

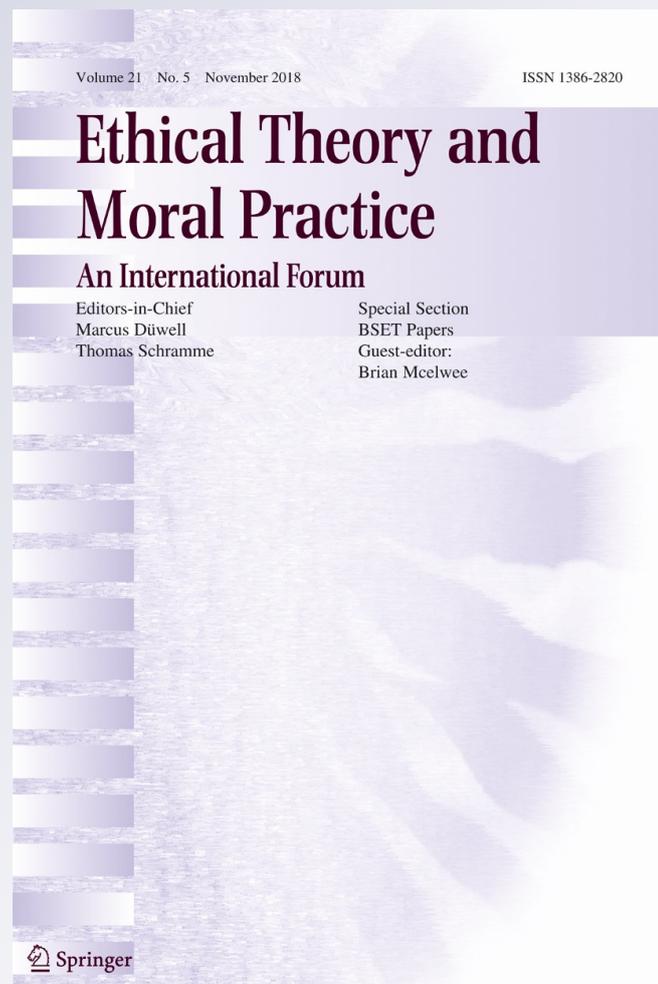
The Duty to Work

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Ethical Theory and Moral Practice
An International Forum

ISSN 1386-2820
Volume 21
Number 5

Ethic Theory Moral Prac (2018)
21:1119-1133
DOI 10.1007/s10677-018-9942-2



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The Duty to Work

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Accepted: 22 October 2018 / Published online: 26 October 2018
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Abstract

Most advanced industrial societies are ‘work-centered,’ according high value and prestige to work. Indeed, belief in an interpersonal moral duty to work is encoded in both popular attitudes toward work and in policies such as ‘workfare’. Here I argue that despite the intuitive appeal of reciprocity or fair play as the moral basis for a duty to work, the vast majority of individuals in advanced industrialized societies have no such duty to work. For current economic conditions, labor markets, and government policies entail that the conditions for a reciprocity-based argument to apply to most workers are not usually met. More specifically, many workers fail to provide valuable goods through working or their working does not result in net social benefit. Concurrently, many workers do not receive adequate benefits from working in that they neither have their basic needs met or do not even enjoy an improvement in welfare thanks to working. Hence, workers neither provide nor receive the benefits needed for a reciprocity-based duty to work to apply to them. Furthermore, these conditions are conditions over which workers themselves have very little control. Most workers therefore could not fulfill their ostensible duty to work even if they made conscientious efforts to do so. In most cases, a person who fails to work morally wrongs no one, and in the case of any particular individual or worker, the defeasible presumption ought to be that she has no duty to work.

Keywords Work · Reciprocity · Fair play

If contemporary life has a shared gospel, that gospel is work. This gospel has largely lost the religious overtones it had in times past. For instance, the Victorian philosopher Thomas Carlyle waxed poetical about how work is the fate of the blessed, a sacred opportunity to perfect ourselves according to divine providence. “The mandate of God to his creature man is: Work!”, Carlyle proclaimed (1843). Today’s more secular, pragmatic, and individualistic societies no longer praise work in such overtly religious terms, nor do they ascribe such exalted significance to the act of working. For those in such societies, work’s value is more prosaic and practical, an enterprise aimed not at perfecting the soul but at providing for the

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needs (and wants) of the body. Nowadays, to have economic security, to enjoy self-esteem and esteem from others (Goldsmith and Diette 2012), and to be judged romantically desirable (Tuttle 2012), we (especially men) must work. Consequently, public institutions take work and the preparation thereto as one of their central aims. Educational systems increasingly emphasize the acquisition of skills so that students will later become 'employable'. Political parties and movements across the ideological spectrum assume that full employment — the economic condition in which the only unemployment is voluntary — should be a central goal of our economic policies.¹ Hence, although work is no longer praised in the Victorians' terms, we retain their moral zeal for work. That so many activities are now described in terms of 'work' or kindred concepts further underscores the centrality of work in our ethical mentality: As one commentator recently observed, "Americans struggle to describe worthwhile, long-term activities without turning them into jobs." Exercise is now 'working out,' failing marriages need 'work,' parenting is 'a job'. "Workplace logic" colonizes virtually every facet of modern life. (Malesic 2017).

