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Needs, creativity and care: Adorno and the future of work

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Abstract
This paper attempts to show how Adorno's thought can illuminate our reflections on the future of work. It does so by situating Adorno's conception of genuine activity in relation to his negativist critical epistemology and his subtle account of the distinction between true and false needs. What emerges is an understanding of work that can guide our aspirations for the future of work, and one we illustrate via discussions of creative work and care work. These are types of work which cater to persistent human needs, albeit ones that are distorted under present social conditions. Adorno's thought helps us to understand why this is the case.

Keywords
Critical theory, work, Adorno, needs, creative work, care work

Introduction

Given the dramatic technological changes underway – the digitization and automation of the work-world through the imminent explosion of machine-learning and artificial intelligence (Ford, 2015; Susskind and Susskind, 2015) – does work have a future? This question can be approached both normatively and empirically. Normatively: *ought* work have a future? Does it have ethical worth that we should care to preserve? Empirically: *will* work *in fact* persist so as to realize whatever ethical worth it might have?

To the normative question, we answer: yes, *good* work, genuine activity, is essential to our being human. While certain sorts of work may eventually be swept aside without ethical loss, other kinds

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of work seem so essential to human life that they are not plausibly eradicable (*pace* the anti-work tradition. See: Danaher, 2019; Gorz, 1985). They seem completely resistant to automation etc., and unavoidable requirements of any recognizably human form of life. On the empirical question, we are less confident. As Applebaum (1992) notes, '[w]hether this vision is a realistic goal or realizable in the future will depend on political and social choices, and the development of a new set of values in modern, industrial cultures' (p. 589).

However, personally deciding – and philosophically accounting for – which activities are most choice-worthy is laden with difficulties. 'Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry' (p. 206) wrote Bentham (1830). Bentham's successor as the leading figure of utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill, disagreed and attempted to make sense of the distinction in terms of higher and lower pleasures (Mill, 2002). The obscurity into which pushpin, a game which involves pushing needles across a table, has fallen suggests that scepticism about the equality of such activities is justified, especially when we consider the enduring appeal of poetry and music.

Nevertheless, any attempt to distinguish between higher and lower pleasures, and thus between more and less choice-worthy activities, as Mill, and others before and since, attempted, has proved frustratingly liable to circularity. Worse, such attempts can even appear reflective of over-bearing 'paternalism' or an obnoxious and arbitrary belief in the superiority of one's own preferences. Furthermore, judgements about the worth of work often seem to reflect a wider set of biases, as when women's work, for instance, is systematically undervalued (see Grimshaw and Rubery, 2007).

When we reflect on our own professional aspirations, we may suspect they reflect idiosyncratic preferences rather than judgements of objectively 'better' and 'worse'. This temptation recedes, however, when we broaden the question: what sort of job would we want our children to do, say? Here, the basic intuition remains: some endeavours – including forms of work – do seem better, more worthy of our time, even in the face of the fact that many people are, apparently, insufficiently appreciative of them, and some do seem worse, and less worthy of our time, even in the face of disheartening popularity.

Call this the 'objectivist intuition'. This notion is related to the current in the contemporary literature which argues that meaningful work is a human need (Yeoman, 2014a). Work is meaningful if it contributes something genuinely worthwhile to others or is intrinsically valuable. Hence someone may find their job interesting, but still feel it is not really 'meaningful', which is a notion that implies a certain objectivity (Wolf, 2010) despite the overwhelming emphasis on subjectivity in empirical research on this topic (Bailey et al., 2019).

There has recently been much interest in ethical reflection on work (Breen and Deranty, 2021; Yeoman et al., 2019), and the philosophically rich, interdisciplinary Frankfurt School tradition of Critical Theory is a natural place to look for a critical ethics of work. While Honneth's (1991, 2014) more recent paradigm of Critical Theory has been influential in the work literature (Deranty and Dejours, 2010; Smith and Deranty, 2012), we want to suggest that the leading philosopher of the Frankfurt School's 'first generation', Theodor Adorno, offers promising and untapped resources for a critical ethics of work that respects the objectivist intuition.

Despite influence in Critical Management Studies (Hancock and Tyler, 2004; Klikauer, 2015; Parker, 2003), Adorno has received scant attention in work scholarship. Unsurprisingly, perhaps: his insistence that 'wrong life' – our current social world – is radically compromised and 'cannot be lived rightly' (Adorno, 2005b: 39) is disquieting. Moreover, the received view of Adorno as an irrationalist pessimist is understandably off-putting. Lately, however, that view has been challenged (Duford, 2017; Finlayson, 2020; Freyenhagen, 2013; O'Connor, 2004), and the significance of Adorno's thought to the study of work defended (e.g. Nevasto, 2021;

Reeves and Sinnicks, 2021, 2022). In that vein, we want to argue that Adorno's negativist accounts of true and false needs, of work in contemporary market society and of work as genuine activity are highly suggestive for critical reflection on work's future that does justice to the objectivist intuition.

On this Adornian view, market society tends to generate work characterized by powerlessness, boredom and superfluousness. Nevertheless, we consider two paradigm examples of work that appear to be central to work's future: creative work and care work. Our needs for creative experience and for care are not needs which could in principle be answered by mechanization or automation: they are not for, say, interesting images or sounds, however created, or a technical imitation of kindness. They are needs for *human* creativity and for *human* care. And reflection on the privations of contemporary work implies we essentially need autonomous, spontaneous and imaginative activity that immediately fulfils others' needs. Hence, creative and care work seem to exemplify what is irreducibly worthwhile in work, and must have a future, despite their distortion under present social conditions.

The Adornian account that emerges is negativist and critically sceptical of our existing practices and institutions, but takes our deepest ethical impulses and intuitions seriously, and is guided by a fundamental optimism about the unfulfilled potential for human flourishing *contra* the impoverishment of our social world. It thus advises us to promote social changes that foreground and liberate forms of work which answer to the description of 'genuine activity', which we elaborate below, including creative work and care work, from the deforming pressures of market society.

We do not, of course, aim to fully defend Adorno's position. Rather, we try to show how, while involving some challenging and controversial claims about modern societies, Adorno's thought also provides surprisingly illuminating elucidations of certain of our deepest impulses and intuitions about the importance of work in principle, about the impoverishment of work in our current social world and about any future of work worth wanting. The apparent counter-intuitiveness of his social analyses is potentially displaced once we get into view just how much Adorno helps us to make sense of the suffering and frustration that is already experientially prominent in the work-world of contemporary capitalist societies. Even if some of his social diagnoses are disquieting, their elucidatory power suggests we should take them seriously.

Thus, we try to show that Adorno's thought offers a distinctive and illuminating approach to the question of work's worth and work's future that has the potential to deepen our thinking about these topics and merits more sustained attention.

