Authors' version. Please see the version of record published in A. Bielskis (Ed.), *Human Flourishing in the Age of Digital Capitalism: AI, Automation and Alienation* (pp.89–108). Bloomsbury.

Available at: https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/monograph-detail?docid=b-9781350510753&tocid=b-9781350510753-chapter4

"Mild Preparations": Work, practices, and the internal good of recognition

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter seeks to articulate the ethically developmental potential of work, both in terms of the intrinsic satisfactions of the very best activities, and because of the recognition structures work can provide. We do so by exploring the goods of work in the context of the discussion concerning technological unemployment. One response to the possibility of technological unemployment is provided by the anti-work perspective, the plausibility of which rests in large part on its capacity to do justice to the impoverished nature of much contemporary work. Drawing on MacIntyre's concept of practices we argue, however, that the concept of good work is better equipped to sustain the recognition structures that facilitate the achievement of excellence in those practices. Thus, good work can be viewed, somewhat ironically, as being powerfully conducive to our efforts to prepare ourselves for a world in which leisure is more socially central.

AN AGE OF LEISURE?

Recent forecasts about technological changes in the workplace have given new impetus to the idea that a world without work is something humankind might feasibly be able to work towards (see Weeks, 2011; Frayn, 2015; Fleming, 2015; Danaher, 2017, 2019 etc.). While it is difficult to predict precisely how disruptive impending technological developments will be, it is clear they will be significant (Floridi, 2017, p.2). Any form of employment in which people perform standardised or routine tasks is likely to be at risk. Indeed, some have predicted that non-menial jobs will be at risk (Ford, 2015, ch.4), and even some forms of work now regarded as highly skilled and professional, such as some of those involved in the practice of law (Susskind & Susskind, 2022) and medicine (Kazzazi, 2021).

Clearly, there is nothing inevitable about technology liberating us from tedious labour, but nor is it inevitable that technological innovation will lead to misery. Nevertheless, the issue of how to respond is a pressing one. Yet, this issue of how we would do in a world in which most work now done as a matter of paid employment is unnecessary is not new. Indeed, the anti-work view – which suggests that the most appropriate response is to aim for a world without work – has an extensive history (see Russell, 2004 [1935]; Gorz, 1985; Black, 1986; Rifkin, 2004; Granter, 2009). According to this view, work is typically characterised by a number of important ills, which mean that we would be better off in a world without work. Such ills are familiar enough, and include boredom (Svendsen, 2015), domination (Anderson, 2017),

exploitation (Faraci, 2019), a focus on trivialities that waste human talent (Sinnicks, 2022, p.55), and no doubt many others.

Writing in 1930, J. M. Keynes perceived the looming possibility of what he referred to as an 'age of leisure', long before A.I. could be seen as its most notable pre-condition. However, while much of the anti-work tradition regards the liberation from work as unambiguously good – as Black puts it "Work is the source of nearly all the misery in the world... In order to stop suffering, we have to stop working" (1986, p.17) – Keynes also saw the personal ethical challenges such an era would impose, an issue not always properly grasped by the anti-work view.

According to Keynes "the economic problem, the struggle for subsistence" (2015, p.81) has always been the most pressing problem facing humankind, and yet this problem will soon be solved. This prospect gives rise to the following question: "If the economic problem is solved, mankind will be deprived of its traditional purpose… must we not expect a general 'nervous breakdown'?" (2015, pp.81-82). The central reason to expect this breakdown is the alienating nature of contemporary work, indeed, the ethical impoverishment of contemporary society:

> there is no country and no people, I think, who can look forward to the age of leisure and of abundance without a dread. For we have been trained too long to strive and not enjoy. It is a fearful problem for the ordinary person, with no special talents, to occupy himself, especially if he no longer has roots in the soil or in custom or in the beloved conventions of a traditional society (2015, p.83)

The notion that people, in contemporary society, all too often have no roots in the soil or in the conventions of traditional society is a familiar one, and has affinities with a variety of critiques of contemporary society, including those offered by Taylor (1989), Sennett (1998), and above all, MacIntyre (2007), whose work we return to below.