Thus, although the ethical ground has shifted since Victorian times, the *expectation* of work is no less entrenched in contemporary culture than it was in Carlyle's. Many people live, as Frayne (2015) has observed, in work-centered societies in which the value and virtuousness of work function as almost unquestioned dogmas.

Given how existing economies operate, working seems unavoidable. Nearly all of us *must* work in order to achieve many of our goals or realize our interests. But it is critical that we interrogate this 'must'. On its face, this looks like the instrumental 'must,' an imperative of prudence or self-interest. Yet it is possible to confuse instrumental prerogatives with moral ones — to unwittingly infer from the fact that individuals typically must work in order to advance their interests that work is thereby a moral *duty*. And much of our political rhetoric tacitly assumes that this 'must' is moral in nature: For example, many communities and nations have moved away from traditional welfare toward 'workfare,' requiring that recipients of public benefits work (or at least actively seek out or improve their prospects for work through acquiring additional skills, education, or training). 'Workfare' policies thus assume that governments are morally entitled to enforce a duty to work. But governments are only morally entitled to enforce this duty if such a duty exists in the first place, a claim often assumed but rarely defended.² This insistence on work as requisite to claim one's share of society's goods reflects larger cultural trends that marginalize or demonize non-workers. (Frayne 2015: 98–105).

The purpose of this article is to explore whether there is a moral duty to work. There is some plausibility in Carlyle's conviction that work is good for our character — that it can help develop our skills, boost our sense of achievement or self-esteem, etc. Perhaps we owe it *to ourselves* to work.³ But the question I shall investigate is whether there is an interpersonal or social duty to work, a duty which, if we do not fulfill it, we fail to provide what we owe *to others*. I shall argue that in fact the vast majority of individuals in advanced industrialized societies (the United States being a prime example) have no such duty to work. This is not because there are no convincing arguments for a duty to work. On the contrary. I will outline

¹ Populist-conservative Donald Trump ran on a platform of job provision in 2016, as did progressive Bernie Sanders. For discussions of full employment, see Baker and Bernstein (2013) For a recent endorsement of full employment, see Paul et al. (2017) For criticism of full employment as a policy goal, see Livingston (2016).

² Note that the contrary relationship — that there is a duty to work only if the state may enforce it — may not hold. See Becker (1980)

³ Though notice that goods such as skill development, etc. need not have their source in employment or jobs.

an argument, the *fair play* argument, that provides a compelling basis for a duty to work. But if the fair play argument is convincing, then why do so few individuals have a duty to work? Because the fair play argument assumes an economy, labor market, and labor policies that by and large do not exist (or exist only for a select few). In other words, in order for the fair play argument to actually entail a duty to work, certain conditions must be in place that are rarely realized in the actual circumstances in which today's workers labor. Furthermore, these conditions are conditions over which workers themselves have very little control. Most workers therefore could not fulfill their ostensible duty to work even if they made conscientious efforts to do so. Hence, whatever reasons there may be for working — and these reasons are considerable — that working is morally required is not among the reasons most people have for working. In most cases, a person who fails to work morally wrongs no one. My argument does not demonstrate that there no one does, or could have, a duty to work. But it should persuade us that, in the case of any particular individual or worker, the defeasible presumption ought to be that she does *not* have such a duty.

Before we begin, three caveats: In arguing that most individuals in today's advanced industrialized societies do not have a duty to work, I can only speculate about the extent to which individuals' believing they have such a duty is among the reasons they have for working. As noted earlier, the expectation of work is psychologically well-entrenched in such societies, and so it would not be surprising if belief in such a duty partially motivates the prevailing desire to work.⁴ If successful, my arguments should persuade most individuals that this belief ought not be among their reasons for working. Note, however, that this neither impugns other reasons individuals may have for working nor shows that they ought not work all things considered. Individuals may have strong prudential reasons for working even if they have no moral duty to work, for instance. Furthermore, some philosophical traditions (Hegelianism-Marxism, for instance) hold that work is essential to the realization of our natures, either *qua* individuals or as members of a species for whom productive, world-changing activity is essential. Others, such as Weber's Protestant work ethic, view work and the virtues associated with it as manifestations of divine grace. Such philosophical stances are nevertheless compatible with there being no interpersonal duty to work of the sort discussed here. Thus, my conclusions do not show that work, either actually or ideally, lacks value or significance for individuals. They show only that we should be more suspicious than we characteristically are in assigning value to work because it fulfills an interpersonal duty we owe to the societies of which we are members.

