

## Why a Journal? Why Vocation? Why Now?

*David S. Cunningham*

Our present moment may not seem like a very propitious one for launching a new academic journal. Research in general, and academic research in particular, has lost a great deal of the support—financial and otherwise—that it has depended on for decades. Generative artificial intelligence is raising a great many questions about the nature and value of writing done by human beings, and readers find themselves uncertain about the provenance and reliability of the written word. Attention spans are shorter; many of us barely have time to read (or write) a short blog post, let alone an extended essay or a substantial book review. Many long-standing academic journals have skyrocketed in price, dropped their print editions, or simply folded. Who would launch a new journal under such conditions?

But perhaps we should begin with a consideration of the conditions that have traditionally brought about the introduction of a new academic journal. When I was a graduate student, a group of theologians launched a new journal, *Modern Theology*, opening with an article by (not-yet-Archbishop) Rowan Williams, in which he described his reservations—critically, but in a characteristically irenic way—about the work of an agnostic Cambridge

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colleague who had become a regular presence in public media.<sup>1</sup> That journal was launched by a group of scholars in theology and religious studies who had noticed a gap in the theological literature of that time: historical and scriptural studies abounded, but there was little room for the work of constructive theology. Their new academic journal filled an important gap—and it is still publishing today, forty years later.

So the launch of a new academic journal may not be quite as foolhardy an enterprise as it seems at first glance—particularly if it provides a service to writers and readers, giving voice to an ongoing conversation that lacks a regular forum for academic and praxis-oriented interchange. This lacuna, with respect to vocation and calling, is precisely what has motivated the launch of *Studies in Vocation and Calling*. The editors and the editorial board of this journal believe that the conditions are right for making such a vehicle available to the hundreds (perhaps thousands) of readers and writers who are working at the intersections of vocation with a broad range of academic, scholarly, and practice-oriented fields.

### Specifying *Vocation and Calling*

And what do we mean when we use words like *vocation* and *calling*? As many readers will be aware, these words have ventured through a complicated historical sojourn. The Latin word *vocare*, “to call,” gave rise to the related noun *vocatio*, which we usually translate as *vocation* or *calling*. In the medieval era, the application of this term to human beings was largely limited to the ecclesial context, where it meant a religious vocation to the priesthood, to the convent, or to a monastic order. While scholars have noted some occasional use of the word in reference to the laity, *vocatio* referred primarily to a call to a vowed religious life. The Reformation is typically identified as the historical moment when the range of reference of the words *vocation* and *calling* expanded to include secular occupations and other *Stände* (stations in life); however, like most everything else that grew out of the Reformation, a wide range of views on this topic soon developed within various strands of Protestantism. And scholars have sometimes wondered whether this shift was really an opening up of the concept of vocation, or simply a way of preserving the status quo by imputing divine approval to prevailing social, political, economic, and domestic structures.

1. Rowan Williams, “‘Religious Realism’: On Not Quite Agreeing with Don Cupitt,” *Modern Theology* 1, no. 1 (October 1984): 3–24.

That worry was certainly confirmed during the Industrial Revolution, when *vocation* came to be associated primarily with paid employment. The word came adrift from its Latin root in the idea of a *call*, and came to mean one's occupation—or, at an even more mundane level, one's job. Those who labored in the smelting factories and the industrial textile mills of the 19th century may have regarded their toil as a vocation; but if they also thought they had been “called” to it by God, this was most likely only because they had been told to understand it in those terms by the Bolderbys of the age. We still see the residue of this usage when we use the language of “vocational education” to refer to preparation to enter a trade. And in many quarters, the earlier focus on vocation as a call to religious life still has a strong grip—referring either to ministry within a faith community or, sometimes, expanded to include other “caring professions.” Nurses, teachers, and social workers are more likely to be seen as having responded to a “calling” than are engineers, politicians, and geologists. Even if the specific reference to God as the “caller” has become much less resonant for many people, certain professions (and other stations in life, such as homemaking, volunteerism, and civic participation) still retain an aura of being a “calling,” as opposed to the (much less freighted) words *profession* or *occupation*. The difference is not so stark in other languages; in German, one's profession is a *Beruf*, which is derived from the verb *rufen*, to call—and the word *Berufung* roughly translates the English noun *calling*.

