Work

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What is work?

At first glance, work appears to be something we do out of necessity for merely instrumental reasons. It is a way of earning money to pay for other necessities – food, clothing, accommodation, and so on – and, if we are lucky, some discretionary spending beyond that in our free time. The concept of 'work' also encompasses housework, homework, and voluntary work, which do not typically attract remuneration, but even these may be considered burdensome and primarily instrumental. This conception of work as burdensome has a long history. In the Old Testament, for instance, Adam's punishment for eating the forbidden fruit is the need to toil the cursed ground (Gen 3:17) in order to produce the necessities of life. This assessment of work remained largely constant in European thought, at least, throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages.

More recently, Bertrand Russell offered the following definition of work: "Work is of two kinds: first, altering the position of matter at or near the earth's surface relatively to other such matter; second, telling other people to do so" (2004, p.3). Russell claimed that the former is typically unpleasant and poorly paid, and the latter pleasant and well paid, yet today this seems naïve. Oral historian Studs Terkel's remark that his renowned book on work was, "by its very nature, about violence – to the spirit as well as to the body" (1974, p.xi) draws our attention to the mental and spiritual hardship that even work which is not physically onerous can have, a fact of which many in today's white collar occupations are aware.

The conception of work as necessary but undesirable has been challenged by research focusing on the disruptive potential of technological change, in particular, the prospect of widespread automation replacing human workers. This research has often accepted that work is undesirable but sought to challenge the claim that it is necessary. The anti-work view holds that we should aim to move towards a world without work and instead devote ourselves to other activities, including some of those we currently enjoy as part of our leisure time (Gorz 1985). Whether this is a realistic or, indeed, worthwhile aspiration is, though, open to dispute: on the contrary, argues Deranty (2022), despite its current flaws, work is both necessary and valuable.

Indeed, in contrast to the emphasis on subjective enjoyment implicit in celebrations of free time, there is an attractive seriousness that attaches to the concept of work. This is in part because there is a sense in which 'free time' is "shackled to its opposite" (Adorno 2005, p.187): our hobbies allow us to recuperate, serve to replenish our ability to work, and can only be understood against a background of bad work (Reeves and Sinnicks 2021). This thought encourages us to consider rival understandings of work. One such understanding is suggested by Hannah Arendt (1958), who distinguished between labour, which applies to

activities which support our basic survival, which merely immediately sustain us (the paradigm being farming); work, which creates something lasting, the sphere of artifice, but which is still undertaken for achieving some purpose, rather than for its own sake; and action, which connotes creative activity done for its own sake. These latter concepts, work and action, suggest the possibility of forms of employment that are rather removed from burdensome toil.

Indeed, while experiences of boredom and frustration are common in the workplace, there is an enormous variation in how people assess and relate to their work. This is captured by research into the distinction between jobs, careers, and callings (Wresniewski et al 1997), which can perhaps be understood as mirroring Arendt's tripartite distinction, with jobs corresponding to labour, careers to work, and callings to action. While this way of putting it is inevitably secular, and misses the religious dimension of callings (see Wightman et al 2022), it nevertheless demonstrates that work can have considerably different meanings for different people, with action and calling representing the highest stage, which, far from burdensome toil, might be considered "life's prime want" (Marx 1978, p.531).

Good and meaningful work

Because avoiding poverty and providing for one's family are goods, even if the pessimistic understanding of work as a burdensome necessity is correct, work may still be, all things considered, a good. However, what other kinds of goods might work make available that would justify understanding one's work along the lines of Arendt's description of action, or approaching one's work as a calling? In this section we look at good and meaningful work. There is significant overlap in the discussion of such concepts, largely because meaningfulness is an important good, and goodness tends to make work meaningful, although it is possible to distinguish between the two.

Sayer suggests that "a complex, interesting job that demands the use of skilled, practical judgement enhances the capacities and satisfaction of the worker, whereas a boring, unskilled job dulls the mind" (2009, p.2). Given the realities of work under present conditions, this is perhaps a high bar to set, and yet meaningful work in this sense is compatible with work that one would wish to avoid in the event of automation leading to the possibility of an age of leisure, or, more prosaically, in the event of some personal windfall (a lottery win, a large inheritance, discovery of buried treasure, etc.), as leisure activities may yet be more complex, interesting, demanding of skill, etc.

Tyssedal (2022) argues that work is meaningful insofar as there are good reasons to do it. This suggests that "work can be meaningful regardless of whether it is good in other respects, such as in inherent interest or opportunities for self-realization" (2022, p.1). This sense of meaning may provide grounds for critiquing particularly pointless forms of employment, or perhaps capturing what makes 'hard labour' a particularly unpleasant punishment, but nevertheless it also requires us to recognise work that is very unpleasant or painful for those who carry it out if, all things considered, there are reasons to carry it out. This links meaningful work to the significance of doing something that is good to be done, in that it contributes to the life of the community, even if it isn't good to do for the individual. But it thereby threatens to make meaningfulness hostage to the vagaries of the market mechanism that can create reasons for doing work by manufacturing or manipulating consumer wants,

and can create reasons for individuals to carry out unfulfilling work by, for example, marginalising certain people from other more enriching kinds of work. Here meaning is collapsed into goodness for the community, but this seems to side-line the intuitively primary sense, according to which meaningful work is indexed to goodness for the worker.