Secondly, complications ensue for any argumentation concerning a duty to work due to the fact that work is a surprisingly difficult matter to define. Indeed, it is unlikely that there is a single ahistorical understanding of the nature of work, nor is there only one way a duty to work might be grounded. In the Christian tradition, for example, a duty to work has sometimes been rooted in the imperative that our earthly existence should glorify and serve God, or perfect the created world by making it fit for human needs.⁵ However, the dialectical aims of our discussion are not historical. Our concern is instead to ascertain whether individuals, in the socioeconomic conditions that prevail in the relatively prosperous economies of the early twenty-first century, have a duty to work of the sort that is often assumed in public discourse,

⁴ For an exploration of how the desire to work is shaped by contemporary economic and ideological conditions, see Cholbi (2018).

⁵ For a helpful elaboration of Christian attitudes toward work prior to the emergence of the Protestant work ethic, see Lis and Soly (2012).

i.e., an enforceable, interpersonal duty. Thus, rather than attempting to settle what work *is*, we can instead rely upon whatever notion of work is at issue in the ostensible interpersonal duty to work. In other words, work (for our dialectical purposes) is whatever individuals are required to do so as to discharge the ostensible duty to work. And some notions or kinds of work would presumably not count as discharging this obligation. It would, I imagine, strike contemporary advocates of a duty to work as wrongheaded to reason that, because recreational swimming or completing a crossword puzzle are sometimes “hard work,” those engaging in such activities are thereby discharging their ostensible duty to work. To insist that individuals have a duty to work is instead to insist that individuals have a duty to engage in economically useful activity. For our purposes then, work can be understood as any activity that aims to produce goods with a commodity status, that is, goods that others besides the worker can in principle consume or enjoy. (Note that this need not assume that work produces goods intended for market exchange; others can consume or enjoy goods they acquire through non-market means.) On this picture, self-sufficient farming or hunting, entrepreneurship, and providing unpaid labors such as child or elder care are all work, since all result in the production of goods that could be exchanged with others (even if they are not as a matter of fact so exchanged). But the paradigm case of working is *employment*, the selling of one’s labor to others so that goods can be produced for others’ consumption. Our focus in assessing a duty to work will largely fall on employment, since that is the form work takes for the great majority of workers.

Finally, there may be an obvious sense in which many individuals have a duty to work: They are responsible for the material welfare of children or other dependents, in which case work may be necessary in order to fulfill the moral duties they have toward those dependents. I do not deny that working (and employment in particular) is the most common way by which individuals discharge such material duties toward their dependents. Yet I am concerned here with a generic rather than special duty to work, one to which all (adult) individuals are subject, irrespective of whether they have special responsibilities for dependents.

1 Work and the Fair Play Argument

There are a number of possible arguments for a duty to work. But instead of considering all the arguments, our attention will focus solely on the most philosophically promising argument, one appealing to the concept of *fair play*.

When people engage in economic activity, they produce goods that others can consume or benefit from. In most cases, an individual (or firm) produces more of whatever category of goods she creates than she ultimately needs or will use. These productive surpluses are typically exchanged with others in the marketplace: Those responsible for producing shoes usually produce more shoes than they can use, so they sell their surplus shoes to others (or to shoe stores who in turn sell the shoes to customers, etc.). Those in need of shoes, who also produce a surplus of whatever goods they create, buy the shoes from the shoemaker, and the shoemaker buys their surpluses (of bread, software, what have you). Moreover, as these marketplaces get more complex, these producer-consumers will often collaborate to produce *public* goods that stimulate further production and consumption to the benefit of them all: police forces to keep the peace, physical infrastructure (roads, airports, etc.), systems to exchange wealth (banks and financial institutions) or information (telecommunications and broadcast systems). Nearly always, they establish governments to create and maintain these

public goods. Let us call this entire arrangement of production, consumption, the exchange of goods through markets, and the public goods that grease the wheels of production, consumption, and exchange, a *cooperative scheme*.

Some, the 'idle rich' or independently wealthy, may not need the benefits of this cooperative scheme in order to support themselves. Those of lesser means will need — or at the very least strongly desire — a share of the scheme's benefits though. Who is entitled to such a share? Few would disagree that those producer-consumers who contribute to the cooperative scheme are entitled to at least some share of the goods this scheme generates. This is not to say that each is necessarily entitled to the same share. Nevertheless, each producer-consumer who, through her work, has made a *fair contribution* to the cooperative scheme deserves at least a share in its benefits.

Conversely, anyone who does not make a fair contribution to this scheme is freeloading and not entitled to a share of its benefits. Those who work in support of the cooperative scheme have invested their efforts in it. It would therefore be unfair for anyone who has not invested in that scheme to claim a share in it. Many philosophers cash out this insight in terms of the notion of *reciprocity*. Stuart White explains his "principle of reciprocity" as requiring that any citizen who claims a share of the "social product" has "an obligation to make a decent productive contribution to the community in return." (White 2003: 20) Those seeking a share of the goods generated by the cooperative scheme must 'pay their dues,' White argues. If they do not, he observes, then these freeloaders are akin to thieves, depriving the contributors of some of the goods to whose production they contributed. They also fail to respect those who contribute to the cooperative scheme. For in claiming an unearned share, freeloaders exploit those who make productive contributions, treating them in an "offensively instrumental way." (White 2003: 63) As White sees it, freeloading on the work of others amounts to treating them as so many tools or resources fit to serve the freeloader's interests. Freeloading thus overlooks the fact that those on whom one freeloards are people with a legitimate interest in enjoying the fruits of the cooperative scheme in which they have invested by virtue of having worked to make that scheme a success. If we expect to benefit from the cooperative scheme, we thus owe it to others — or at least to all non-freeloaders who contribute to the cooperative scheme — to work so as to contribute to that scheme.⁶

