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REFLECTIONS OF A YOUTH ON
CHOOSING AN OCCUPATION (1835)

[The following examination essay is one of two in German which Marx wrote shortly before his graduation from the Trier Gymnasium on September 24, 1835. In tone it is suffused by a spirit of dedication to the perfection and welfare of all humanity. It reveals a special respect for the life devoted to ideas and a hint of Marx's characteristic mature view that our social relations have begun to form before we can determine them. Marx's second examination essay on "The Union of the Faithful with Christ" also reflected a lofty humanitarian idealism as Marx found the ground of that union in human aspiration and its effects in a genuine love of men "beautifully shaping and elevating life." The examiner found "Reflections of a Youth" marred by unusual expressions, but the state examining committee certified Marx as ready to enter the university on the basis of general good conduct, good or superior performance in German and classical languages, competence in Christian doctrine, a good knowledge of mathematics, and a passing knowledge of physics. At the Gymnasium Marx had been exposed to high standards and a liberal atmosphere. A number of his teachers were in disfavor with the secret police. The headmaster and Marx's father were members of a liberal literary society. Marx's father had left Judaism for Christianity in 1816 and was attached to the Enlightenment spirit of Frederick the Great.]

Nature has assigned to the animal the sphere of its activity, and the animal acts calmly within it, not striving beyond, not even surmising that there is another. To man, too, the Deity gave a general goal, to improve mankind and himself, but left it up to him to seek the means by which he can attain this goal, left it up to him to choose the position in society which is most appropriate and from which he can best elevate both himself and society.

This choice is a great privilege over other creatures
about a position; we may have embellished it with our fantasies, embellished it to the highest point that life can offer. We have not analyzed it, not considered the entire burden and great responsibility to be placed upon us. We have regarded it only from a distance, and distance deceives.

In this matter our own reason cannot be the counsel; Neither experience nor profound observation supports our reason, which is deceived by emotion and blinded by fantasy. But where shall we look for support when our reason leaves us in the lurch?

Our heart calls upon our parents who have walked the path of life, have experienced fate’s severity.

And if our inspiration still endures, if we still love that position and believe we are called to it after we have tested it objectively, perceived its burden, and become acquainted with its encumbrances—then we may strive for it, then inspiration does not deceive us, nor does overeagerness rush us.

But we cannot always choose the vocation to which we believe we are called. Our social relations, to some extent, have already begun to form before we are in a position to determine them.

Even our physical nature often threateningly opposes us, and no one dare mock its rights!

To be sure, we can lift ourselves above it, but then we fall all the faster. We then venture to construct a building on rotten foundations, and our entire life is an unfortunate struggle between the intellectual and the physical principle. When one cannot calm the elements fighting in himself, how can he stand up against life’s tempestuous urge, how is he to act calmly? Out of calmness alone can great and beautiful deeds emerge. Calmness is the only soil on which ripe fruits thrive.

Although we cannot work for long, and seldom joyfully, with a physical nature inappropriate to our position, the thought of sacrificing our welfare to duty, of acting with weakness, yet with strength, always arises. However, if we have chosen a position for which we do not possess the talents, we shall never be able to fill it properly, we shall soon recognize with shame our own incapability and say
to ourselves that we are a useless creature, a member of society who cannot fill his post. The most natural result, then, is self-contempt, and what feeling is more painful, what can less be displaced by anything the external world offers? Self-contempt is a serpent which eternally gnaws in one's breast, sucks out the heart's lifeblood, and mixes it with the poison of misanthropy and despair.

A deception about our aptitude for a position we have examined closely is a misused which revengefully falls back on ourselves, and even though it may not be censured by the external world, provokes in our breast a pain more terrible than the external world can cause.

When we have weighed everything, and when our relations in life permit us to choose any given position, we may take that one which guarantees us the greatest dignity, which is based on ideas of whose truth we are completely convinced, which offers the largest field to work for mankind and approach the universal goal for which every position is only a means: perfection.

Dignity elevates man most, bestows a high nobleness to all his acts, all his endeavors, and permits him to stand irreproachable, admired by the crowd and above it.

Only that position can impart dignity in which we do not appear as servile tools but rather create independently within our circle. Only that position can impart dignity which requires no reproachable acts, reproachable not even in appearance—a position which the best person can undertake with noble pride. The position which guarantees this the most is not always the highest, but it is always the best.

Just as a position without dignity lowers us, we certainly succumb to the burden of one based on ideas we later recognize as false.

Then we see no aid except in self-deception, and what a desperate rescue is the one that guarantees self-betrayal!

The vocations which do not take hold of life but deal, rather, with abstract truths are the most dangerous for the youth whose principles are not yet crystallized, whose conviction is not yet firm and unshakable, though at the same time they seem to be the most lofty ones when they have taken root deep in the breast and when we can sacrifice life and all striving for the ideas which hold sway in them. They can make him happy who is called to them; but they destroy him who takes them overhurriedly, without reflection, obeying the moment.

But the high opinion we have of the ideas on which our vocation is based bestows on us a higher standpoint in society, enlarges our own dignity, makes our actions unwavering.

Whoever chooses a vocation which he esteems highly will carefully avoid making himself unworthy of it; therefore, he will act nobly because his position in society is noble.

The main principle, however, which must guide us in the selection of a vocation is the welfare of humanity, our own perfection. One should not think that these two interests combat each other, that the one must destroy the other. Rather, man's nature makes it possible for him to reach his fulfillment only by working for the perfection and welfare of his society.

If a person works only for himself he can perhaps be a famous scholar, a great wise man, a distinguished poet, but never a complete, genuinely great man.

History tells us the greatest men who ennobled themselves by working for the universal. Experience praises as the most happy the one who made the most people happy. Religion itself teaches us that the ideal for which we are all striving sacrificed itself for humanity, and who would dare to destroy such a statement?

When we have chosen the vocation in which we can contribute most to humanity, burdens cannot bend us because they are only sacrifices for all. Then we experience no meager, limited, egotistic joy, but our happiness belongs to millions, our deeds live on quietly but eternally effective, and glowing tears of noble men will fall on our ashes.

Marx.