True and false needs

Adorno's ethics of work accommodates the objectivist intuition because it is rooted in a conception of needs that is alive to the distinction between true and false needs, that is, between merely felt, but in some way illusory, needs and genuine needs. True needs are bound up with the objectivist intuition introduced above because in order to qualify as a need, subjective attraction is insufficient. The distinction between true and false needs is complex. The concept of true human needs as opposed to false ones is not, for Adorno, equivalent to that of acquired or manufactured needs as opposed to 'natural' ones. True human needs are not automatically transparently available to self-consciousness, for the self-interpretation of one's needs, which process can sometimes be partly constitutive of those needs, is a socially conditioned process.

What Yeoman (2014a) refers to as 'the capabilities for objective valuation' (p. 245) are not easily acquired. Furthermore, many obvious candidates for true needs are 'manufactured' through socialization and the ongoing complex interplay of social life. Our needs are not simply given, as they might be for less complex organisms, 'mere', 'non-rational' animals, say. However, just as

true and false needs can be generated by these processes, true needs can also be rejected or rendered invisible by the pathologies of contemporary social life. Critique can only proceed by interrogating social experiences of suffering and attempting to understand as fully as possible their sources.

Accordingly, Adorno (2017) insists that '[n]o neat distinction can be made between a need proper to humanity and one that would be a consequence of repression . . . needs are conglomerates of truth and falsehood' (p. 103). This is to say not that needs combine truth and falsehood in the same way and to the same degree, but, rather, that even false needs have a truth-moment, as actual needs of subjects in a privative situation. This idea may seem obscure, but consider those addicted to alcohol or benzodiazepines, for example: they have an acquired immediate need for the substance, which is why medical advice is to gradually taper, rather than abruptly cease, use. Such acquired needs are, in reality, needs that addicts do not need, and indeed need to be rid of. Thomson (1987) suggests that our fundamental needs are associated with vital interests relating to our essential nature. Such vital interests are, by definition, inherently choice worthy, though of course the problem is, as we noted at the outset, philosophically accounting for which activities are most choice worthy is laden with difficulties and notoriously prone to circularity. This difficulty is particularly pronounced given the complex interrelation between true and false needs.

This concept of false needs also applies more broadly, where someone has acquired a present actual need, which acquired need is something they ultimately need not to have and to be rid of. The complex picture Adorno paints here is one that implies a pervasive vulnerability to the distortion characteristic of false needs, so that we are all liable to adopt them. Of course, we may not be able to distinguish with certainty true from false needs in particular cases, but we can know that our market-based social world *tends* to create such false needs in people. For it operates according to functional system-imperatives that are oriented not to sensitively deciphering people's needs, or helping them to articulate their own true needs for themselves, but to instrumentalizing and manipulating their needs, and obscuring their reflective sense of what their needs are, in the interests of profit-creation.

Social conditioning of our needs *per se* is not the problem. Clearly any possible social world will require inhabitants to come to terms with it in some way. But the actual social world seems, for Adorno, to be particularly, systematically misaligned with our true needs. This is not to say that people are preoccupied with following their false needs rather than discovering their true needs, but that an alienating social world tends to generate false needs that as actual needs seem to people to be true ones. It is the fact, as Adorno sees it, that our false needs are actual needs, in a social world that requires people to adapt to system-imperatives opposed to the fulfilment of our true needs, that explains why we are prone to pursue false needs.

The notion of 'false needs' is reminiscent of Marx's account of false consciousness, and indeed Adorno (1973) refers to false needs as 'ideologies' (p. 92), that is, 'socially necessary illusion[s]' (Adorno, 2006: 118). However, the Frankfurt School incorporation of psychoanalysis allowed Adorno to provide a deeper account of false needs. Marx's held that, under capitalism, people are alienated from their true needs because they are forced to relate to themselves and each other – and so to their human life form or 'species-being' (Marx, 1975: 391) – via the corrupting mediation of the 'hostile reciprocal opposition' of commodity exchange (p. 341). Adorno endorses this story as far as it goes, but it leaves the question of why and how people are prone to accept and adapt to this alienation, accepting a false consciousness of it, rather than apprehending and rebelling against it (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002). And this part of the story is supplied by psychoanalytic concepts: repression, internalization, adaptation, unconscious phantasy, accommodation to the superego, role-identification (Adorno, 1967, 1968).

But false needs also involve a truth-moment in another respect. As Adorno (1973) puts it:

> Real needs can be objectively ideologies without entitling us to deny them. For in the needs of even the people who are covered . . . administered, there reacts something in regard to which they are not fully covered – a surplus of their subjective share, which the system has not wholly mastered. Material needs should be respected even in their wrong form. (p. 92)

No matter how misguided, displaced or transferred onto 'things not needed by subjects' (ibid), what lies at their core is an ineliminable 'surplus'. That underlying surplus, the impulse behind every false need, is true as a longing despite taking the wrong form.

Such an observation allows us to make sense of the notion that not every aspect of our society is equally distorted – the system has not mastered everything wholly – which will be important to our later discussion, even if manifestation in the wrong form ensures that the pursuit of felt needs, both true and false, registers as suffering under present conditions. In this way, there is an affinity between Adorno's account of needs and the notion of *Sehnsucht* or 'life longings' (Scheibe et al., 2007), which captures the idea that our most pressing desires are often experienced as being painful.

This suffering, while hard to reliably measure (Allard-Poesi and Hollet-Haudebert, 2017), is particularly manifest in contemporary work. Adorno regards the workplace as being systematically misaligned with human needs: indifferent if not overtly hostile to them. Practical life is largely determined by the impersonal forces of opaque economic and administrative systems; the roles and norms available to individuals are rooted in practices that ignore and distort people's needs, and encourage reified forms of thought.

Our social world of practices and institutions is dominated by a form of rationality Adorno (1993) calls 'identity thinking', in particular the form of thought which views everything in terms of the 'universal exchange relationship in which everything that exists, exists only for something else' (p. 26). Such thinking, embodied in economic, bureaucratic and legal rationalities, treats everything abstractly, as *fungible* material, rather than as something of irreducible particularity and significance. This means human needs are generally not directly relevant as significant in themselves, *as ends*, within our social practices, which are interested in them only insofar as they can be means to abstract systemic goals like efficiency, profit and growth. It is, in this sense, a social world based on a 'disregard for living human beings' (Adorno, 1973: 354), in which people's 'needs are merely ground down' (Adorno, 1993: 46).

Through concrete inquiries into various aspects of social life it is possible, Adorno holds, to diagnose the privation of a form of life from the inside; and moreover, he holds, our social world is, and we can know it to be, a privative one. If the bad *qua* privation of human life can be diagnosed in this way, then – *contra* later Frankfurt School theorists (Habermas, 1987; Honneth, 1991) – we do not need a positive ethical conception or 'normative foundation' to apprehend it (see Freyenhagen, 2013: ch.8; Reeves, 2016).

Adorno's critique of modern work

Adorno identifies at least three distinctive forms of suffering prevalent in the social experiences of the contemporary work-world: *powerlessness*, *boredom* and *superfluousness*. There are reasons to suspect these are genuine manifestations of privation, rather than forms of suffering internal to the human life form. In each case, too, there appear to be false needs, needs whose existence is best explained not by the essential requirements of human flourishing but by the adaptive pressures our social world places on individuals if they are to cope with its impoverishment. Thus, they are examples of precisely what we would want the work of the future to avoid: it would be work that

avoided powerlessness, boredom and superfluousness because it fulfilled the true needs the violation of which they are symptoms, and that avoided the fulfilment of the corresponding false needs because it removed the cause of those false needs existing in the first place.