There are significant philosophical worries about the fair play argument. Some doubt that work is *per se* required by reciprocity, noting that it seems possible to fulfill our duties of reciprocity in ways that do not involve work. (Becker 1980: 40–44, Aven 2016) Others doubt that reciprocity forbids our receiving a share of society's goods without working. (Levine 1995; Segall 2005) Philosophers sympathetic with libertarianism have doubted that others can obligate us simply because, by cooperating with one another, various goods are thereby generated. I propose, however, that we grant that the fair play argument is sound and establishes an in-principle duty to work grounded in reciprocity. My concern is instead with its capacity to establish a duty to work for us, here and now. For notice that the fair play argument makes workers' fulfillment of their duty contingent upon a set of background conditions being satisfied. The first such condition is obvious: In order for workers to fulfill this duty, they must make a fair contribution to a cooperative scheme. Morality bars them from

⁶ A similar argument is found in Rawls (1988). See also Rawls (1996: 15–18). Levine (1995) argues that in favoring a duty to work, Rawls violates his own principle of state neutrality by failing to accord equal respect to conceptions of the good that assign high value to leisure. For other articulations of a reciprocity-based duty to work, see Becker (1980), Shelby (2012), and Schaff (2017).

freeloading on that scheme. The second condition is that workers must also *benefit* (or benefit in the right way or to an adequate degree) from the cooperative schemes to which they contribute. Just as workers may not freeload on the cooperative scheme, so too are those associated with a cooperative scheme barred from freeloading on workers who fairly contribute to that scheme. This claim rests on the same considerations of fair play that ground the duty to work: For a cooperative scheme not to distribute its benefits to those who fairly contribute in effect deprives those contributors of goods to which they are entitled and treats them as mere instruments in service of the needs or wants of others contributing to that scheme. The reciprocity demanded by the duty to work works both ways. Hence, just as *only* those who make a fair contribution are entitled to a cooperative scheme's benefits, so too must *all* who make a fair contribution to a cooperative scheme enjoy its benefits.

The duty to work is thus embedded within a reciprocal arrangement between workers and the cooperative schemes to which they contribute. The duty here is conditional, not absolute: Economies, labor markets, and workplaces must satisfy these ideal conditions in order for there to be a widespread duty to work. Let us now see why these two conditions are so rarely satisfied in today's societies.

2 Condition 1: Fair Contributions to the Cooperative Scheme

Recall that the first condition for a duty to work to be binding is that workers must be in a position to provide fair contributions to the cooperative scheme.

What exactly is a 'fair contribution' to a cooperative scheme? One minimal condition on a fair contribution is that a person's work be a net benefit to the members of that cooperative scheme. By a 'net benefit,' I have in mind that a person's contributions produce more benefits than harms. Indisputably, if the fair play argument entails that workers must promote the cooperative scheme of which they are a part, their contributions must make others better off on the whole. If their contributions fail this test, they have not contributed to the success of the cooperative scheme, and all the more, cannot have made a fair contribution to its success. Some would want to add additional conditions on what makes for a worker's "fair contribution" (we might wonder whether workers with particularly valuable skills or talents are obligated to contribute more to the scheme, for instance⁷). But no matter. This minimal account of fair contribution in terms of net benefit will, as we shall see, be sufficient to show that in the majority of cases, workers do not — and indeed cannot — fulfill their end of the reciprocal bargain envisioned in the fair play argument.

One way for a worker to fail to make a fair contribution is for her work to make no positive contribution at all to the cooperative scheme. (An individual who makes no positive contribution at all cannot, by definition, make a net positive contribution). That an individual's work fails to make *any* positive contribution to the cooperative scheme of which she is a part may seem outlandish. Unfortunately though, today's economies includes many workers whose employment makes little if any contribution to the larger society. Compared to even a half century ago, far fewer people work in industries that produce tangible goods (farming or manufacturing) or that generate discernable benefits to others (education or health care, say). (US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016a) Instead, the service and

⁷ Among those who have argued against a right of unlimited choice of occupation are Cohen (2008) and Stanczyk (2012).

administrative employment sectors have exploded, with a larger percentage employed in fields such as telemarketing, public relations, corporate law, and the like. While these jobs are often well-compensated, what goods those who hold these jobs produce in return for this compensation is often mysterious. Imagine two possible labor strikes. In the first, everyone with the following job titles threatens to walk off the job: senior counsel, product marketing director, network architect, user experience designer, and compensation consultant.⁸ In the second, everyone with the following job titles threatens to strike: school teacher, police officer, subway operator, electrical repair technician, and sanitation engineer. Which group of strikers would garner greater public sympathy? No doubt the second group of strikers stands a far greater chance of having its demands met. The reasons for this are obvious: Those in the first group do not produce much, if anything, of vital social worth. For them to strike would not deprive participants in the cooperative scheme of any particularly valuable goods. In contrast, the disappearance of the second group of workers would have enormous impact on the short- and long-term success of the cooperative scheme to which they belong. A cooperative scheme without school teachers, police officers, etc., is likely to grind to a quick halt.

