

Henry West's Commentary on "What Job You Can Accept"

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What Job You Can Accept

Some people might think that if Gerald Wahr goes for the interview, he is committed to taking the job if offered, but that isn't so. He may find out more about what kind of work he would be doing with Pro-Growth Pesticides and whether he could do it in good conscience. Even if he thinks that it is highly unlikely that he will take the job if offered, his having an interview is not an act of bad faith.

But should he take the job if offered? He probably wouldn't even consider it if it weren't that the family is in dire need of the income, and the income that he would get from an engineering job would be significantly greater than from any alternative. With no other engineering job in prospect, this is his best chance of enabling the family to meet the mortgage payments and his father's medical bills.

Another argument in favor of taking the job is that he would learn about the pesticide industry from the inside. His father had said, "If you really want to show those pesticide folks a thing or two, you've got to be able to talk their language." After working in the pesticide industry, he would really be able to talk their language. And the job need not be forever. While there he can be keeping his eyes open for other positions in chemical engineering which do not compromise his ideals, and he would get valuable experience. Or his father's medical expenses might be paid for, and he could then return to work on the family farm, as planned.

Would an explanation that he is doing it to save the farm be a consolation to his father, or cause his father even greater distress? Would his father accept his own words ("...you've got to be able to talk their language") as a good reason for working for a pesticide company, or would his father feel that Gerald was using his talents and education in destructive ways? Should Gerald even worry about what his father will think? Maybe he should take that into consideration, the way that one takes into consideration the effect of one's action on anyone who is affected, but Gerald should

not let his father's attitude make his decision for him. Gerald might have good reasons for taking the job which his father would not accept or that he would not want to state to his father.



Allen's first argument looks like an excuse that could be used to justify being co-opted into doing almost anything. But there is some force to it. If a bad result is going to happen anyway, your participation or non-participation isn't going to make any difference. If pesticides are going to be produced and used, it won't help any if you "keep your hands clean." If everyone were to refuse to work in the pesticide industry, then they wouldn't be produced and used, but since everyone isn't going to refuse, what difference does one person's refusal make? This argument has many applications elsewhere. If animals are going to be grown on factory farms and eaten for food by others, what difference does it make that one vegetarian refuses to eat meat? If everyone were to refuse to serve in the military, there would be no more wars; but, if most people are willing to serve, what difference does one pacifist make? Gerald could reply that he is setting a bad example by working in the pesticide industry, and setting a good example by refusing. Others might follow his lead. But it would be naive to think that his example is going to make much difference.

Bob has an intriguing argument. If Gerald takes the job and does ineffective work, that might have better consequences than if someone else takes the job and works effectively, for example discovering ways of making more deadly and environmentally more hazardous pesticides, or how to make them more cheaply so that they are used in even greater quantities. If Gerald were to accept this argument, he would be compromising his integrity in two ways, not only by working to produce a product that he does not believe should be used, but also by working half-heartedly instead of in good faith for his employer. But this is not a completely absurd argument. Sometimes subversion is more effective in hurting an enemy than outright attack.

Don's argument is different. It is not that Gerald could slow down the production of pesticides by poor work, but that he might be able to redirect it into production of less harmful products.

One danger which his friends don't mention is that if Gerald takes the job, he may become corrupted by the environment in which he works. Those around him will be believers in what they are doing. Gerald may have difficulty finding another job and be with the company for years. He may begin to talk himself into believing that what the company is doing has to be done. A nuclear scientist who was assigned to work on the Clinch River breeder reactor in 1966 thought that the danger of an accident with such radioactive materials was such a risk that the plant should never be built. Ten years later, when the project was cancelled, after he had spent the best ten years of his career in producing an effective design, he was terribly disappointed. He had come to believe that the world fuel shortage justified the use of dangerous nuclear power.

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Even if Gerald has decided that he wants the job, a lie would probably not help him get it. A perceptive interviewer could see through it. Trying to avoid any answer at all would also probably not work. Gerald could honestly express his concerns about the environment. Most likely the interviewer would then begin to try to sell Gerald on the belief that the company shares his concerns.

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As indicated above, it is possible to be corrupted once one's self-interest is involved. If one's work and one's ethical commitments don't match, one is likely to solve the discomfort by compromising one's ethical ideals. Furthermore, people are likely to do better work if they believe enthusiastically in what they are doing. If they are working merely for a paycheck, without any belief that the work they are doing is serving any good purpose, they will feel alienated from the work, feel that they are simply putting in time on the job in order to receive a salary to spend on what they consider their real life. But work ideally can be an expression of one's self, of one's productive powers, of one's contribution to the world.