In a move that brings meaningfulness and goodness closer together, Yeoman (2014), following Wolf (2010), identifies meaningful work as inhabiting the intersection between subjective attraction and objective attractiveness, and suggests that meaningful work is inherently bound up with our "inescapable interests in freedom, autonomy and dignity" (Yeoman 2014, p.249). Such a conception is clearly at odds with Tyssedal's 'reasons' account: while we might reluctantly concede that some dirty and dangerous job does, all things considered, need to be done (i.e. that there are reasons to do them), this hardly qualifies as objective attractiveness and falls far short of providing a justification for adopting the 'calling orientation', or for meeting Arendt's conception of action, outlined in the previous section.

One influential account of good work is provided by MacIntyre's account of 'practices' (2007, p.187), which are rich, rewarding activities that are conducive to the good life. MacIntyre's own examples include architecture, chess, football, and farming – with brick-laying, tic-tac-toe, throwing a ball, and turnip-planting being corresponding examples of non-practices which lack the requisite richness – but it has also been applied to a variety of forms of occupations (see Sinnicks 2021 for an overview). This account attempts to capture forms of work which allow for creativity and intrinsic appeal in the manner of Arendt's conception of action, but also highlights how such forms of activity can be morally educative – we need patience and self-honesty to devote ourselves to such activities, and courage to open ourselves up to the criticisms of others.

This conception of good work allows for an emphasis on community in at least two senses. Firstly, there is the sense of enjoying the community of the workplace – the sense of fellowship, the emergence of friendship, and so on – and secondly there is the wider sense of contributing to the common good of the community. This sense of making a social contribution is bound up with the good of recognition, which work provides perhaps the best opportunity for in contemporary society (Gheaus and Herzog 2016) and yet which is often denied, sometimes unjustly, to workers.

Work and Justice

We might primarily think of work as being something we have a duty to perform (though see Cholbi (2018) for a critique of this intuition), rather than something we have a right to. However, Sison et al (2016) note that these two positions are not incompatible, and suggest that while the duty to work is primary, because of the goods work can provide – the ability to support a family, to property, to play a full role in human society – might be considered rights, then we can think of a 'right to work' as being derivative of these rights.

Others have disputed the existence of such a right. Elster (1988), for instance, argues that we should not understand work as something to which we have a right. This is because it is almost unimaginable to suggest that an individual has a right for any particular employer to provide employment, and even a right against dismissal would seem to violate the rights of that employer to property and voluntary contracts. The other alternative is that we have a

right for the state to ensure we are provided with employment, but this is taken to be unattractive in light of both the economic inefficiency it would lead to, and because the kind of jobs it would generate would lack the kind of dignity and esteem workers need and typically want. Both positions arguably underestimate the extent to which private contractual right rests not simply on voluntary agreement but on substantive norms of fairness rooted in social recognition struggles over how social relationships should be organised (see Honneth 2014).

Indeed, the question of justice at work is not entirely separate from the issue of good work. After all, the right to a zero-hours contract for a dirty and dangerous job would be a meagre right. Thus, whether we have a right to meaningful work has also been a topic of fruitful debate, with Hsieh (2008) casting meaningful work as an object of distributive justice, and Breen (2016) suggesting that, despite the inevitably challenging questions relating to how it might be supported by the state, meaningful work should be an object of public policy. Veltman argues that even if we "cannot guarantee that opportunities for meaningful work will be available to all people" we ought to continue "working to transform institutions so that work that promotes psychological health and self-development becomes possible for more people" (2015, p.740).

Questions of justice have also been addressed in connection to a variety of more particular workplace practices, including justice in compensation (Moriarty 2012) and broader debates about equal pay (Örtenblad 2021). Bieber and Moggia (2021) address the issue of precarious work in the 'gig' economy and suggest that greater regulation is called for, as is a move away from an understanding of work as a mere commodity. Anderson (2017) has drawn attention to the undue influence employers can exercise over the lives of employees and argues that employers are often akin to authoritarian private governments. Meanwhile, other scholars have explored concepts such as discrimination (Demuijnck 2009), and the systematic undervaluing of women's work (Grimshaw and Rubery 2007).

One potential route towards dealing with problems of injustice in the workplace, as well as making work more meaningful, is through the promotion of workplace democracy (see Frega et al (2019) for a helpful overview). Such democracy can, when in good order, give workers a means with which to oppose workplace injustices, as well as to experience the autonomy and community that are characteristic of good and meaningful work.

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