Positions in this first class are those that sociologist Graeber (2017) has succinctly labelled “bullshit jobs.” The existence of employees “who are basically paid to do nothing,” Graeber observes, runs counter to the predictions of market economics. If such employees produce little of value, then why do firms create positions for them and, in many instances, pay their occupants six figure salaries? This puzzle aside, Graeber points out the fact that many jobs contribute nothing of great value to our shared cooperative scheme is hardly a secret. Many holding bullshit jobs recognize they’re bullshit, “performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed.”

While I have little doubt that the number of non-productive jobs is growing, the precise number of people whose work does effectively nothing to contribute to our shared cooperative scheme is hard to pin down. The critical point for our purposes is that those working bullshit jobs do not hold up their end of the bargain envisioned in the fair play argument. For that argument roots the duty to work in a duty to make a socially valuable contribution to that scheme. Whoever works without making such a contribution necessarily fails to make a positive net contribution and so has no moral obligation to work under those circumstances.

Suppose, however, that a person’s work makes a contribution to the cooperative scheme from which she benefits. It nevertheless remains possible that her work also results in harms which balance or even exceed whatever positive contributions her work generates. If so, then her working undermines one of the central rationales for a duty to work: Her ostensible duty to work rests on her being obligated to contribute to a cooperative scheme from which she benefits. But if her working ends up undermining that scheme — if her working produces harms as great as its benefits, say — then her fulfilling the supposed duty to work cancels the very goods its fulfillment is supposed to create.

That work causes harms to others may seem like a surprising possibility. After all, most of us think of our wages as compensation for the work performed to produce *goods* for others. And I do not deny that most workers produce such goods. But we must not overlook that work also tends to produce harms to others, many of which tend to escape our attention.

⁸ These are among the occupational titles that, in a recent worker survey (Giang 2013), were most often described as “low meaning” despite high compensation.

Some of the harms work causes to others are generic in the sense that they are produced by almost everyone who works. Those who commute contribute to traffic congestion and crowded public transit systems, thus causing aggravation, discomfort, and wasted time for others. We bring our infectious microbes into the workplace, exposing our co-workers to disease. Work also has an ecological impact. When we work, we often double our use of natural resources, both heating or cooling our homes (where we do not work) and our workplaces (where we do). Aaron James (2017) has likewise argued that more of us should adopt the laid-back outlook of the surfer community, cutting back on work so as to produce less of the carbon emissions responsible for disruptive and damaging climate change. (See also Jackson 2009).

These harms of work are examples of *negative externalities*, costs of economic transactions that fall involuntarily on those who are not party to the transaction. When we exploit or sell our labor, we often generate costs that others have to bear largely without their consent.

However, other harms we cause through work are more direct, due to the specific nature of the work we do. Many workers contribute to industries that sell goods or services that provide either no benefit to consumers or are actually harmful to consumers. Those who market or manufacture tobacco contribute to harming those who buy tobacco products. The same could be said for those who market or manufacture unhealthy foods or untested medical supplements, or whose products encourage sexist stereotypes or negative self-conceptions based on gender. Many industries exist largely to sell products that contribute little if anything to human well-being. Though I do not begrudge others their bejeweled cell phone cases, I very much doubt that anyone would be worse off without them. And frankly, many products and services are ripoffs, promising or implying benefits that they do not provide. Just as those with bullshit jobs recognize their work makes no positive contribution to society, many who hold jobs in these industries know that their work harms others. A recent survey asked employees in different fields whether their jobs “make the world a worse place.” Among the fields with the highest affirmative responses were fast food workers (preparing and distributing food of suspect nutritional value), casino floor supervisors (watching gamblers lose their money in the addictive pursuit of wealth), and search engine marketing strategists (devising ever more clever ways for companies to divert our attention while we search the Internet). (Payscale.com 2016).

Again, how many people’s jobs are harmful on balance is difficult to estimate. Suffice to say though that most every job harms others to at least some negligible degree, and a fair number of jobs cause more significant harm to others. Add to these the number that make no productive contribution, and the result is that many people do not work so as to make their fair contribution to the cooperative scheme from which they benefit.

3 Condition 2: Fair Shares for Workers

The last section concluded that workers frequently do not often fulfill their end of the reciprocal bargain because their work does not amount to a net positive contribution to the cooperative scheme of which they are a part. Let us now consider whether the other end of this bargain is upheld — whether workers receive a fair share of cooperative benefits in exchange for their work. Granted, the larger society whose members already contribute to that scheme have a right that others not freeload on their contributions, that is, a right to ask for fair contributions from those who benefit from it. But so too do the beneficiaries have a right to ask

that the scheme yield benefits of sufficient value to make working a fair deal for both 'sides.' They have just as strong a claim not to be victims of freeloading.