Powerlessness

Our social world is, for Adorno, a realm of unfreedom. In such a world, no-one 'can now determine their own life within even a moderately comprehensive framework' (Adorno, 2005b: 37, translation amended). And a central pillar of this unfreedom is the world of work: work is by and large 'time that is determined heteronomously' (Adorno, 2005a: 167), over which people feel they are powerless, a feeling which is associated with a sense of meaninglessness at work (Bailey and Madden, 2019; Tummers and Den Dulk, 2013). The average worker does not have the freedom to 'seek out and arrange his work according to his own intentions' (Adorno, 2005a: 169), and this shows up in the suffering of the prevalent feeling of powerlessness.

The range of work currently made available by the market does not offer many people many desirable options. Indeed, options tend not to be sought out, but rather reluctantly accepted on pain of destitution. For most workers, 'unfreedom persists objectively despite the semblance of levelling and equalization' (Adorno, 2019a: 58). Indeed, we all

> experience this when for example we find ourselves in a job-seeking situation. It will be experienced primarily in the fact that what is expected of us as someone who . . . has to sell themselves on the market is not what we ourselves would like; that is, we cannot actually realize our own possibilities and talent but must largely follow what is demanded of us. (p. 58–59)

Adorno's point is that, since the economically viable, available forms of work are determined by the market, by what is and is not profitable, and insofar as such work is organized by that same profit principle, the sphere of work is a sphere of unfreedom. We largely feel powerless not only over our work activities, but also to change this sphere for the better, or even to prevent further deterioration. As Spencer (2017) notes, recent technological changes in the workplace have allowed employers 'to shape the design and operation of digital technologies to realize their own goals, at the expense of those of workers' (p. 146).

Our social world generates considerable pressure towards adaptive role-identification, wherein people identify with their employer, employment role or working conditions, or at least formulate their dissatisfaction and demands in thin and minimal terms that object to the extremes while implicitly accepting the essentials of their predicament (Reeves and Sinnicks, 2021). Many sorts of jobs create pressures on people to adapt to their situation by identifying with their employers and/or their employment role (Musílek et al., 2020). This tendency is an example of false needs in action, as in identifying with an employer, agents can come to adopt the interests of their employer as their own needs, even where there is a conflict between the fundamental interests of employers and employees as is often the case in the employment relationship (Budd and Bhave, 2019). This shows why Adorno's conception of needs is important for thinking about the ethics of work. People may well need to identify with their employment roles in order to adapt and cope, and this may be a pressing need, and yet it may at the same time be a false need, a need imposed on people by a hostile social world (Reeves and Sinnicks, 2022: 3).

Boredom

The 'feeling of powerlessness is closely bound up with boredom', which 'is a function of life under the compulsion to work and under the rigorous division of labour. Boredom need not necessarily

exist' (Adorno, 2005a: 171), yet it is perhaps one of the most common workplace experiences (Cederström and Fleming, 2012; Fisher, 1993; Johnsen, 2016; Noury et al., 2022).

As Adorno (2019a) sees it, such boredom is a second prevalent social form of suffering which reflects the impoverishment of work in modern societies rather than something essential to work: boredom is 'connected with the [social] structure of labour... the technically rationalised character of which basically consists in the repetition of ideally identical processes and operations on the part of the labouring individuals and the machines which are involved' (p. 155). These are 'development[s] which human beings are simply supposed to adapt to' (Adorno, 2019a: 155), yet, on the whole, we have not thoroughly adapted to the boredom of work. Indeed, Svendsen (2008) claims that much work is 'excruciatingly boring' (p. 30), Costas and Kärreman (2016) highlight boredom as one of the typical experiences of working life, and it is one which often makes people think about leaving their job (Reijseger et al., 2013). The phenomenological persistence of boredom suggests that it is relatively resilient, and this, for Adorno (2005a), suggests the inherent inadequacy of modern work to the true needs of human beings. When we examine the kinds of tedious and unstimulating work people are typically expected to perform, boredom looks like an apt response: 'boredom is the reflex reaction to objective dullness . . . It is objective desperation' (p. 171).

While boredom may sometimes be misplaced, it seems unlikely that the bored call-centre or distribution-centre worker must be missing something exciting and vital in their work which, we may speculate, falls someway short even of the excitement once associated with pushpin. People sometimes require time and familiarity to appreciate the internal goods of their work, but with boring work the opposite is true: increased familiarity tends to intensify, not ameliorate, boredom.

Of course, many people do adapt to boredom in various ways, for example accepting that work is 'naturally' or 'necessarily' boring, and that the 'realistic' attitude is to accept this without complaining. Indeed, we can identify ideological repercussions of this in, for example, the idea that work *ought* to be boring and that, concomitantly, whatever is not boring is not proper work. Adorno (2005a) alludes to this tendency when writing that 'my work . . . so far has been so pleasant to me that I am unable to express it within that opposition to free time that the current razor-sharp classification demands from people' (p. 168).

The need for 'superficial distraction' in our free time (p. 172) is, Adorno (2005a) thinks, another example of a false need – one arising from the demand to cope with the boredom of work, for which purpose it may be very helpful to suppress one's imaginative capacities and needs. At any rate, prolonged subjection to dull work might plausibly atrophy one's imagination. The superficial distraction of culture industry products,[1] which provide comfort through the repetition of familiar and unchallenging formulae which engage primitive levels of psychological wish and anxiety (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 97–136), may well be something people forced to cope with objective dullness have come to need. But this need seems likely to be a false one – a need that is adaptively acquired in a social world that demands we find ways to cope with objective dullness, objective desperation.

Superfluousness

The feeling of superfluousness, Adorno (2019b) claims, is a more or less ubiquitous one that prevails against the official recognition-structures of the market:

> in this society, we all potentially experience ourselves as superfluous in terms of our work . . . this deep sense of superfluity is really at the heart of the general malaise, the need for security and the uncertainty that we can speak of today. (p. 59)

People can find that their work commands a good price in the labour market, yet still feel that it is superfluous. The consumer market is divorced from any plausible structure of true human needs, geared instead towards the manufacture and manipulation of preferences for profit-maximization. We are, consequently, largely unable to really believe in the recognition-structures of the labour market. Since it palpably fails to systematically track human needs, its recognition of our work offers no assurance that what we are doing is necessary and valuable. Here Adorno anticipates recent research on workers' sense of the irrelevance of their work (see, for instance, Graeber, 2018).

