

## Book Reviews

*The Ethics of Doing Nothing: Rest, Rituals, and the Modern World.* By Andrew Blosser. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023. vii + 192 pages. \$26.00.

It is widely lamented that we moderns are living in a world constantly demanding that we become more *productive*—working hard 24/7. Since Max Weber, many have claimed that the so-called “Protestant work ethic” dominates not only individual morality but also cultural norms and public policies. Yet there has been a revolt against this pervasive work ethic. The recent phenomenon called “the Great Resignation” is but one example. Many left-leaning social theorists have suggested a vision of a post-work society without “burnout” and “bullshit jobs” (a coinage of the late anthropologist David Graeber). Some contemporary scholars of religion have also developed “anti-work” theologies that aim to repudiate the equation between work and life (see, e.g., Kathryn Tanner, Jeremy Posadas, Jonathan Malesic, and Zachary Settle). Andrew Blosser’s *The Ethics of Doing Nothing: Rest, Rituals, and the Modern World* recently joined that stream.

This book is divided into two parts. The first three chapters include philosophical and theological theories of “inoperativity” or “doing nothing.” One of Blosser’s main theses is that despite its values, “all labor must eventually come to an end” (11). This claim is repeatedly made throughout the volume, with the help of diverse interlocutors including Jean-Yves Lacoste, Josef Pieper, Giorgio Agamben, Jürgen Moltmann, Abraham J. Heschel, Roberto Goizueta, and Rav Kook. Without brushing off differences among them, Blosser adroitly weaves them together to produce a paradoxical account of “doing nothing”: “Inoperativity is inherently valuable and has no purpose outside of itself, but it also must have effects and purposes outside of itself” (104). For instance, religious rituals or appreciating artworks are seemingly non-productive and pointless; yet, due to this purposelessness, Blosser claims they are truly subversive and transformative.

In the second half of the book, Blosser offers a compelling argument about how his notion of inoperativity can help us ethically respond to the exploitation of both workers and the planet. Blosser maintains that behind both problems lies the identification between life and work. While the modern work ethic abets “status anxiety,”

workers are increasingly joining the “precariat.” Against this tendency, Blosser proposes that we sever the linkage between work and income, following many advocates of Universal Basic Income (UBI). He also expands the discussion to climate change, suggesting that breaking the spell of the “life = work” equation should be the starting point for ecological movements. For Blosser, a Sabbath of the earth can be materialized through UBI and public transportation. (Along with economist Juliet Schor, I would add the four-day workweek.) Ultimately, he advocates a different society organized by an alternative understanding of work and life.

Despite many virtues, there is a concerning issue in Blosser’s argumentation. I found it unfortunate that his otherwise strong case for less work and UBI occasionally draws on the technocratic logic of efficiency. For instance, echoing Steven Pinker, he writes, “Technology in the form of agricultural improvements . . . makes land far more efficient at feeding populations” (134). Following Jeremy Rifkin, Blosser also avers, “Efficiency, by definition, means less work” (153). I am not convinced that the logic of efficiency is a promising corrective to the capitalist work ethic. Plus, this rosy techno-optimist vision, which verges on Aaron Bastani’s “fully automated luxury communism,” has been critiqued by degrowth researchers, eco-socialists, eco-feminists and decolonialists—for good reasons. Will automation liberate us from toil and ecological collapse? Or will it intensify global economic inequality, “green” extractivism, and climate colonialism? To be fair, Blosser is not advocating an easy technocratic fix, but his post-work vision seems to give undue credence to the narrative promoted by Silicon Valley techno-futurists.

That said, this volume is a delight to read. Given that this book is a revised version of Blosser’s PhD dissertation, *The Ethics of Doing Nothing* surprisingly reads like a collection of well-constructed essays with wit and erudition directly coming from the author’s own experience and reflection. Even when Blosser engages with esoteric continental thinkers like Lacoste and Agamben, his explication of their thought is skillful, accessible, and engaging. While general readers can enjoy his writing style, undergraduate and graduate students as well as other scholars of religion would particularly benefit from reading this book. *The Ethics of Doing Nothing* is a slim volume that will generate a rich conversation about our relationship to work in this restless world.

KEUNWOO KWON  
*Loyola University Chicago*