Good Work: The Importance of Caring About Making a Social Contribution

ABSTRACT:

How can work be a genuine good in life? I argue that this requires overcoming a problem akin to that studied by Marx scholars as the problem of work, freedom and necessity: how can work be something we genuinely want to do, given that its content is not up to us, but is determined by necessity? I argue that the answer involves valuing contributing to the good of others, typically as valuing active pro-sociality – that is, valuing actively doing something good for others. This makes work better in one way, and may even make work something we are genuinely glad to have in our lives. Contemporary philosophical thinking about good work tends to focus on how work can be good for the person doing it, by providing e.g. self-realization or social relationships, while underappreciating the special importance of valuing social contribution. People will typically only really want work if they want a part of their lives to be about the good of others. This also means that work may be a part of the best life, something we should take into account when discussing work-related policies and the desirability of a ‘post-work’ future.

Keywords: Work; pro-sociality; social contribution; the good life; Marx; freedom; necessity

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# Introduction

Work can be good (and bad) in numerous ways, but in this paper I argue that a specific value and corresponding volitional structure is at the heart of good work: namely, valuing making a social contribution to the good of others; that is, acting to promote the good of others, and valuing thus acting as a good thing in itself. In slogan form, it is ‘caring about caring’. This is of special importance for the goodness of work, because it is makes it possible for work to be *a genuine good in life*. That is, it may make work something we genuinely want in our lives, and not simply something we accept as more or less good or bad. This means that work may be a part of the best life for people who value making a social contribution. The argument draws on lessons from Marx scholarship on what has been studied as the problem of work, freedom and necessity, which I will call simply ‘the problem of work’: the content of work is determined by needs and wants, and work therefore largely consists in activities we do not spontaneously want to engage in for their own sake.

The argument leads to a critique of contemporary accounts of good work, both liberal-egalitarian and Marxist, which focus too heavily on how work can be good for the person who does it but do not correctly appreciate the special importance of valuing making a social contribution. This is not just one good of work, but is at the heart of how work itself can be a genuine good in life, and of how other goods of work can also be genuine goods in life. Moreover, the obervations made about how work can be a genuine good in life are of considerable interest for a wide range of questions and policy issues related to work, such as the role of work in a good life, the desirability of a ‘post-work’ economy, and the desirability of policies that help people exit work relative to policies that aim to improve the work people have access to.

The argument will proceed as follows: Section 1 introduces the problem of work, freedom and necessity from Marx scholarship and argues that it describes a problem of general interest: how can work be a genuine good in life? Section 2 discusses and shows how valuing making a social contribution, typically as active pro-sociality, provides an answer to this problem. Many people want to spend at least some of their time actively doing something good for others. If work is otherwise not bad, I suggest this may be enough to make work a genuine good in life (2.1). Moreover, valuing making a social contribution is also necessary for this to be possible (2.2). Section 3 discusses some existing accounts of good work in light of these findings, focussing on Gheaus and Herzog’s (2016) broadly liberal-egalitarian approach as well as some Marxist approaches, in particular that of Kandiyali (2020), and criticizes these for not fully realizing the special importance of pro-sociality. In most cases, people will only want work, and goods such as self-realization as this is realized at work, if they want a part of their lives to be about the good of others. The conclusion briefly reflects on the further practical significance of these findings.

# 1 The Problem of Work

Marx scholars have identified what they understand as a problem of work, freedom and necessity in the following well-known passage in *Capital,* Volume III:

[T]he realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilised man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working-day is its basic prerequisite (Marx, 1867/1998: 807).

On this picture, work or labour consists in the activities that have to be done to maintain and reproduce life, i.e. to satisfy needs, or that are instrumental to satisfy wants beyond what is strictly necessary. For simplicity, I will follow Marx in speaking of work as ‘necessary’ in this broad sense, which covers what is necessary to satisfy either needs or wants.[[1]](#endnote-1) This identification of work with necessary or instrumental activity does not preclude that people also have needs and wants that are satisfied in work itself, such as desires for self-realization, recognition, or caring for others.[[2]](#endnote-2) The point is that work seems to exist in the first place because there are needs and wants that do not satisfy themselves, and work is necessary for the satisfaction of these. The character and content of work as an activity is thus in part determined by the nature of the need or want which gives rise to the work in the first place.

In the quoted passage, Marx contrasts work as a necessary activity with the ‘realm of freedom’, where we find those activities that are ends in themselves. This contrast leads to the problem Marxists have identified as the problem of work, freedom and necessity: how can we be free when work, a considerable part of our lives, is determined by necessity?

David James proposes a reconciliation of freedom and necessity that makes use of Rousseau’s claim that ‘obedience to the law one has prescribed to oneself is freedom’ (James, 2017: 281). That is, freedom and necessity are compatible, and the problem of work, freedom and necessity is overcome, if the constraints on human activity given by necessity are (also) imposed by the will.[[3]](#endnote-3) As James recognizes, however, this is not yet a full answer to the problem. We also have to say how people may come to genuinely will work itself, independently of its being necessary, i.e. apart from the fact that it satisfies needs and wants. For if we will work only instrumentally to satisfy needs and wants, then it is only the satisfaction of these needs and wants that are really willed as genuine goods. Work is willed, or accepted, ony as a means to the latter, but not willed as a genuine good in itself. In other words, work only escapes the realm of necessity if it can be willed for its own goodness. The real challenge is to give a satisfactory explanation of how this may be possible, and this is the topic of Section 2, where I also discuss James’ particular answer.