The last quarter-century has witnessed a remarkable resurgence of the concepts related to vocation, combining some of these historical strands and also going beyond them, to forge a broader and more serviceable notion of calling. This broader account of vocation has become particularly useful in helping people think about the contours of their lives. I have elsewhere suggested that this emerging account of vocation has three important features that were not always recognized by earlier manifestations of the concept. Vocation is now understood as more *capacious*; it involves much more than paid employment, and more, even, than work in general; it considers the entire shape of a life, in all its complexity and across its many facets. Moreover, vocation is *dynamic*; vocational discernment is not a once-and-for-all decision about one's direction in life (as if that were truly possible!), but rather an ongoing endeavor that each of us will continue to “practice” across an entire lifetime. And the concept of vocation is relatively *elastic*; it manifests itself in different forms and with different features, depending on the context in which one's vocation is being explored and discerned: early in life, middle-age, or retirement; in a more religious or a mostly secular context; in times and places that allow for extended

contemplation, or those that create pressures for a definitive choice. The contemporary account of vocation—as capacious, dynamic, and elastic—helps to distinguish it from past versions that focused narrowly on one’s work, or on a singular moment of decision to pursue a specific path, or as restricted to a particular stage of life, a specific religious perspective, or certain conditions of time and space.

Of course, vocation can be defined as *so very* “capacious, dynamic, and elastic” that it can eventually come to mean anything at all. In many quarters, the concepts of vocation and calling are recast as the process of discerning “a life of meaning and purpose,” of “living a flourishing life,” or of bringing about “happiness and the good life.” While each of these approaches bears a family resemblance to vocation, they all need further specification to prevent them from becoming something very different indeed. For example, happiness is sometimes defined, not through the ancient concept of *eudaimonia* (which points to something deeper, broader, and more enduring than does our common use of the word *happy*), but instead as something much more fleeting: a feeling of bliss, a temporary emotional high. Similarly, some people may feel that they have found their “purpose” in accumulating as much wealth as possible, or attracting the most public attention, or exercising power and control over others. If vocation and calling are defined so broadly as to admit these kinds of alternative conceptions, something is clearly amiss. Hence, it behooves us to say a bit more about the specific features of vocation and calling that distinguish these concepts from some of the approaches that can arise from alternative formulations.

### Five Marks of Vocation and Calling

In the enlarged and more capacious understanding of vocation that guides this journal’s outlook, the word retains its connection to the Latin verb *vocare*, insisting that the “call” be understood as having some kind of external dimension—a “caller” of one sort or another, an agency outside of one’s own self, encouraging us to venture outside of our self-absorption and our purely internal focus on our own self-determination. This caller may be “God” in the traditional sense of the Abrahamic faiths, or it may be some other being or entity or force considered to be divine; but it can also be another human being, a circumstance that has commanded our attention, or even a more general sense of “the needs of the world.” In spite of this wide variation, however, the call is always something more than a merely

internal voice or a subjective decision to move in one direction or another; something outside of the self is drawing us out of ourselves and summoning us to focus our attention on *something that is not us*.

In the world of paid employment, this difference can be recognized in the language that we use to describe it: a profession suggests that it is something that we profess, i.e., we have decided, perhaps with the aid of others (but perhaps not), that we will learn, believe, do, and act in one direction rather than another. Although we don't use the verb that often, *to profess* is to bring an internal intention to some form of thought and action. The internal focus is even clearer in the word *occupation*; it suggests that we have chosen—and, in our increasingly post-industrial society, often of our own free will—to “occupy” ourselves with a certain activity. This activity is often related to the need to be paid for what we do, so that we can meet basic needs and spend some of our time being “occupied” with various forms of entertainment and leisure. In contrast, to speak of one's paid employment as a *calling* is to assert, however implicitly and subtly, that one has been “called” to it by someone or something outside of one's self.

So this is the first step in describing *vocation* and *calling* as we have come to understand them today: these concepts suggest that we ought not regard our thoughts and actions as driven only, and perhaps not even primarily, by internal forces—an internally-originated, outwardly-directed “push” from a self-governing, self-actualizing, individual will. Instead, a focus on vocation means recognizing our interdependence on vast networks of thought and action that originate outside of ourselves, and to which we respond: an outwardly-originated, inwardly-experienced “pull” from beings and entities and forces over which we do not have comprehensive control. To live vocationally is to live what some have described as “a responsive life,” “a summoned life,” or “a life of genuinely paying attention.”