One false need arising in response to this sense of superfluousness in work is, Adorno (2005b) argues, the way in which the market logic of productivity has colonized free time:

> Everybody must have projects all the time. The maximum must be extracted from leisure . . . the forms of the production process are repeated in private life, or in those areas of work exempted from these forms themselves. The whole of life must look like a job. (p. 138)

As such, 'organised free time is compulsory . . . linked to the needs of human beings living under the functional system' (Adorno, 2005a: 170). This is exemplified in the rise of what Adorno calls 'pseudo-activity', 'the expression of a readiness for self-surrender, in which one senses the only guarantee of self-preservation. Security is glimpsed in adaptation to the utmost insecurity . . . Anyone who wants to move with the times is not allowed to be different' (Adorno, 2005b: 139). The performative mimicry of productive activity, Adorno is suggesting, can be an adaptive attempt to cope with and ward off the sinking feeling that one can no longer make a worthwhile contribution and so is surplus to requirements.

While perhaps all good and meaningful work will involve elements of suffering – including fatigue, physical pain or mental anguish – powerlessness, boredom and superfluousness are plausibly forms of suffering that track privations in work rather than being internal to work as such. We accept certain forms of suffering as intrinsic parts of human life, without which what is worthwhile would be inconceivable: every athlete knows fatigue is part of the process, as every writer knows anxiety is. But some forms of suffering seem to be extrinsic to what is ethically irreducible. Arguably, this distinction shows up phenomenologically: while fatigue and anxiety are unpleasant, we do not experience them as extrinsic to work, and when we take our work to be worthwhile we may even welcome them as corollaries of meaningful exertion. The same cannot be said for powerlessness, boredom or superfluousness. These strike us (in the good epistemic case) as corruptions of human activity from the outside, not intrinsic features of meaningful activity. For Adorno, that these forms of suffering seem to make up the dominant register of modern work is telling.

Genuine activity and true needs

For Adorno, the privation of work in our social world is detectable by the forms of suffering it generates, and by the plausibly false needs that the pressure to cope with and adapt to those forms of suffering generates. We turn now to the positive ethical nature and significance of work, its place in human life. Adorno's Critical Theory is primarily negative, but it is by no means *merely* negative. From these negative diagnoses of social suffering as manifestations of privation, positive hypotheses present themselves. The experiences associated with these forms of privation can thus guide us towards an understanding of the sort of work worth wanting, in a manner reminiscent of accounts of emotions as evaluative appraisals (e.g. Nussbaum, 2001). On such accounts, our emotional experiences are not brute feelings, but rather carry an important cognitive component that helps us to understand ourselves and the world.

Similarly, for Adorno, experiences of suffering contain insights: by extrapolating from experiences of bad work to the plausible objects of the forms of suffering distinctive of modern work, we can hypothesise – fallibilistically – about good work. Thus, the Adornian method is a kind of inverted form of 'eudaimonistic reflection' (Wallace, 2006; see also Yeoman, 2020), a thought which draws support from recent readings of Adorno as a negative Aristotelian (Freyenhagen, 2013; Reeves, 2016). Following suit, we have approached the topic of how needs might inform our thinking about the future of work in a negativist manner.

Adorno's negative eudaimonism contrasts not only with positive Aristotelian accounts but also with the most powerful position in the contemporary Critical Theory of work, which integrates Marxist insights and psychoanalytic research within a broadly recognition-theory framework (e.g. Dejours et al., 2018). Like Adorno (2012), such theorists identify 'the internal normative dimensions of working activity *qua* activity' (Smith and Deranty, 2012: 59) as most ethically essential, because genuine activity 'develops [the subject's] practical intelligence and manual skills', and 'challenges the subject in his or her very identity' (p. 60). They argue that the contemporary work-world makes the realization of such activity difficult, and focus on the ways in which even the most privative forms of work in our social world might be ameliorated, made less unbearable, by realistic changes in the here and now, such as better collective labour organization and greater emphasis on 'horizontal' recognition structures amongst peers (Smith and Deranty, 2012: 61).

This position corresponds to Adorno's negativism in asking how we could make the existing work-world less unbearable, and it makes an important contribution guided by a concern Adorno certainly shares, manifest in his emphasis on the need for 'solidarity with . . . "tormentable bodies"' (Adorno, 1973: 286). But Adorno reports 'the constant feeling that we are merely encouraging the cause of untruth if we turn prematurely to the positive and fail to persevere in the negative' (Adorno and Mann, 2006: 97), and accounts that prioritize ameliorating existing privations of work, reaching to positive ideals of work to do so, run the risk of inadvertently lending tacit support to an essentially impoverished work-world. However, that we must not turn prematurely to the positive does not mean we should not get there eventually. Implicit in Adorno's (2005b) critique is an ambitious utopianism which, by extrapolating from the prevalent experiences of suffering, makes (fallibly) available insights into true but suppressed needs. These insights point not only to amelioration of suffering in present conditions, but to concrete utopian reflection on our current predicament from 'the standpoint of redemption' (p. 247) that gestures towards a more radical vision of the future of work.

So, what suppressed needs do the characteristic forms of suffering of our work-world imply? The suffering of powerlessness, of heteronomy, lack of control over one's working life, and the temptation to deny or gild this in such rationalizations as personalization, role-identification or technological fetishism, seems to indicate a thwarted human need for autonomy, for self-determining agency in relation to one's activity. This means not only the freedom to 'seek out and arrange one's work according to one's own intentions', but, moreover, the freedom to formulate one's purposes and intentions through a genuine encounter with both the object and one's own needs and powers. After all, there is little point in being free to impose one's own intentions on one's work if one's intentions are themselves largely being shaped by heteronomous forces, such as false needs.

The suffering of boredom seems to indicate a thwarted human need for imaginative, creative, productive activity. It is the suffering that registers 'the defamation and atrophy of the imagination . . . those who want to adapt must increasingly renounce their imagination' (Adorno, 2005a: 172). Moreover, boredom registers the absence of spontaneity in work. This is, Adorno (2005a) claims, part of the motivation of pseudo-activity, which 'also takes up the weary exasperation people feel toward mechanization' (p. 172).

The suffering of superfluousness negatively implies a need to fulfil, in and through one's activity, the needs of others. In market society, this need manifests, in the first instance, as the need to be 'useful' to the 'community', the existing social whole and the ethical status of the market is often alleged to be its capacity to allow individuals to contribute to the needs at once of others and of the community in and through pursuing their own self-interest.

But because the market economy tends towards the instrumentalization and manipulation of people's needs, that one can sell one's labour in it does not give any reassurance that one is doing anything really needed. And even where the market does happen to allow one to fulfil others' (plausibly) true needs, one may still feel superfluous because the market foists on that fulfilment a form that contradicts its content: exchange. That is, we are compelled to treat fulfilling others' needs not as our own end but as a mere means to fulfilling our needs. Our contribution to others' needs is not direct or immediate, but only in exchange for something. The feeling of superfluousness points to the need to contribute to others true needs beyond the distortions of the market.

Now, we should not think of these hypothesized, negatively extrapolated true needs as separate and independent items on a list of empirical anthropological facts. They are, rather, moments of a wider whole, abstractions from a deeper unity, which Adorno's thought implies as the fundamental need of human beings: *genuine activity.* Such activity is not a contingent need, nor one among many human requirements, but the form of human life proper – what it is to be and to live in a properly human way, to realize the human life-form in practice. Genuine activity, on this view, would be at once autonomous and spontaneous, and so would be self-directed and reasonable, while also being imaginative – that is, without being repressively regimented. And since human activity is essentially social activity, genuine activity would be oriented to true human needs as such, those of others and oneself at once.