Work invariably entails some sacrifices. Indeed, work necessarily makes us worse off with respect to certain scarce goods that we cannot replace. Work takes time, attention, and energy, all of which are in short supply and none of which we can manufacture.⁹ A duty to work imposes these burdens on our time, attention, and energy because it imposes limitations on our liberty. A duty to work, in other words, asks us that we devote some chunk of our liberty to working rather than other activities. Work may also generate other burdens. We may find it burdensome to have to interact with obnoxious co-workers or unpleasant clients, for example. The fair play argument contends that such burdens can be justified because by contributing to a cooperative scheme of production and consumption, workers become entitled to a share of that scheme's benefits. But what makes for a fair share of these benefits?

Imagine a negotiation between those already contributing to, and benefitting from, some cooperative scheme and those who wish to benefit from it and are willing to work in order to gain the right to those benefits. What balance of contributions and benefits would existing contributors and prospective contributors to the cooperative scheme find reasonable to accept?

No doubt some workers benefit more from working than others. Some opt to work more, which would seem to entitle them to a greater share of these benefits. Others have especially valuable talents or training, attributes which (in any scheme where labor is distributed on a market basis) typically lead to better compensation or working conditions. But suppose we consider simply what level of benefits from their contributions to the cooperative scheme workers would find minimally acceptable. In other words, where should the *floor* be set with respect to the benefits a person would receive from working in order for it to be reasonable to impose on her a moral duty to work? This is the level of benefits below which, if it were proposed by existing contributors to the cooperative scheme, prospective workers would be justified in 'walking away from the table.'

Where is this floor? First, the benefits of working (and thereby contributing to a cooperative scheme) must unequivocally improve a person's overall well-being in comparison to the level of well-being she enjoys without working. A necessary condition on any 'bargain' being rational is that each party is made better off than they would be in its absence. Would-be workers who could not expect to have their lives improved overall by contributing to a cooperative scheme would be foolish to assent to working on behalf of that scheme.

Still, even if working made a person better off overall thanks to her sharing in the cooperative scheme's benefits, prospective workers would be justified in requiring that working meet an additional criterion: that these benefits enable them to meet the basic needs of someone living in her community. 'Basic needs' is obviously a vague term, but few would disagree that safe and stable housing, a nutritionally adequate diet, and access to essential medical care are basic needs in every society. I would count other goods among a person's basic needs, such as the education needed to participate in public life and to prepare for the workplace and some decent amount of leisure in which to enjoy other pursuits and maintain worthwhile relationships with families and others. However, we need not identify the precise boundaries of 'basic needs' to appreciate this as one criterion of the benefits floor. If working does not provide for a person's basic needs, then expecting individuals to work amounts to offering them a bad bargain. After all, most all would-be workers work because those basic needs go unmet if they *do not* work. And it is hard to see why workers should be willing to

⁹ On the neglect of the value of time in contemporary theorizing about justice, see Rose (2016).

expend irreplaceable goods such as time, energy, etc., if work does not lift them over the threshold of basic needs being met.

Among possible work arrangements that satisfy these two criteria, would-be workers might have reason to favor some over others. But any arrangement that representatives of the cooperative scheme offered that did not both make workers better off overall and make possible the satisfaction of their basic needs would be one that workers would have a basis for reasonably rejecting. Hence, in terms of the duty to work, only those workers for whom working satisfies these two criteria could have a fair-play-based duty to work. For if these criteria are not met, then workers do not acquire the goods sufficient to make working a reciprocal duty.

Let us begin with the first criterion, that working must leave a person better off in terms of well-being than not working. No doubt many people are better off employed than unemployed. Decades of research has established that unemployment is detrimental to physical and mental health (Brenner 2005; Herbig et al. 2013; Margerison-Zilko et al. 2016) and to individuals' sense of well-being. (Calvo et al. 2015) Such evidence notwithstanding, we should not be so quick to conclude that work always makes us better off than not working.

For one, work has a number of costs that must not be overlooked when examining work and well-being. The most obvious cost of work is the opportunity cost arising from the amount of time spent working. A recent study of workers in 36 countries found that workers average anywhere from 1400 to 2300 h per year on the job, the equivalent of around eight to fourteen weeks per annum. (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 2015) This likely underestimates the time commitment associated with work. For one, most workers travel to their job sites. The average commute to work in the United States, for example, is 26 min each direction. (Ingraham 2016) For an employee working 200 days per year, that adds up to 180 h or just over an entire week per year, spent travelling to job sites. Such time commitments obviously leave far less time for other worthwhile endeavors, such as socializing with friends or family, exercising, sleeping, pursuing hobbies or leisure, or participating in shared community life. Contemporary knowledge workers suffer further work-related infringements on their time due to the growing expectation that they will remain electronically "connected" to the workplace through e-mail, text messaging, etc. (Gregg 2011) This expectation makes whole-hearted attention to non-work activities outside work hours more challenging and so diminishes the value of non-work time. This reality has led to a backlash against the porousness of work-life boundaries and an assertion of employees' "right to disconnect." (Rubin 2017).