Nevertheless, the prospect of an age of leisure gives us some grounds for hope. According to Keynes, "We shall be able to rid ourselves of many of the pseudo-moral principles which have hag-ridden us for two thousand years, by which we have exalted some of the most distasteful of human qualities into the position of the highest virtues" (2015, p.83). If we can rid ourselves of this misconception "[w]e shall once more value ends above means and prefer the good to the useful," (2015, p.85) and be in a position to turn our attention to truly valuable things and genuine virtues.

While this liberation may be, to say the least, some way off, in the meantime "there will be no harm in making mild preparations for our destiny, in encouraging, and experimenting in, the arts of life as well as the activities of purpose" (2015, p.85). This is an intuitively appealing thought, for it highlights the contrast between living and working, activity that is its own end and activity that is instrumental to external ends – a contrast that's embedded in the fabric of our existing social world. The market, so the story goes, encourages experimentation in the instrumental activities of purpose. But not necessarily the 'arts of life'. In fact, the experimentally-guided progress of the division of labour often seems to come into direct conflict with experimentation in the 'arts of life', as where increasingly rationalised production-processes result in increasingly simplified and mechanised work roles.

While the production of material and cultural products has, through experimentation, become more efficient, arguably, the scope of experimentation for the worker in their work and the

consumer in their free time has diminished. In this light, Keynes' proposal is a timely call to refocus our priorities on, to borrow Mill's phrase, 'experiments in living' (Mill, 1989, passim) rather than producing, since the market often caters well to experimentation in the latter but frequently at the expense of the former. If we can anticipate at some point reclaiming our human existence from the tyranny of necessity, we would do well to pre-emptively cultivate our at-present suppressed capacities for living.

THE ARTS OF LIFE AND THE QUESTION OF WORK

That we might, without work, be liberated to use our free time to pursue meaningful activities is a central thought in the anti-work tradition. Consider, for example, this passage from Gorz:

> As the periods of disposable time become longer, non-working time can become something other than the obverse of working time... the counterpart of a work which, by its monotony, is anaesthetizing and exhausting. As disposable time increases, it becomes both possible and necessary to find other activities and relations to structure it... It becomes possible for... a new societal and cultural space, composed of autonomous activities with freely chosen ends, to be opened up. (Gorz 1989, p.92)

Gorz here attempts to highlight the need for structures that might help us deal with Keynes' plausible worry that the impoverishment of our work-world undermines our capacity for free enjoyment in deeper ways that may not be so easy to shake off, perhaps leaving us ill-equipped to deal with the apparent freedom of a hypothetical 'age of leisure'.

Gorz's talk of the 'multi-activity society' (1999, passim; see also Granter & Aroles, 2023) is part of a rich heritage of visions of a better society. It tacitly reflects a dissatisfaction with alienating work, which Marx expressed in his early writings (Marx, 1978, pp.70-81; see also Bielskis, 2023), and clearly has an affinity with Marx and Engel's characterisation of a communist society, outlined in *The German Ideology*:

> where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic. (Marx & Engels, 1970, p.54)

It is no accident that Marx and Engels appeal to leisure activities of the elite class – hunting, engagement with the arts – in their description of a better world. The better world grants everyone the freedom to pursue those activities which are clearly enjoyable and appealing.

Gorz's vision also has important connections to MacIntyre's thought, again in at least two senses. Firstly, it aligns with MacIntyre's critique of modernity insofar as the world of work in dominated by the imperatives of the market. For MacIntyre, "what is essentially human is rational activity, and consumption exists to serve activity and not to be served by it. We ought to eat in order to work, not vice versa." (MacIntyre, 1979, p.44) On this view, human purpose is not only geared towards survival or consumption, but to richer activity. This stands in stark contrast to the reality of the contemporary workplace, in which most people have a "treadmill of a job" (MacIntyre 2015, p.18). Such jobs are not merely bad in themselves, but also tend to serve a broader system in which production is devised to meet untutored consumer preferences. Indeed, in some ways the 'age of leisure' seems to be a pre-requisite for the freedoms needed

to reverse the ethical deficiencies of modernity. This is because it would allow room for engagement in MacIntyrean practices, which brings us to the second aspect of the vision of a 'multi-activity' society with an affinity to MacIntyre's thought.

