that expectation, and it does not hide it either.

WHAT CAME NEXT

The decade was hard. On 13 November 1887, "Bloody Sunday" in Trafalgar Square, police and troops broke up a demonstration Morris was part of. The Socialist League filled up with anarchists who favoured direct action, and in 1890 Morris left it and founded the Hammersmith Socialist Society.

That same year he serialised *News from Nowhere* in *Commonweal*: a utopia in which a nineteenth-century man wakes up in a future England where money has vanished, the factories have emptied and people work for pleasure. It is, to a large extent, this lecture turned into a novel.

In 1891 he started the Kelmscott Press, a hand press in Hammersmith that designed its own types and paper. Its masterpiece, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* with illustrations by Burne-Jones, appeared in 1896. Morris died on 3 October that year, at Kelmscott House, aged 62.

THE LEGACY

His influence ran in two channels that are rarely looked at together.

The first is **design**. The Arts and Crafts movement he inspired spread across Britain, the United States and Europe. In 1936 the historian Nikolaus Pevsner wrote a book whose title says it all: *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*. The Bauhaus, with its aim of bringing artists and craftsmen together, counts Morris among its grandparents, even if it later embraced the machine he distrusted.

The second is the **critique of work**. Morris turns up, acknowledged or not, in almost everything written since on the meaning of work. He is there in his contemporary Lafargue's *The Right to Be Lazy*, in Keynes in 1930, in Bob Black, in Richard Sennett and in David Graeber's "bullshit jobs". His wallpapers now sell in department stores around the world, which would probably not have amused him.

Reading this lecture recovers the part of Morris that does not fit on a mug.

TIMELINE

- **1834.** Born on 24 March in Walthamstow, Essex.
- **1853.** Goes up to Exeter College, Oxford; meets Edward Burne-Jones and reads Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic", published that year.
- **1856.** Articled to the architect G. E. Street, where he meets Philip Webb.
- **1859.** Marries Jane Burden; Webb designs the Red House for them.
- **1861.** Founds Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.
- **1875.** Takes sole control; the firm becomes Morris & Co.
- **1880.** Lectures on "The Beauty of Life" ("useful or beautiful").
- **1883.** Joins the Democratic Federation; reads *Capital* in French.
- **1884.** Gives "Useful Work versus Useless Toil" at the Hampstead Liberal Club. At the end of the year he leaves the Social Democratic Federation and co-founds the Socialist League.
- **1885.** The League publishes its manifesto (February) and the lecture as a pamphlet; *Commonweal* begins.
- **1887.** Bloody Sunday in Trafalgar Square, 13 November.

- **1888.** *Signs of Change* collects the lecture.
- **1890.** Leaves the Socialist League; *News from Nowhere* appears in *Commonweal*.
- **1891.** Starts the Kelmscott Press.
- **1896.** The Kelmscott *Chaucer* is published. Morris dies on 3 October at Kelmscott House, Hammersmith.

MORRIS'S KEY WORDS

A few words in the lecture carry more weight than they seem to. They are worth having in mind before reading.

- **Toil.** Not just hard work but work done under compulsion and without hope. Morris has no quarrel with effort, only with effort that leads nowhere.
- **Hope.** The core of the lecture. Morris uses it almost technically: the three hopes of rest, product and pleasure are his test for whether work is worth doing.
- **Waste.** Labour spent on things that are not wealth. It is not rubbish in the bin but effort that should never have been spent.
- **Wealth.** What Nature gives and what a reasonable person can make of it for reasonable use. Morris's definition leaves out much of what an economist would count.
- **Slave-wares.** Cheap, bad goods made for people who cannot afford good ones, often by those same people.
- **Commercialism.** Morris's word for an economy organised around selling rather than using. Today we might say consumerism, or simply the market.
- **Manly.** Worthy of a free, self-respecting person (see note 2 to the text).
- **Popular Art.** The ornament ordinary workers once added to ordinary things for their own pleasure. Morris thought commercialism had killed it.

Useful Work versus Useless Toil

William Morris

The above title may strike some of my readers as strange. It is assumed by most people nowadays that all work is useful, and by most well-to-do people that all work is desirable. Most people, well-to-do or not, believe that, even when a man is doing work which appears to be useless, he is earning his livelihood by it—he is "employed," as the phrase goes; and most of those who are well-to-do cheer on the happy worker with congratulations and praises, if he is only "industrious" enough and deprives himself of all pleasure and holidays in the sacred cause of labour. In short, it has become an article of the creed of modern morality that all labour is good in itself—a convenient belief to those who live on the labour of others. But as to those on whom they live, I recommend them not to take it on trust, but to look into the matter a little deeper.

Let us grant, first, that the race of man must either labour or perish. Nature does not give us our livelihood gratis; we must win it by toil of some sort or degree. Let us see, then, if she does not give us some compensation for this compulsion to labour, since certainly in other matters she takes care to make the acts necessary to the continuance of life in the individual and the race not only endurable, but even pleasurable.

You may be sure that she does so, that it is of the nature of man, when he is not diseased, to take pleasure in his work under certain conditions. And, yet, we must say in the teeth of the hypocritical praise of all labour, whatsoever it may be, of which I have made mention, that there is some labour which is so far from being a blessing that it is a curse; that it would be better for the community and for the worker if the latter were to fold his hands and refuse to work, and either die or let us pack him off to the workhouse[1] or prison—which you will.

Here, you see, are two kinds of work—one good, the other bad; one not far removed from a blessing, a lightening of life; the other a mere curse, a burden to life.

What is the difference between them, then? This: one has hope in it, the other has not. It is manly to do the one kind of work, and manly also to refuse to do the other.[2]

What is the nature of the hope which, when it is present in work, makes it worth doing?

It is threefold, I think—hope of rest, hope of product, hope of pleasure in the work itself; and hope of these also in some abundance and of good quality; rest enough and good enough to be worth having; product worth having by one who is neither a fool nor an ascetic; pleasure enough for all for us to be conscious of it while we are at work; not a mere habit, the loss of which we shall feel as a fidgety man feels the loss of the bit of string he fidgets with.

I have put the hope of rest first because it is the simplest and most natural part of our hope. Whatever pleasure there is in some work, there is certainly some pain in all work, the beast-like pain of stirring up our slumbering energies to action, the beast-like dread of change when things are pretty well with us; and the compensation for this animal pain is animal rest. We must feel while we are working that the time will come when we

1 *Workhouse.* After the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, relief for the destitute in England was largely tied to the workhouse, where inmates worked in conditions made deliberately harsh to discourage anyone from asking for help. When Morris pairs it with prison, the comparison is not a joke.

2 *Manly.* In Victorian English the word means more than "masculine". It means worthy of a free, self-respecting human being. Morris uses it, and "manliness", several times in this lecture. We leave it as he wrote it, since that is how a speaker addressed a room in 1884.