Work imposes other costs besides forfeiture of time. Commuting, for instance, is also a significant source of stress and very detrimental to health. (Ingraham 2016) Commuting also has significant monetary costs. One study pegs the average annual cost of commuting in the United States at \$2600 per worker. (Vasel 2015) Many workers also expend income in order to conform to work demands. Workers can spend hundreds, even thousands of dollars per year, on workplace clothing, either mandated by law (as in the 'white coats' or scrubs worn by medical professionals) or merely socially expected (as in the suits that are customary in finance or law). Working also generates costs in order to pay *other* workers for tasks that one might be able to complete oneself but for working. Many working people pay others for home cleaning, home repair, or lawn and garden services that, absent the demands of work, they could well provide for themselves. And of course the single largest example of this is child care. Many households in the U.S spend over 10% of their income on child care, with typical costs averaging well above \$200 per week. In many states, the cost of child care exceeds the cost of tuition at public universities. (Renzulli 2016).

These costs do not include various physical and mental costs of work itself. Recent studies have concluded that while having a job with good working conditions is better from the standpoint of stress and health than unemployment, unemployment may well be no worse (Kim and von dem Knesebeck 2015) and perhaps even better on these measures than having a job with poor working conditions. (Chandola and Zhang 2018) And if one's job is (in Graeber's terms) bullshit, then one suffers the further burden of guilt or anxiety at working without producing anything of value.

Again, an exact estimate of the number of individuals for whom working is a net drain on their well-being is hard to come by. But add up the direct and ancillary costs of work — in time, monetary expenditures, health and stress —and these costs are likely to exceed, in some cases, whatever benefits to well-being that work provides.

Note though that even if a person is made better off overall through work, she may still not have her basic needs met through work. And here the case for large numbers of workers not meeting the second criterion for receiving a fair share of the benefits of a cooperative scheme is apparent.

Simply put, many workers do not receive wages that could enable them to avoid poverty and meet their basic needs through work. In most Western nations, many of those in poverty work (about 40% in the United States (Dalaker 2017)), and the greater the overall level of poverty, the greater the percentage who are 'working poor' tends to be. (Brady et al. 2010) Three-fifths of those in poverty in Great Britain are in households in which someone works. (Butler 2017) In the U.S., the federal minimum wage is currently \$7.25 per hour, the full-time equivalent of about \$15,000 per year, below the national poverty line for a household of two or more people. And this statistic is likely to be misleading, since the poverty line is calculated based on food costs, which have remained stable in recent decades while costs for housing, health care, and education have soared. (United States Department of Agriculture Department of Economic Research 2017) (About 1 in 7 Americans receives supplemental government food assistance to boot.)

Under the narrow definition given above, basic needs include safe and stable housing, a nutritionally adequate diet, and access to essential medical care. Again, exact estimates are hazardous, but given that half of American jobs pay \$18 per hour or less, the equivalent of \$36,000 per year (United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016b), I would venture that perhaps half of the U.S. working population cannot meet its basic needs through working. If we adopt the more expansive definition of basic needs, one including education and leisure, then it seems likely that this percentage is smaller still. Admittedly, many of these households have their basic needs met via government assistance. But that underscores rather than undermines the case made here: that work often fails to enable workers to meet their basic economic needs.

4 Why Few Have a Duty to Work

The previous two sections show that whether we consider worker contributions to a cooperative scheme or worker benefits from a cooperative scheme, it is rarely that case that the reciprocity envisioned by the fair play argument is in fact achieved. A large number of workers do not in fact provide a net benefit to the cooperative scheme to which they are supposed to make a fair contribution, and a large number of workers either do not benefit on balance or do

not have their basic needs met thanks to their work. The number who do both, I submit, is likely to be very small indeed.

My opponents will rightfully point out that my reasoning thus far does not demonstrate that the fair play argument is unsound. It merely shows that plenty of workers do not fulfill their alleged duty to work. And in and of itself, this would not count against there being a duty to work. After all, that a large number of people do not fulfill a duty does not show that there is not such a duty after all. Lying and deception are distressingly common, for instance. But that isn't much of an argument against a duty not to lie or deceive.

In the case of the duty to work though, there is the crucial difference that workers rarely have much control over their economic circumstances or workplaces. Lying and deception fall straightforwardly within our control. Yet whether one's work contributes to, or provides one adequate benefits from, a cooperative scheme is a matter over which workers have little control. In fact, in most instances, others besides workers have far more control over the background conditions that determine whether workers can meet this duty. Macro-level facts—government policies and employer practices, chief among them—go much further in determining whether workers and their employers (or workers and the larger cooperative scheme in which they are embedded) stand in a fair reciprocal relation than do any micro-level facts about, or choices by, individual workers. As the old philosophical saw has it, a person only *ought* to do what she *can* do. And workers morally ought to work (that is, they have a duty to work) only if they *can* work under terms that satisfy the background conditions that make possible the reciprocal relationship envisioned in the fair play argument. But because workers have such meager power over the larger economy and the market in which they sell their labor, they by and large cannot act so as to create the conditions for them to be subject to a duty to work.