According to MacIntyre's definition, a 'practice' is a:

> coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (2007, p. 187)

Perhaps the most important aspect of this definition to bear in mind is that of 'internal goods'. These can be achieved only by engaging in the activity in question, and contrast with 'external goods' such as money, power, and reputation, which are "always some individual's property and possession" (2007, p.190), and can always be acquired in a variety of ways. MacIntyre illustrates this concept of practices with repeated references to 'arts, games, and sciences' (2007, pp.188, 190, 200). These kinds of activities clearly provide an opportunity to attempt to achieve excellence, to extend our conceptions of the ends and goods involved, in the way that MacIntyre describes. MacIntyre also notes that practices do not have set and stable goals, but rather that "the goods themselves are transmuted by the history of the activity" (2007, p.194). Again, the arts, games, and sciences – the sorts of cultural and intellectual activities which we might choose to partake in if liberated from work in a multi-activity society – seem to be apt illustrations here. Those who excel at such activities do so in a way that is in dialogue with the master-practitioners of the past, and MacIntyre invokes Rembrandt, Bartok, J.M.W. Turner, and W.G. Grace as examples of such master-practitioners. Thus, it is unsurprising that MacIntyre's most evocative descriptions of practices focus on chess (2007, p.188), when discussing induction into a practice, and portrait painting (2007, p.189), when discussing the historical development of practices.

Because practices, in MacIntyre's sense, are clearly rich and engaging in a way that the sort of leisure activities needed to cope with the monotony and exhaustion of contemporary work, to recall Gorz's characterisation, it seems that MacIntyre's thought is well-placed to contribute to the anti-work tradition's conversation about the shape of an age of leisure. We can readily see how MacIntyrean practices might promote communities where people learn, reason, cultivate friendships, and indeed pursue any number of the other things we might want from a world without work.

However, this is not to say that MacIntyre should be understood as part of the anti-work tradition. MacIntyre's discussion of practices also includes a range of kinds of work, such as farming and commercial fishing, and indeed has sometimes been thought to offer an understanding of what work might be at its best (Muirhead, 2004; Keat, 2008). As such, it has been applied to many forms of work beyond those rather exclusive domains of arts, games, and sciences. These include circus (Beadle, 2013; Beadle & Sinnicks, 2025), business (Moore, 2002; Bernacchio & Couch, 2023), management (Beabout, 2012), software design (Bolade-Ogunfodun, et al., 2022), and financial trading (Rocchi, et al., 2021).

MacIntyre clearly regards work as being of great ethical significance. MacIntyre suggests that "there is a close connection between being a good human being and doing good work", a connection which "has been lost sight of altogether in the contemporary workplace" (2011,

p.323). Indeed, for MacIntyre, work, when in good order, should be “thought of as a kind of prayer and performed as an act of prayer” (2011, p.323).

Despite this, there remains a sense in which MacIntyre’s concept of practices is bifurcated between a description of rich, rewarding, morally educative activities, that ultimately has very little to do with *work*, and a conception of the goods of (ordinary) work understood primarily in terms of practice-based communities. The chess-playing child in *After Virtue* has no need to turn professional to gain the benefits of engaging in chess, while the fishing crew risking their lives at sea, in MacIntyre’s reply essay in *After MacIntyre* (MacIntyre, 1994, pp.284-286), would have to be understood very differently if they were doing it for fun.

Indeed, if we are forced to choose between practices which might be understood as belonging to the category of ‘noble leisure’ (chess, music, etc.), which is clearly quite distinct from mere relaxation, and the practices which constitute examples of somewhat prosaic work, it seems entirely reasonable to prefer the former. The dangerous task facing the commercial fishing crew, the often tiring and sometimes tedious work of the farmer, clearly possess less intrinsic appeal than the leisure activities chosen largely because of that appeal. The internal goods of such leisure activities, not to mention the possibilities for a systematic extension of the ends and goods involved, are plain. As a result, the anti-work tradition seems well-placed to withstand a MacIntyrean defence of work, in part because of the resources provided by MacIntyre’s own account of practices.

