John B. Dilworth's Commentary on "What Job You Can Accept"

Commentary On
What Job You Can Accept

This is a useful case because it focuses on a deep, recurring nexus of moral problems. These concern the clash between personal ideals or life-plans and the realities of the social and business world. In its most general form the problem appears as a near-omnipresent threat of moral prostitution. Any work which is done at least partly for money is morally suspect, because in those respects it does not advance one's moral ideals, and in some cases it could significantly compromise one's ideals.

It is important to emphasise the general problem of the clash of personal ideals versus social realities, because it is easy to think that it is only the overt moral conflict cases which are morally problematic, such as that presented in the current case. However, there could be any number of jobs which were consistent with Gerald Wahr's general moral convictions, and which yet are also morally problematic. For example, any benign but unchallenging long-term job of no social importance could lead Gerald's friends to accuse him with some justice of having led a morally wasted, pointless life. The sins of complacency may rival those of 'selling out'.

How then can we overcome this central moral problem of the working world? A useful clue is to be found in the slogan 'If you're not working on the solution, then you're part of the problem'. Intuitively, morality requires us to be actively engaged in bringing about solutions to the moral problems of our jobs, whatever the jobs and problems may be. Even in difficult, overtly problematic cases, it may be possible to preserve one's moral integrity by appropriate remedial planning and action. What follows are some reasons and strategies which could preserve the integrity of someone like Gerald in the pesticide business, if he were to enter it.

First, prior to his first interview, Gerald needs to get a good overview of the many aspects of organic versus non-organic farming. He needs to clearly define for himself the actual and ideal contributions of each to the world of agriculture, both present and as projected into the indefinite future. Questions such as exactly what factors make organic farming good, and chemically-assisted farming morally unacceptable, have to be asked, and any exceptions or unclarities in the questions or responses need to be carefully noted by him. He should then use the results to outline a plan for how he himself, working (at least initially) inside the pesticide industry, could do as much to accentuate the benefits and to minimize the potential harms of pesticide use as possible. If the plan intuitively offers enough of these kinds of 'moral profit' overall, he can go to the interview and accept the job with a clear conscience. Otherwise, he should turn it down.

It is useful to compare this strategy with those suggested by two of Gerald's friends. Both Allen ("the work's going to be done anyway..") and Bob (better Gerald than a pesticide 'nut') offer utilitarian solutions. These ignore the pressing personal dimensions of moral commitment which are addressed here. They also totally ignore everything specific about the issue of pesticides versus 'natural' farming. Gerald needs to know that his efforts are morally worthwhile in this specific case, and that he is on the right side -- as part of the solution rather than the problem in this area of agriculture. Here are some specifics he could use in his plan.

First, exactly what are pesticides? The stereotype of a pesticide is of a chemical which kills pests. But more generally in agriculture they are chemical or biochemical factors which promote resistance or immunity -- to diseases, parasites, or to other factors which would prevent optimal growth of a desired crop or species. Understood in this wider context, the agricultural pesticide business is one in which profitable solutions to problems of harmful growth are developed.

Given this wider understanding of what a pesticide business is or should be doing, Gerald can look for morally worthy things to do with some confidence. For example, he doubtless knows that recombinant DNA ('gene splicing') techniques have shown great promise in producing strains of wheat (and other crops) which are naturally pest-resistant. In these cases, the immunity-promoting factors are actually part of the genetic constitution of the crop. Gerald could work within his pesticide company to ensure that it makes strategic alliances with appropriate bio-technology firms, so that it can share in the patents and profits to be made from selling disease-resistant crops (whose use will widely benefit farmers and the public they serve).

Even if Gerald's pesticide company is narrow-minded and reluctant to change, he could prove to them that it was definitely in their own interest to make such alliances and adopt such broader views. The bad image of pesticide companies as merely selling harmful chemicals, whatever the damage to the land, is after all a powerful reason not to buy pesticides from companies having such attitudes.

If a company wants to maintain or enlarge their list of customers, they must be willing to provide whatever will satisfy the real long-term needs of those customers. Most likely this will involve a broad range of customized solutions in each case, involving more disease-resistant animals and crops, more long-term environmental management of land (for example, selling customers more fertilizer and other 'support' items rather than just disease-prevention items), with 'straight' chemical pesticides being supplied only when nothing else will work. Gerald can become part of the solution to pesticide problems by actively working within his company for such longer-term self-interested thinking on the part of his employers.

To finish, note again that the 'threat of moral prostitution' mentioned at the beginning has no general solution; we must carefully analyse each specific case, including the apparently easy ones as well as more questionable cases, to see whether or not a commitment to a role in the business world is morally acceptable. Personal integrity demands no less.