A second mark of vocation is its moral character. If a calling implies a caller (or perhaps a great many of them), then we must be in a position to evaluate the intentions of the caller. Is this “other” oriented *for* us or *against* us? Are we being drawn into something that serves that which is true, good, and beautiful? Or are we being called into thoughts, actions, and ways of life that are damaging to ourselves and to others, habituating us in bad behaviors that we may later find difficult to escape? At first glance, this need for moral evaluation seems to be a result of our secularized society, insofar as many people no longer assume that a call comes from God (who is assumed to be drawing us to the good, even if we might not understand it as such). But on further reflection, some level of discernment has always

been necessary, even when God is assumed to be the primary caller. Most people do not “hear” this call as a clear and distinct “voice,” in spite of the frequent descriptions of such audible “calls” in the scriptural texts of many faiths and in a wide range of other narratives, ancient and modern. For most of us, even *God’s* call requires a certain degree of discernment—sorting it out from among a myriad of other voices that “call” to us. We may even find ourselves wrestling with the caller, refusing to let go until we have been blessed with an affirmation of the moral worth of the call.

For this reason, discussions of vocation have often been associated with the ancient accounts of virtue and vice. The virtues and vices are habits—habits that eventually become such a part of our lives, such an “automatic” response to whatever situation we encounter, that other people begin to associate them regularly with our behavior and to see them as character traits. A person becomes just, or courageous, or wise, not just by “learning” about these virtues, but by doing things that exemplify these virtues, over and over again, until “deciding” to do these things seems like the obvious course of action—that is, not really a “decision” at all. A life lived according to the virtues is a life of true happiness as described by that ancient word *eudaimonia*: not merely a temporary emotional feeling, but the extended contentment enjoyed throughout a genuinely good life: a fulfilled and fulfilling life. And in a similar way, the vices—cowardice, partiality, miserliness—are not simply the markers of some villain who has momentarily decided to enact them, perhaps in a fit of pique or rage. As the narrator of *A Christmas Carol in Prose* tells us, Ebenezer Scrooge did not just decide one day to be a miser; he had practiced his lack of generosity so regularly and religiously that only a series of visits from (quite literally) *another world* could draw him out of the perspective into which he had habituated himself.

Because of this need to discern and to evaluate, morally, the various “calls” that we hear, we can take note of a third feature of vocational thinking: it requires us to do this discernment in the presence of, and with input from, other people. As Aristotle noted long ago, we only come to understand the moral standards by which we judge things—that is, we only know how to recognize what kinds of behavior exemplify the virtues and the vices—through the communities within which we live. He offers examples of how those in Athens and in Sparta judge character differently; and the same questions arise in our own era. Who most exemplified courage during the Vietnam War? Was it the soldiers who went, however unwillingly, to southeast Asia where they fought, killed, and often died? Or was it the people who stayed in this country and asserted the immorality of

sending young men into that conflict, protesting the prevailing wisdom of the day in ways that often cost them their reputations, their livelihoods, and sometimes even their lives? Or are these two (rather opposing) sets of actions both instantiations of courage? The answer that you give will not be determined by an ethics textbook or a passage of scripture, but by the community in which your moral formation took place: does it put a stronger emphasis on military service or on conscientious objection? On patriotic duty or on a commitment to nonviolence? On defeating your enemies or on sitting down at table with them? Perhaps your morally formative community advocated a mixture of these views, believing or hoping that they would not come into conflict with one another (until, inevitably, they did). Or do you perhaps find yourself, as many of us do, to be identifying with a number of different communities, each with its own distinctive moral code and ethical contours, each with slightly different definitions of the virtues and vices? Indeed, many people would argue that the mixture of ethical communities to which most of us belong is both an undeniable feature of modern life and a reason why most of us find it difficult, at least in some instances, to make definitive moral judgments about so many matters of importance.

The moral nature of vocational discernment, along with the communal basis of morality, means that exploring and discerning one's vocation cannot be undertaken in isolation. We need to be in conversation with others in order to discern whether the voices that seem to be calling us are doing so in our best interests—and in the best interests of the world at large. Only through conversation with others can we begin to sort out the diversity (and sometimes the cacophony) of voices that seem to be calling to us. We need other people to help us get a perspective on the thoughts, actions, and forms of life to which we are being called.

A fourth element of a vocational approach to life and thought is its emphasis on the necessity of combining contemplation and action. At the end of his treatise on ethics, Aristotle reviews the arguments for and against a contemplative life vis-à-vis a life of action. In the end he favors the contemplative life—a perspective that has drawn a great deal of criticism. But the concept of vocation doesn't really allow these two perspectives to be set up in opposition to each other. Yes, exploring and discerning one's calling does require contemplation; it is not merely one more choice to be made during a day full of hurried and harried decisions. Instead, it demands a certain amount of dedicated time, and a free and ordered space, within which such exploration and discernment can occur. But the whole point of that work of exploration and discernment is not simply to keep on con-

templating, but rather to put the results into action. This means actually taking up the callings to which we have been called—and living into them to the best of our ability. At the same time, of course, contemplation should not be set aside entirely, nor even assumed to be incompatible with action. Our vocations call us to a life of contemplation *and* a life of action, and we live our lives more completely when we understand the necessity of both.