Indeed, forms of work which are practices seem particularly geared towards those whose focus remains on preserving or cultivating “roots in the soil or in custom or in the beloved conventions of a traditional society” (Keynes 2015, p.83). If we really think that such forms of work are liable to become less necessary in future, thus allowing us to focus on the ‘good’ rather than the ‘useful’, it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine an argument in favour of human beings risking their lives at sea in order to catch fish simply because doing so is a practice when many other practices, practices which are less dangerous and more amenable to a creative engagement that allows for an extension of our understanding of the ends and goods involved, are available within the multiactivity society.

We noted above that it would be wrong to categorise MacIntyre as an anti-work theorist. But does this observation mean that MacIntyre *should* support an anti-work position? Not necessarily. And the reason for this is that there is an additional facet of work, of serious and devoted engagement in practices in a manner that seems intuitively distinct from leisure, that demands consideration: recognition.

RECOGNITION AS AN INTERNAL GOOD

In this section, we aim to cast a certain kind of recognition as a good internal to practices. Recognition is clearly a very important good. As Bernacchio puts it, “Recognition is a fundamental good within human life, whereby one’s status as a person becomes tangible and real” (Bernacchio 2023, p.2). It is clearly an important good of work (Dejours, et al, 2018; Gheaus & Herzog, 2016).

In addition to being important, recognition is also a multifaceted concept. Recognition *per se*, that is, recognition in the broadest sense, attaches to persons qua persons, and thus stands

outside the basic categories of goods internal and external to practices. This is the sense of 'recognition' that has been central to contemporary political philosophical debates (see, for instance, Taylor, 1994). But more local kinds of recognition can be achieved in a wide range of ways. As such, it is not internal to any particular practice, and may perhaps be best understood as an external good, on MacIntyre's schema, like money or reputation. If someone fails to achieve recognition in one domain, they can achieve it in another. Imagine an unsuccessful farmer turned master stand-up comic. Recognition is not forthcoming in the domain of failure, but is in the domain of mastery.

However, there are also fine-grained differences between such examples of recognition that allow us to understand recognition as an internal good as well. Consider examples such as the professional tennis player obsessed with winning, or the physicist obsessed with being promoted. Such figures appear to be focused on external goods: victory and an increase in status appear to be achievable in a variety of ways, and thus not internal to any particular practice. And this is, of course, a real possibility. Nevertheless, there is a range of forms such aspirations may take, including a desire for victory or status that is best analysed in terms of internal goods.

While it might be hard for an outside observer to discern the difference, a tennis player who is obsessed with victory for its own sake is quite different from a tennis player obsessed with winning at tennis but only as a result of excellent play. There is something very different about a victory achieved as a result of other competitors pulling out through injury and a victory achieved as a result of fairly beating the best players. If, for instance, a physicist is fixated on promotion for its own sake or for the financial benefits that accompany a promotion, then he or she will attempt to obtain it by whatever means necessary, including perhaps those which may seem to be underhand or dubious in some way, e.g. by 'calling in a favour' or agreeing to support a departmental policy they do not agree with. If, by contrast, the physicist is notably determined to be promoted because he or she views it as a marker of their genuine expertise and accomplishments within the field of physics, that is rather a different matter. While any particular individual is liable to self-exculpatory delusions in this regard, in principle, this latter focus on achievement is entirely compatible with a proper focus on internal goods.

Recognition within practices is, when these practices are in good order, intimately related to excellence. As a result, they can in fact be the locus where internal and external goods meet. This is because recognition clearly relates to an external good like reputation, and, in the case of proper recognition within a practice, has at the same time a distinctive quality that cannot be achieved in any other way. The champion tennis player is recognised *qua tennis player*, the deserving physics professor is recognised *qua physics professor*, and neither type of recognition can be achieved outside of that particular practice. Nor is it substitutable by a more generic type of recognition. Moreover, it cannot be collapsed into any of the external goods like wider esteem or reputation with which it might typically be connected: no amount of ill-gotten or undeserved external, wider esteem will amount to such proper recognition within the practice. All the celebrity or prestige in the world is still not an objectively adequate substitute for a Grand Slam title or a Nobel Prize won for the right reason, in the right way.