The need to autonomously and spontaneously fulfil others' true needs is, in other words, just the need to live in a human way, to realize in practice what we essentially are – the need to be human. Hence Adorno's negative critique of work puts flesh on Marx's (1975) thought that properly human labour would be 'the free expression and hence the enjoyment of life' (p. 278), because in immediately fulfilling another's need, I would know that 'I would have directly *confirmed* and *realized* my authentic nature, my *human*, *communal* nature' (p. 277). In such cases, the adoption of others' needs does not give rise to false needs, as in the case where employees adaptively (falsely) identify with their employers, but gives rise rather to a more concrete determination of the individual's true needs, in virtue of the worth of the other's need which is taken on as an end. To adopt the other's true need in this way is to fulfil one's own true need to fulfil the other's needs.

Though the market spoils all kinds of work, there is an important distinction between, on the one hand, kinds of work that are essentially products of the market and so essentially privative, and, on the other hand, kinds of work that are forms of genuine activity, but which are distorted and spoiled from the outside by the pressures of the market. Some kinds of work seem mere artefacts of a bad society, mere symptoms of privation, and thus very definitely not the sorts of things we would want to see in work's future. Others seem candidates for genuine activity, whose privation rather than existence is a symptom of a privative social world. The effects of the market on genuine activity vary significantly in quality and degree; a concretely differentiated account is needed to inform what we should want of work's future.

In this light, Adorno's account makes it possible to redeem the objectivist intuition about work in his distinctive negativist way. In order to elucidate this account, we consider two paradigm cases of work that is essentially genuine activity, but which is spoiled in different ways in market society: creative work and care work. In creative work, powerlessness and boredom are paradigmatically avoided, while autonomy, spontaneity and imagination privileged. In care work, superfluousness is paradigmatically avoided, and the need to immediately fulfil others'

true needs privileged. But in market society, creative work is particularly vulnerable to superfluousness, and care work to boredom.

In wrong life even genuine activity seems vulnerable to being distorted and fragmented in this way: realizing only part of genuine activity but not the whole. But this fragmentation of genuine activity is itself arguably an artefact of market society and could potentially be overcome in a changed social world. Creative work might no longer seem superfluous, of value only insofar as it can be sold to advertisers, wealthy collectors or philistine investors, and contributing nothing to human flourishing, in a social world that gave creativity its full due and allowed everyone to enjoy artistic expression and to experience the fruits of artistic and creative labour, instead of suppressing people's imagination and energy. Care work need not be boring, degrading and stressful in a social world that prioritized true human needs, and thus properly resourced caring practices and institutions and organized care work in accordance with its human importance rather than according to market imperatives. Such a rearrangement of societal imperatives might be the least we would hope for of work's future.

Creative work

The impulse to engage in creative work is common to all forms of human society, appearing wherever humans have been able to produce the necessities of life sufficiently to create time for further activity (Dissanayake, 1990), and Adorno sees art as a paradigmatic example of genuine activity and thus good work (Reeves and Sinnicks, 2021). Clearly, the desire to engage in creative work is a deep an enduring one. But what is good about artistic creation? That this is a puzzling question is revealing. While concerns about financial security may assert themselves, and while constraints relating to race, gender and class shape both social expectations about decisions to pursue fulfilling work as well as the opportunities available to any particular individual, we do not feel inclined to question someone's motives when they express a desire to engage in creative work; that artistic, creative work is worthwhile accords with our most deeply held intuitions, not least the objectivist intuition with which we began. Creative work is plausibly an end in itself.

The answer seems unlikely to focus solely on the *artworks* produced. The products of most creative work are not great, are not remembered, and do not contribute to the historical development of the activity, and indeed are somewhat vulnerable to the encroachment of AI (Colton, 2012; Fernández and Vico, 2013). While conceptions of greatness have been subject to distortion by a number of social ills, for example, racism and sexism (Pollock, 2013), the very notion of excellence is inherently comparative. Thus, any credible answer can be arrived at only by, as Jackson (2016) puts it, 'focusing not on art as an expression of individual genius . . . but rather on the *work* of art, where work is read as a verb rather than a noun and understood as a *techne* for making one's life more individually and socially viable' (p. xiv, original emphasis).

Jackson (2016) also gives an evocative description of an artwork that is valuable for documenting the creative work that was needed to produce it, he says that as 'an object, it had no value . . . rather it is a physical trace of the labor of bringing life into the world' (p. 50). Hence, the activity or practice of creation is what is valuable, even if the work produced falls short of excellence. Here we see a degree of affinity with existing accounts of craftwork, of the kind developed by Sennett (2008; see also Schwalbe, 2010) and others, which gesture towards the intrinsic worth of genuine activity.

Understood in this way, creative work is something available to us all, and potentially ennobling for us all. This understanding allows us to avoid the 'image on an uninhibited, vital, creative man' that is bound up with the 'fetishism of commodities' (Adorno, 2005b: 168) characteristic of bourgeois society, where the 'great' artwork qua commodity reflects the 'great' individual who produced it.

To regard only great work, by great artists, as being worthwhile would be an elitist error, even if we wish to hold that the very best art is most instructive. To hold that everyone can – or could, absent the pervasive social conditions that undermine the possibility – engage in such work is to recognize the significance of human potential for autonomous and spontaneous genuine activity. For Adorno, 'the autonomy of art is a historically contingent fact. Moreover, the autonomy of art lies in the work of art, in its production, not specifically in the aesthetic judgments of the subject' (Skees, 2011: 916). At the time Adorno was writing, art, unlike products of the culture industry, was relatively free from corruption by commercial pursuits. As Hulatt puts it:

> Art is allowed to be free of the heteronomous, self-preserving demands of the market and commodity exchange, and this freedom allows art to autonomously produce novel artworks. However, art's being free of the self-preserving pressures of the social whole has been brought about by that social whole itself – art has been 'separated from this same society' by 'this society itself'. It so happens – contingently – that the social order has found it apposite to outline certain social activities and spheres as free from the immediate demands of self-preservation. (Hulatt, 2016: 757)

So, the relatively autonomous status of art is in a sense an historical accident. It is not, however, a mere matter of fortuity.

On the one hand, art qua practice has characteristics that render it liable to such a status, and even in a social formation dominated by economic interests, retains an appeal. Its quality as *in principle* genuine activity, which essentially involves autonomy and spontaneity – creativity – is precisely what renders it more resilient to the alienating and distorting effects of market society.

On the other hand, art's relative autonomy, its separateness from society, is premised on the exclusion of creativity from work generally. So, the relatively autonomous survival of art is, on the Adornian view, the other side of the coin of the objective dullness of the work-world in market society. The humanity of the artist is preserved at the expense of the dehumanization of the rest, and as such is in itself spoiled. Premised on the coldness of a bad social world, it is subverted by the violation of humanity it presupposes, and thus contaminated with the potential for a kind of survivor guilt. Hence, Adorno (2005a) writes 'I am well aware that I speak as someone privileged, with the requisite measure of both fortune and guilt, as one who had the rare opportunity to seek out and arrange his work according to his own intentions' (p. 168–169).