One might think that the solution here is obvious: In order to fulfill their duty to work, workers ought to change jobs, finding positions that make a greater contribution to the cooperative scheme or that provide them their fair share of the benefits to which they are entitled thanks to their making their fair contributions to that scheme. But here too, workers have relatively little control. Obviously, whether a given firm employs a worker depends on choices made by the firm. And in recent decades, labor markets have become increasingly stagnant. Regardless of occupation, workers (particularly younger workers) shift from job to job much less frequently than in the past. Possible explanations for this trend include high housing costs, lack of geographical mobility, and mismatches between workers' skills and available positions. (Bosler and Petrosky-Nadeau 2016) But one *implausible* explanation is that workers do not want to shift jobs as much now. In addition to many jobs failing to provide workers their fair share of the benefits of the cooperative scheme to which they contribute, today's workers are less satisfied with the quality of their jobs than they were a generation ago. (Pew Research Group 2016; Conference 2017) We may rightly infer then that many workers would work in more productive and satisfying positions if only they could do so.

Another way in which the conditions for a fair play-based duty to work could be more fully realized is through workers' collective political action. Workers bonded together in unions or other forms of collective representation could well alter some of the contingent facts that (I have argued) undercut the fair play-based duty to work. Their efforts could lead to higher wages, lower and more reliable hours, the introduction of greater meaning and productivity into bullshit jobs, changes to labor-management relations, and so on. Such changes would likely bring the labor economy closer to the conditions that trigger a duty to work. But note

that, in the interim, it still would not be true that most individual workers have a moral duty to work or can act on their own to create the political conditions for such a duty to be in place.

Second, even to the degree that workers can control their specific employment situation or the background conditions in which they work, creating the conditions for work to ‘pay off’ morally — for one’s work to satisfy the conditions for morally dutiful work — is not their moral responsibility alone. The fair play argument emphasizes that the moral duty to work rests on considerations of reciprocity, i.e., whether a worker is afforded the opportunity to make a fair contribution to, and garner a fair share of the benefits of, a cooperative scheme. Many of our duties are *unilateral* in that they require us to fulfill them irrespective of what others do. (Our duties not to cause others harm or not to break our promises to others are like this; we are required to fulfill them largely independently of what others do.) Being reciprocal, the supposed duty to work is not like this. The duty to work is conditional and *bilateral*, a duty that arises only if certain conditions are satisfied, conditions which are overwhelmingly shaped not by workers but by others. As social critics such as Bertrand Russell have long emphasized, economic elites usually derive benefit from the widespread belief in a duty to work, and so “preach the dignity of labor while taking care themselves to remain undignified in this respect.” (Russell 1932) But the responsibility for creating the conditions of reciprocity on which a duty to work rests as much on them as it does on those who might work. If there is a ‘meta-duty’ here — a political duty to create the conditions under which a moral duty to work is possible to discharge — that meta-duty surely does not fall on workers alone.

The fair play argument thus rests on an idealized picture of work that diverges dramatically from the conditions of many workers. A great deal is therefore lost in translation between the ideal economic and labor market circumstances assumed by the fair play argument and the non-ideal economic and labor market circumstance in which many workers actually live. Today’s gospel of work thus assigns a “moral sanctity” to work “painfully out of step with the way that a vast proportion of people actually experience their jobs.” (Frayne 2015: 63) As a result, there is a duty to work, but very few are bound by that duty. The *scope* of the duty to work is therefore very narrow. I cannot venture an exact guess as to how many workers work under conditions that enable them to satisfy their conditional duty to work. Yet it is very unlikely that this number is more than a small fraction of those who can or do work.

5 Conclusion

Much of my discussion has focused on the economic and labor market conditions in the United States, where (if I am correct) few actually have a moral duty to work under said conditions. Of course, economic and labor market conditions vary in different nations, and there are other industrialized nations where more workers have a duty to work because work is more productive, less harmful to others, more remunerative to workers, etc. Moreover, workers in professions that make a decided contribution to the social good and are fairly compensated for those contributions (pediatricians come to mind) retain a duty to work. But the more crucial philosophical point is that we must not be misled into thinking that the duty to work is natural, universal, or unconditional. As one defender of a duty to work points out, “all members of a society may be said to be equally obligated to work even though the quality and quantity of required work varies widely from member to member,” with the particular form of that duty depending on contingent truths about a society. (Becker 1980: 41) I only hope to have shown that, far more often than we expect, contingent facts about the economic organizations of

contemporary societies entail the quantity of work particular workers are required to perform in order to fulfill this societal obligation is zero.

Given the poor conditions in which many work nowadays, the long-term trend of larger numbers of workers quitting the workforce altogether should not shock us. (United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017) Prudence may condemn those who quit. But I hope to have shown that, by and large, morality does not.

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