So while it might seem counter-intuitive to regard something like recognition as an internal good, since in many ways it is quite distinct from the activity itself, there are several reasons to hold that certain kinds of recognition are better understood as an internal good rather than

an external good. Firstly, MacIntyre characterises external goods as those for which there "are always alternative ways for achieving such goods, and their achievement is never to be had only by engaging in some particular kind of practice" (2007, p.188). To be recognised qua tennis player or qua physics professor cannot be achieved in any way other than by engaging in tennis or physics. There are no alternative ways of achieving these goods. Secondly, MacIntyre characterises living a specific kind of life as a distinctive good of portrait painting (2007, p.188, p.190), and the absence of a specific kind of life as one of the reasons that teaching is not a practice (MacIntyre & Dunne, 2002, p.9). Again, the specific kind of life one leads as a practitioner is, in some sense, outside of the activity that constitutes the practice, and yet cannot be achieved in any other way, just as is the case with 'internal good recognition'.

Recognition in this sense seems to be distinctly more available within contexts we would normally think of as 'work' than contexts we think of as leisure. Within work we are answerable to standards external to ourselves, and not reducible to our own enjoyment or inclination. This does of course apply to very serious amateur pursuit of certain goods, though of course it may make sense to see, for example, the very serious novelist who has yet to secure a book deal, or the very serious physics PhD who has yet to land a post, as engaged in work rather than leisure, in part because they are subjecting themselves to the standards of the practices of literature and physics, over an extended period, rather than enjoying a pleasing pastime.

But there remains an important distinction between those who eventually come to be seen to make such a contribution, and those who, despite their best efforts, do not. The recognition structures of the activity play a central role here. This aspect of practices is clearly bound up with MacIntyre's argument that practices require institutions (2007, p.194), and thus that the pursuit of internal goods of practices requires us to secure external goods – power, reputation, money – in support. On this schema, 'recognition' looks somewhat akin to 'reputation', an external good. But again, we can make a further distinction. The full-time tennis player needs an income. He or she could, of course, attempt to support their commitment to a full-time tennis tour through burglary or the establishment of a ponzi-scheme, but much more desirable is to win prize money at tennis tournaments as a result of excellent play.

Our imaginary tennis player clearly needs money, and wants victory and recognition, but not just any victory and recognition, only those that emerge from excellent play and are obtained in the correct way. Recognition from the right people and for the right reason are the sorts of goods that attend only to the practice of tennis. This distinct kind of recognition is a good internal to practice. It is bound up with the standards of excellence internal to that practice, and so ultimately available only from master-practitioners or those otherwise qualified to judge the practice through their intimate familiarity with it. It is not excluded from leisure altogether, as we noted above, even if it is all-but unavailable to leisure pursuits that are only engaged in occasionally, for fun. Recognition structures, through which many valuable kinds of internal-good-recognition are distributed, are often principally managed through work institutions.

To broaden the point so that it might illuminate the broader category of work, one important contrast might be that in the context of leisure taken for mere relaxation, improvement – excellence, virtue – is incidental and ancillary to the pursuit of immediate enjoyment, relaxation or fun, whereas in the serious context the enjoyment and fun is subordinate to and derivative of the pursuit of excellence itself. Where immediate enjoyment is subordinate to the cultivation

of excellence and virtue, the concept of work as opposed to leisure is arguably implicated. Those who play sports for leisure do not typically spend most of that time in drills and routines, but rather in playing games, despite the fact that playing competitive games is not necessarily the best way to build excellence. Playing a game of tennis is much more enjoyable though than doing endless drills designed to improve individual aspects of one's game, just as playing pieces is much more fun than playing endless scales and arpeggios on a piano.

In genuine practices, when we are encouraging our children to engage in an art, craft, science, etc. we tend to say things like 'if you want to *enjoy* it, you have to *work* at it'. Such language embodies the connection between work, seriousness, and excellence. It is in many cases true that excellence is its own reward – that being good at something is much more fulfilling than doing it badly, and becoming good at a genuine practice generally requires serious, diligent and disciplined effort, much of which is not immediately very fun. This highlights why the virtue of constancy is so important for MacIntyre (2007, p.203, see also Robson, 2015), but also why Keynes' distinction between the 'arts of life' and the 'activities of purpose' misses the morally educative role of those activities where life, and a purposiveness better captured with reference to the concept of work, come together.