Such guilt is intelligible only if there is something to feel guilty about: only if there are qualitatively better and worse kinds of work, only if the idea of genuine activity – even in wrong life – makes sense. Here we see wrong life dragging even genuine activities down. This is part of what makes our social world so bad. To understand this facet of the badness of our social world, we have to appreciate the distinction between genuine and privative activity which Adorno's account helps us to keep clearly in view.

However, according to Hulatt (2016), art's 'enabling conditions are beginning to be reneged upon; economic and instrumental value are beginning to be sought in the art sphere' (p. 758). This is surely right, if perhaps something of an understatement. While there has long been a thriving art market, since at least the 1960s the artworld became more commercialized, and today art is often regarded as an investment vehicle (David et al., 2013). As Joy and Sherry (2003) put it,

> [w]hile most art has almost always had a market, as a trend accelerating in the late 1970s and especially in the 1980s, the art world (artists, art critics, historians and curators) conflated with the art market (art dealers, art galleries, auction houses and, by implication, the stock market). (p. 155)

But, tellingly, art and creativity are also being corrupted from the other side, in the manner of attempts to make work and management more 'artistic', perhaps in response to the 'artistic critique of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018; see also Ancelin-Bourguignon et al., 2020).

But to take seriously the worth of creative work would not mean encouraging futile, and perhaps invidious, attempts at job design which merely parody genuine creativity – to encourage, say, the employees engaged in menial labour to, in some way, see themselves as artists. Attention to the fate of creative work should, rather, inform our reflections and shared deliberations on which forms of work are, in line with the objectivist intuition, most worthy of pursuit by individuals and retention by society, and perhaps about how certain forms of work ought or ought not to be deformed by technological assimilation.

Appreciating the place of autonomy and spontaneity in the wider context of genuine activity helps sharpen the critique of the foreclosing of the autonomous and spontaneous space that artistic and creative work once enjoyed, as well as the critique of the general suppression of creativity in work on which that privilege was premised. That even creative work has lately been colonized by the exchange principle shows how even genuine activity can be corrupted by market pressures, but the shame of wrong life is that it has all along tended to marginalize creativity from all forms of work in the modern work-world. Nevertheless, tellingly, the need for creativity persists, and creative work cannot be completely abolished.

However, while those doing creative work may be particularly likely to find their work interesting and so to be somewhat insulated from boredom, they are likely to be susceptible to other forms of suffering that can undermine the intrinsic interest and meaningfulness of their work. Not only may people with the good fortune to find creative work be liable to feel guilty about having more interesting work than others have access to (particularly given the class, race and gender dimensions to such unequal access in our societies), but they may also be more susceptible to the feeling of superfluousness. For they may well find that the market deploys their creativity in ways that do not seem to enhance the good of others, but instead to cultivate preferences for things which seem worse, less worthy of our time, than alternatives.

Consider the 'creative industries', where the techniques of artistic creation are co-opted for the purpose of manipulating consumer desires (after all, making films and making adverts are steps on the same career ladder, parts of the same 'sector'). Most who train as artists will work not as artists but in these creative industries – in advertising and marketing, big studio TV and film, mainstream pop music and so on; in short, in the culture industry, where creativity is siphoned off to serve commercial purposes and strategies (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002). There is clearly room for creative, spontaneous activity in such industries, but the sense of autonomy and of fulfilling others needs less so. Such workers may typically find their creative vision subordinated to commercial pressures, may well also have cause to wonder whether their interesting work is really benefiting people, and in some cases – for example, the manipulative endeavours of advertising – may suspect that it is actively working against people's interests, however creatively rewarding it is. The ideologies of advertising that proliferate are necessary rationalizations that people need in order to cope with such unease.

But is this sense of superfluousness a necessary feature of creative work? It is surely more plausibly an effect from without of market society. As recent management research has noted, under capitalism there exists a 'tension between self-interest, required to survive in a market economy, and collective welfare' (Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008: 1523). Where one's creative work is co-opted by the market into manipulating people in the service of profit this conflict will become pronounced, but even for those able to do art professionally, the disconnect between their practice and the immediate needs of most people must be stark, as may be the guilt associated with their privileged form of work. In a social world that prioritized human needs, though, creative work

could be liberated from these deformations; where people's needs were generally fulfilled, both the enrichment of art and the fulfilment of creative activity might be in practice available to everyone, such that creative work could take its place as the immediate fulfilment of true human needs – one's own and those of others at once.

Creative work, then, while spoiled by market society, is plausibly a form of essentially genuine activity, the impoverishment of which could in principle be done away with. As such, it is a central case of good work that not only has a future but is a paradigm of any future of work worth wanting.

Care work

Whereas creative work is inherently resilient to boredom, care work seems inherently resilient to the feeling of superfluousness: it seems a paradigm of activity in which, in principle, one knows oneself to be immediately fulfilling others' true needs. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that care work is fundamental to our society (Ozkazanc-Pan and Pullen, 2021). This is to say not that other kinds of work do not presently play a crucial role in fulfilling human needs, but that care work exhibits an immediacy in the worker's relation to the fulfilment of another's needs that makes it particularly paradigmatic.[2]

That is, care work is another central case that accords with the objectivist intuition, which, as we saw, is often regarded as being reflective of an unappealing paternalism. The concept of paternalism can seem patronizing and disrespectful, and its etymological connotation of male dominance generates further suspicion. It often connotes a kind of coercion, treating ethical terms as 'police-concepts' (Geuss, 2009: 77). By contrast, the Adornian account we have developed here is better characterized as *ma*ternalist – organized not around ideas of coercive authority or superiority of knowledge and judgement, but themes of vulnerability and suffering, love and solidarity – the conceptual space of care.

Indeed, it is precisely human vulnerability, the difficulty in acquiring a sufficient understanding of both oneself and of the qualities involved in genuine activity, and the difficulty involved in having confidence in one's judgement, that underpins our discussion. Thus, rather than adopting the role of the wise patriarch directing less wise individuals, our Adorno-inspired account recognizes the human need for the care, including sometimes direction, of others, and the need to provide such care and direction. Accepting the distinction between false and true needs does not grant one an immediate access to knowledge of one's own or others' true needs. It is, rather, a precondition of meaningful reflection on how to overcome the pathologies of our present situation.

Just as the vulnerable infant does not understand its need for care, protection, sustenance and sometimes ostensibly seems to revolt against their provision (Winnicott, 1965), we are throughout life liable to need help to understand our needs and their conditions of satisfaction. But, beyond infancy, maternal care – and paternal care, understood in this maternalist, rather than the traditional paternalist, sense[3] – does not proceed arrogantly, dogmatically insisting on its interpretations or coercively imposing them. To do so would be to fail to care for the person, to fail to acknowledge, value, protect and nurture their potential autonomy and spontaneity.