Finally, a fifth mark of vocation is its extended character: it is not merely focused on a momentary, once-for-all decision, but is something that takes place over the long haul. Vocational exploration and discernment are lifelong practices; as we move through life, we shift and change, and this requires us to return to the exploration and discernment process again and again, to consider whether our present selves are discerning the same call that shaped our selves in the past. The answer may well be yes—but it might not be, and this necessitates a kind of ongoing vocational vigilance. Our general cultural tendency is to imagine vocational discernment as a one-time decision, and this is particularly true among young people who think of the transition to adulthood as a time when one decides “what to do with one’s life.” But that “final decision” rarely turns out to be a permanent one, particularly under current economic and cultural conditions. Even if our grandparents tended to live in one community, have the same job, and pursue the same kinds of activity for their entire lives, such stability and uniformity is rare today.

This temporal extension of vocation—over the long haul—can be expanded to encompass a spatial extension as well: it is not restricted to a certain portion of society, as might have been the case in some of the past uses of the words *vocation* and *calling*. It is not restricted to those entering religious life; it is not focused only on trades, as the language of “vocational education” sometimes suggests; it is not only about one’s working life, but ranges into the domestic, civic, and leisure spheres as well; and it is not only for the “creative class” or another societal caste or division that happens to have enough spare time to explore and discern a future direction in life. In short, *vocation is for everyone*: rich or poor, young or old, majority or minority, liberal or conservative, credentialed or otherwise. In fact, in some ways, the concepts of vocation and calling draw our attention to the problems inherent in all such binary oppositions: they divide the human family in artificial and frequently inaccurate ways, subtly suggesting that being on one side or the other is the path to true happiness (even when happiness is defined more broadly, in the sense of *eudaimonia*). Vocation moves in the opposite direction: every single human being has a calling—indeed a variety of callings. And all people should have the opportunity

to exercise a degree of vocational vigilance—continuing to explore and discern and reflect on their callings, so that everyone might have a chance to live a fulfilled and fulfilling life.

## Vocation at Full Stretch

The long, ever-changing arc of our lives counsels not only vocational vigilance, but also a kind of vocational reserve. The uncertainties around our callings—the identity of the caller, the need for discernment, the possibility of conflicting voices, the wonderings about roads not taken—all these call for some degree of restraint when exploring and discerning one’s many callings in life. Even as we necessarily render judgments on these matters and take actions accordingly, we can still exercise a degree of reserve. We can avoid taking actions that depend entirely on having made those judgments correctly, seek the counsel of others, and remind ourselves that other judgments and other actions will necessarily follow—no matter how “definitively” we have set ourselves a particular course. This is vocation at full stretch: a lifelong endeavor, reaching across every dimension of our lives.

Indeed, vocation and calling are such important elements of our lives that we might well say: *of course* there should be a journal focused on these subjects. As you peruse this issue and future issues of *Studies in Vocation and Calling*, you will see authors using a wide range of language to describe these concepts, and some may even take issue with one or more of the five elements listed above. These elements are not written in stone; indeed, it would be out of keeping with an exhortation to employ “vocational reserve” for that call to be accompanied by a statement of what is definitively the case, now and at all times, with regard to the concepts of vocation and calling themselves. The whole point of publishing a journal dedicated to a particular area of theory and practice is to accept (and, indeed, to celebrate) the “unsettled” character of investigations into its subject-matter: to encourage a variety of perspectives, to make the case for particular accounts, to take issue with other accounts, and to enter into dialogue with those who may see things differently.

And to return to the other question with which I began: given the newly expanded understanding of vocation that is emerging today, what better time than the present to launch a more robust discussion of vocation? We are witnessing a renaissance of the concept, especially in our institutions of higher education, but also in our culture more broadly. At this very

moment, the supposedly linear path from professional preparation into a specific career is being disrupted and questioned, as is the organization of our entire lives around work, money, and more work. People are increasingly asking about the meaning and purpose of their lives and raising serious questions about what might constitute a truly good life, a fulfilled and fulfilling life. I hope that this inaugural issue of *Studies in Vocation and Calling*, as well as its future issues, will provide readers with an opportunity to examine all the ways that—to use a phrase that we have adopted as something of a slogan—“vocation is not just about making a living; it’s about making a life.”