Indeed, the understanding of a certain kind of recognition as a peculiar kind of internal good can be expanded further. While recognition as an internal good in the arts, games, and sciences may be conferred almost exclusively by the particularly well-informed insider or master-practitioner, there are certain practices which contribute to basic human needs so transparently, that internal good recognition can be provided by professional accreditation – i.e. a broader form of recognition that can only be achieved through engaging in particular practices, and in no other way – or by the appreciation of the public at large, despite their relative ignorance of the technicalities of the practice. Again such goods are similar to the broader external good of status, but because "we can only specify them in terms of" the practices in question (MacIntyre, 2007, p.188), they are best understood as an internal good. Examples of this might include those who work in healthcare (see Reeves & Sinnicks, 2023), but also in engineering or aviation, where a 'job well done' is so obviously important to safety that its relationship to human well-being is clear. For the concert pianist, internal good recognition might only be available from a relatively select group of connoisseurs, but the person whose work is a matter of life and death makes a contribution that is more widely comprehensible. As a result, a kind of recognition that attaches to particular roles, and cannot be achieved in any other way, attaches to nurses, doctors, engineers, airline pilots, and so on. This recognition is important and essentially connected to the domain of work.

This broader sense in which recognition is an internal good relates to the wider worth or importance of one's excellence for others. This aspect further helps distinguish work from leisure in its internal goods. For even the excellent amateur chess player or poet who receives recognition from peers in the practice will not thereby get a sense of doing something worthwhile that matters to others whether or not they understand it. Athletes and artists find broader recognition insofar as their work is appreciated by non-experts, the wider world, but this is rather contingent. Athletes often seem to feel an obligation to their audience to do well, but little really hinges on their performance. Pilots and nurses are in a different situation. They have to do a good job else people die. Whilst taking pride and finding fulfilment in excellence, in the recognition by peers that they are doing the practice well, that recognition is backed up by a broader recognition of their practice, and of excellence in their practice, as important.

In our society, certain sorts of work naturally attract this kind of recognition because of their critical function in the reproduction of life, but in principle a much wider range of practices could be recognised as of wider worth in a society more oriented to what is worthwhile. But that would not necessarily be a post-work society. It might better be envisaged as a society in which work comes into its own, and recognition as an internal good can be properly realised.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

What are we to make of Keynes's prognostications in light of the preceding discussion? On the one hand, 'mild preparations' for a future of leisure without breakdown would require honing the capacity for enjoyment of what is not mere drudgery. If the capacity for enjoyment of what is internally good also involves work, disciplined devotion with the expectation of an internal reward, and if we are entrenched in a dichotomy of work that requires disciplined effort and leisure enjoyment that ought to be effortless, we will need re-educate ourselves - through at least 'mild preparations' – in order to better appreciate the ways in which excellence and flourishing require work.

On the other hand, Keynes appears to imagine that his anticipated 'mental breakdown' would flow from the fact that, under the dominance of the market exchange, we are so immersed in activities that are purely instrumental with minimal intrinsic goods, that we would be ill-equipped to tolerate – let alone enjoy – a life of activities that have intrinsic goods, i.e. genuine practices. But we make a mistake if we imagine the aim is to learn to enjoy the internally good activities of genuine practices in the absence of broader recognition of not merely doing something well, but of doing something well that is of wider human worth. Perhaps the mental breakdown Keynes dreads is an artefact of his failure to give proper weight to this latter dimension, the broader recognition we seek from doing something well that makes a positive contribution to the lives of our fellows. To be condemned to cloistered, if intrinsically enjoyable, triviality that is of no worth to others more broadly is understandably an anxiety-inducing prospect.

The vision of an age of leisure risks omitting the internal good of recognition, but it is perhaps for this reason not a very plausible vision. The dread of a mental breakdown beyond drudgery may be assuaged if we shift our vision for a post-drudgery world, away from leisure as such, to an age of good work, which would on this account combine the valuable features of leisure and of work as we know them – internally rewarding practices and the internal good of broader recognition – while jettisoning the bad features of both as we know them (triviality or irrelevance to others, and drudgery). Mild preparations for such an age might be carved out if we were to focus on redeeming the internal goods from the clutches of market etiolation of kinds of work that are most clearly candidates for the unity of internal good and broader recognition.

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