While less explicit in Adorno's (1973, 2005b) writings, this idea nevertheless pervades his thought. It is evident in his criticism of societal coldness and championing of 'solidarity with . . . "tormentable bodies"' (p. 286), and more generally in his emphasis on empathic concern for others as needy, sensuous subjects as expressed in claims like: 'today there is tenderness only in the coarsest demand: that no-one should go hungry any more' (p. 156). As Ferrarese (2020) notes, while 'the word itself crops up rarely' in Adorno's writings, '"vulnerability" comprises all that falls under the many evocations of mutilated lives within the administered world' (p. 2–3).

Care work is a kind of work that typically caters immediately to human need, embodies the concern for the vulnerable other at the heart of maternalism, and is specifically human (Bertolaso and Rocchi, 2022) and so not amenable to technological obsolescence (Robson, 2019), even though technology is increasingly playing an assistive role in healthcare (Crocker and Timmons, 2009; Saborowski and Kollak, 2015). This growing use of technology offers often welcome assistance to care workers, but it nevertheless cannot replace the human relationship at the heart of care.

We intend care work as a broad category, to include social and residential care, medical care, psychotherapy, childcare, social work, teaching, care work which takes place in the home and so on, but for brevity we focus on a single exemplar: nursing. Even relative to other kinds of care work, nursing stands out as paradigmatic of work that involves the immediate fulfilment of others' true needs. As such, it is – in principle – particularly suited to the realization of solidarity and particularly resilient to the feeling of superfluousness.

Indeed, that nursing persists, despite how inherently demanding it is, supports this thought. The ethically and psychically challenging nature of the job is well captured by Menzies classic study. Nurses are in constant contact with people who are physically ill or injured, often seriously. The recovery of patients is not certain and will not always be complete; nursing patients who have incurable diseases is one of the nurse's most distressing tasks. Nurses are confronted with the threat and the reality of suffering and death as few lay people are. Their work involves carrying out tasks which, by ordinary standards, are distasteful, disgusting, and frightening (Menzies, 1960: 97–98).

This means that 'the objective situation confronting the nurse bears a striking resemblance to the phantasy situations that exist in every individual in the deepest and most primitive levels of the mind' (ibid: 98). That primitive level is 'charged with death and destruction' and 'characterised by a violence and intensity of feeling quite foreign to the emotional life of the normal adult' (ibid: 98). Nurses' experiences of the ailing, injury, suffering, decline and death of patients and the surrounding pain, distress and grief of relatives and friends, tap into our most primitive unconscious anxieties – into what Melanie Klein (1975) described as 'persecutory phantasy' – which must tend to amplify their intensity.

Given the extraordinary demands nursing places on people, it is probably only fully possible in social conditions that accommodate and mitigate these difficulties and pressures. But market society does the opposite: it amplifies them. It is often noted that in our social world nurses face especially gruelling ethical challenges (Varghese and Kristjánsson, 2018), and typically find themselves working under conditions which epitomize the problematic nature of capitalist organizations. For 'organizations often turn to the disaster management language of "preparedness" and "resilience" as they try to strengthen their tolerance for extremity and volatility, especially in healthcare' (Granter et al., 2015: 447), and nurses are typically on the front line and at the sharp end of such responses. So, rather than cushioning the inherent stresses of nursing, our market societies systematically exacerbate them.

For Adorno (2006), as we saw, market societies distort individuals' capacities into a 'truly unbearable coldness' (p. 265), an adaptive suppression of responsiveness to need and suffering. There is significant pressure to unconsciously numb one's ethical potentials in order to cope – to internalize the coldness of a society that is dismissive towards suffering, and relate to one's own suffering coldly, dismissively. While care work is especially resilient to such coldness, the pressures of market society tend to spoil care work by insinuating coldness even there.

To be an adequate nurse in a wrong social world, one must, to some extent, become cold to one's own needs and suffering. The ideology of the 'ideal nurse' encourages a rejection of the promotion of one's needs or interests: 'virtue is presumed to be its own reward', which rules out actively defending one's interests in political action: 'by taking collective action nurses cease to be nurses, cease to exist as caring subjects' (Granberg, 2015: 793).

As the market has colonized care work, systemic austerity coupled with the increasing infiltration of the profit motive puts 'workers in an untenable position where they must exploit their own labour through unpaid work in order to make the system function' (Baines et al., 2022: 140). Again, coldness towards oneself and one's own needs is now a prerequisite of caring for others. Moreover, Cottingham et al. (2020) highlight the 'stress and exhaustion that comes from being both a caregiver on the job and at home' (p. 287) which – given that both nurses and primary parental caregivers are in our patriarchal social world disproportionately women – must be a commonplace experience.

This internalized coldness is clearly bad for the nurse: the distorting pressures of wrong life pit their commitment to care against their own self-concern. But Adorno would go further: this self-sacrifice, this internalized coldness towards oneself, may in turn tend to undermine the capacity for care for others. In becoming cold to their own need and suffering, people will tend to repudiate sensitivity to the need and suffering of others as well. Becoming cold to my own suffering might more or less entail becoming cold to that of others: an insensitivity to your needs requires the same kind of failure as would an insensitivity to my own. Coldness may only be possible in the long run in an undiscriminating fashion.

Market pressures on nursing exacerbate the problem of coldness: the less resourced you are, the less time and energy you have for each person, the less you can realistically do for them. The more market forces enter into public sector health care (see Frith, 2013; Gilbert et al., 2014), such as with artificial targets and league tables in the NHS and so on, the more you will need to adopt coldness in order to cope. If you are judged on how quickly you get the patient checked out, rather than on how comprehensively you care for them, this may chisel away at one's capacity to commit to one's passion for caring, the institutional frustration of which one will need to adaptively cope with. Market pressures increasingly press nurses and other care workers to relinquish solidarity; the remarkable thing is how much they continue to resist this pressure.

For 'a majority of people in this day and age paid employment provides by far the most opportunities for gaining social recognition' (Gheaus and Herzog, 2016: 78). Is the problem with nursing, and care work generally, merely a matter of social recognition?

Care work certainly warrants greater recognition. However, the worth of care work cannot merely be recognitive. A recognitive focus can lead to embarrassingly euphemistic attempts to recategorize workers – 'ambient replenishment' rather than 'shelf stacking' and so on. It would suit supermarkets for employees – and indeed the wider public – to be impressed by this nominal reclassification: artificially induced pride is commercially preferable to offering real improvements in pay and conditions. But recognition seems to track other goods when we accord more respect to, for example, the surgeon than to the banker, a contrast which cannot plausibly be explained as an effect of an arbitrary 'hegemonial principle of achievement' privileging creativity and initiative (Honneth, 2014: 241). Recognitive accounts would struggle to explain the coherence of the notion of certain workers being unsung or unduly recognized. Indeed, much of the literature on 'dirty work' seems to carry the tacit normative message that we ought to accord recognition to a wider array of workers than we do. But existing patterns of recognition are only open to critique if we can imagine better, more appropriate patterns, and if we can imagine standards by which to judge patterns of recognition, then it seems recognition cannot be the ethical baseline. Instead, the answer seems more likely to be found in the realities of the work itself.

Dashtipour and Vidaillet (2017) write: 'Menzies' study was conducted in the 1950s. It is remarkable the extent to which similar levels of stress and anxiety observed in her hospital can be found in organizations today' (p. 30).[4] Nursing could never be simple: caring for the sick, wounded and terminally ill is bound to be demanding. But nurses need not be perpetually stressed and anxious.

That is more plausibly the effect of a market-based social world in which caring for others is disparaged and humanly fulfilling human needs obstructed.

And while care work is relatively resilient to superfluousness, in market society it seems to be as vulnerable to powerlessness and boredom as other kinds of work. But it *need* not be gruelling, exhausting and tedious. These features are plausibly distortions imposed from without by the market. Just as, in a society that valued everyone's needs, creative work need no longer appear superfluous, care work need no longer be heteronomous, strenuous and dull. That care work is often boring now reflects market pressures: nursing is subject to the efficiency logic of the production line. Where caring institutions are under-staffed and under-resourced, where the only parameters are reductive proxy-targets imposed by inexpert managers beholden to actual or artificial market forces, autonomy and spontaneity are bound to be side-lined. Care work becomes increasingly subordinated to the general tendency towards mechanization. But in a social world that actually valued care, care work could perhaps – liberated from market pressures – even involve as much autonomy and imaginative spontaneity as creative work.

Here, the goals of the labour movement – a shorter working week, more holiday, better pay, a decline in managerialism, a more favourable patient-carer ratio and so on – remain the most immediate avenues. Additionally, greater worker control of the workplace may constitute a promising avenue (Yeoman, 2014b). Such control addresses a number of undesirable facets of contemporary work we have raised in the preceding discussion. It has the potential to lessen the need to develop false needs as an adaptation to externally imposed expectations, because workers themselves play some role in shaping those expectations. It also counts against the suffering of powerless and superfluousness by immediately granting a degree of control and influence, ensuring all workers are part of the decision-making process. It may even counter boredom, insofar as it both constitutes an engaging and sometimes creative activity in its own right and allows for the preferences of workers – including the preference to avoid boredom – to register. For such worker democracy to become widespread, and indeed to operate within nursing, no doubt wider enabling conditions would need to obtain.

The achievement of the objectives of the labour movement would be valuable not merely as signifiers of respect for the importance of so challenging a job, rather they are necessary preliminary steps towards liberating the intrinsic goodness of care work as a form of genuine activity. Any future of work worth wanting would be informed by the aim of liberating care from the shackles of market pressures, thereby taking seriously the ethical significance of care work.

Concluding remarks

Through a distinctive elucidation of work's present impoverishment, Adorno's thought can illuminate both why work has a future, and what sort of future we should want it to have. Work today is largely of kinds that eschew the ethical, objective worth of work, and even the rare paradigms of good work exist in a guise in which their ethical worth is to a significant extent suppressed or distorted.

Contemporary work is all too often indifferent, if not overtly hostile to, true human needs. This is so even where work is most obviously connected to such needs. Much creative work is distorted by the market pressure to focus on what people find gratifying at the expense of what is truly artistic; much care work takes place under the auspices of market pressures for efficiency as opposed to love and warmth, let alone undiluted orientation to the others' true needs. These privations point the way to the future of work worth wanting: one in which such distortions are removed and the ethical worth of such work oriented to true human needs is liberated.

In this way, Adorno's thought can both accommodate our deeply held intuitions about the value of creative and care work, and help us to explain how such forms of work are frustrated in market-society. And through a negative extrapolation from the suffering connected to such privations – such as boredom, powerlessness and superfluousness – it helps us to think about how our true needs might be reflected in the future of work. The work of the future ought to be organized according to the demands issued by true human needs, exemplified in creative work and care work, liberated from the oppressive effects of market and administrative pressures that belong to contemporary capitalism.

Adorno's account does not presume to know our true needs in advance of their historical realization: he develops these positions out of negative critique of our existing experience. We can identify the need for free, creative, human work primarily by negative inference from the experiences of suffering that are widespread today in response to the kinds of work that deny or distort those needs. That we need creative, spontaneous and autonomous, solidarizing activity that is oriented to others' good is indicated by the fact that we suffer so palpably from uncreative work and work that provides nothing unconditionally good for others. If that is so, we should seek developments that preserve and promote such kinds of work in future. Adorno's account suggests that this would require emancipating work from the constraints of the contemporary division of labour under market and administrative pressure. Exactly what such transformations might look like is an open question for collective deliberation and action, but even this much entails the need for more widespread workplace democracy. Such collective deliberation may counter the dominance of market and administrative pressures, and is thus a precondition of even a full articulation of a vision of the future of work oriented to our true needs.

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Notes

1. The concept of the culture industry is not to be confused with the concept of popular culture. Part of the point of the concept of 'the culture industry' is to distinguish it from 'popular culture', precisely because culture industry products do not answer to pre-existing preferences of people, but rather manufacture and exploit preferences (see Cook, 1996: x).
2. In market society, delivery drivers are often fulfilling true human needs, but they never know for sure: it depends on what they are delivering, to whom and for what purpose. Refuse collectors are generally fulfilling a true need, but they do so at an impersonal arm's length. This does not necessarily undermine the need-fulfilment – refuse collectors are probably less liable to feeling superfluous than many sorts of workers, and indeed are often aware of how they serve their local community (see Hamilton et al., 2019). But it does reflect an important dimension: such kinds of work, though they are vital in addressing true needs now, are not necessary for the fulfilment of those needs. While there are of course other goods characteristic of such work – a sense of camaraderie, providing support to one's family and so on – it is not internal to the needs they fulfil that those needs be fulfilled by human labour, by the genuine activity of others. Delivering and removing things can plausibly – and soon will – be more or less entirely automated. But care work seems to occupy a different place, because care is not something that could plausibly be automated: it addresses a human need for a human encounter.
3. We leave an open question that of Adorno's relationship to the feminist ethics of care derived from Gilligan's (1982) work, which now constitutes a rich tradition (see Halwani, 2003; Held, 2006; Tronto, 1999) and has had an impact within studies of good and meaningful work (see, e.g. Pavlish et al., 2019).

The fact that we associate care with the maternal rather than the paternal is itself the product of the violence done to us in wrong life (which, as in other respects, has not invented the evil but only ramped up an evil that has a much longer history). It is because care is so rigorously excluded from the social proper that it is pushed back into the private sphere, into which women are also pushed by their traditional patriarchal exclusion from the public, that it becomes identified with maternal; while paternal is identified with the worldly patriarch who exists in the social world proper, and so has to adopt its cold, uncaring ethos in order to get by. These associations are being challenged today, though of course progress is partial, slow, and itself vulnerable.

4. It is worth noting that Dashtipour and Vidaillet's account draws heavily on the work of Dejours, who we noted above is associated with a rival Critical Theoretical approach to good and meaningful work.

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