With help from James, we have now redescribed the problem of work, freedom and necessity as follows: how can we come to will the activity of work? If we treat the good as a matter of what we will, based on our own conceptions of the good, this amounts to the question of how work can be a genuine good in life; that is, something which is not only good in some way or to some degree, but which is so good that people themselves genuinely will for it to be a part of their lives. Or in other words, it is the question of how work can be a part of the best life, according to their own conceptions of the good. Arguably, this ‘constructivist’ way of thinking of the good as a matter of what people themselves will is a suitable way to think about the good in liberal political theory, as it treats the good as a matter of what people themselves care about; that is, as up to each person’s own conception of the good, rather than as given by one determinate conception of the good.[[4]](#endnote-4) This also means that although the problem of work was first identified by Marx scholars, it is really a problem of general interest for living a good life with work. In the next section, I develop a solution.

# 2 How Can Work be a Genuine Good in Life? By Valuing Making a Social Contribution

In the previous section, we saw that we can describe the problem of work, or the problem of how work can be a genuine good in life, as the problem of how we can come to will work, despite the fact that the content of work is not given by the will in the first place, but by necessity. In this section, I develop an answer to the problem of work; that is, an explanation of what must be the case for people to genuinely will work. I do this by drawing on a suggestion familiar in particular from different strands of socialist literature, namely that acting on a pro-social attitude of caring for others makes work good. I will refer to this idea as ‘the pro-sociality thesis’. Different versions of this idea can be found in different writers. For example, utopian socialist Charles Fourier describes a scheme to make service work pleasant by organizing it such that each person is (almost) always helping someone they know and like, or are romantically attracted to (Fourier, 1966: 526–30).[[5]](#endnote-5) The idea is also associated with Marx, and Jan Kandiyali has recently argued that the good of satisfying the needs of others is an essential part of Marx’s account of what makes work free and unalienated (Kandiyali, 2017: 836–38; 2020: 563–71; Marx, 1844/1975: 227–28).

Below, I will develop what I think is the most plausible form of this suggestion, which consists in the following three pro-sociality theses:

1. Valuing making a social contribution makes work itself good (in one way).

2. Valuing making a social contribution may make work a genuine good in life.

3. Valuing making a social contribution is necessary to make work a genuine good in life (in most cases).

The first two are argued for in Section 2.1, the third in Section 2.2.

## 2.1 Valuing Making a Social Contribution Makes Work Good, and May Make it a Genuine Good in Life

I will start with the pro-sociality thesis in what I take to be its classical form; that is, the idea that having a pro-social attitude of caring for others makes work good. By pro-sociality, or caring about others, I understand valuing the good of other people as a good in itself. This implies taking the needs and wants of others as reasons to act, just as one’s own needs and wants also provide such reasons. If one is pro-social, one will therefore come to will working for the good of others, just as one wills working for one’s own good. However, the needs and wants of others belong just as much to the realm of necessity as our own. Therefore, pro-sociality only gives us an explanation of how we may come to will work for the good of others instrumentally, just as we work for our own good out of necessity. What is valued and wanted here is the good of others – the result of the work – and not the work itself. Hence, without further refinement, the pro-sociality thesis does not explain how work itself can be good. However, as I will show, it is on the right track.

We have just seen that we are looking for an explanation of how the activity of working, and not just its result, can be something valued and wanted. When doing socially useful work, one makes a causal contribution to the good of others. And if one is pro-social, and values the good of others, perhaps it is natural also to value one’s own causal role in bringing about that good as a good thing in itself. Indeed, it does at least seem that contributing to the good of others is something many people do value for its own sake, and that they would consider their lives poorer if thus contributing were not a part of their lives. On the other hand, I think valuing contributing without being pro-social is contribution-fetishism – this is why pro-sociality, caring about others, is also needed. The point is that if one not only cares about others, but also cares about contributing to their good, one can value work as an activity in which one does this.

I will provide some more backing for this idea. Contributing to the good of others in the general sense of making a causal contribution to their good can take several forms. One is contributing money; another is working, the way that interests me here. As a form of contributing, working stands out by entailing a thicker form of involvement, because it is contributing by engaging in an activity that extends in time, and thus takes up a part of one’s day, one’s life, and which typically also involves some effort. I will now argue that it seems that people are particularly inclined to value this active and involved form of contributing to the good of others.

In English, the word ‘caring’ is used both for the pro-social attitude of being non-indifferent to and wanting the good of others, and for acting on that attitude. We can describe the second of those senses as ‘active pro-sociality’, to describe the notion of activity motivated by one’s pro-social attitude. Arguably, many people do value active pro-sociality, and even seem more inclined to value this thicker form of active caring for others than they are to value contributing in the general sense. Some evidence of this is that parents who care (in the first sense) about their children are typically not indifferent to how they contribute to their children’s good, and want not only to contribute to this good, as one can do e.g. with money, but also to care for them in the second sense, i.e. engage in active pro-sociality.[[6]](#endnote-6) The importance of caring in the second sense is also seen in other personal relationships and interactions. Another piece of evidence that points in the same direction is that people often want to *do* something – not only *cause* something – for others. Observations of this kind support that caring as active pro-sociality is a form of contributing that people are particularly inclined to value for its own sake.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Work, as activity that satisfies the needs and wants of others, can amount to active pro-sociality, or caring in the second, active sense. And this again means that if one’s set of values is such that one values active pro-sociality, or caring, in the active sense, one can value work itself as an instantiation of active pro-sociality, or caring, and not only instrumentally for the good of others that is thereby brought about.

Thus, while pro-sociality, valuing the good of others, is not sufficient to make the activity of work itself good, valuing active pro-sociality, or just valuing contributing more generally, is sufficient to do so. I have emphasized the former, as I suspect it is the more common form of valuing making a social contribution. Moreover, valuing active pro-sociality is a way in which work specifically, as contributing *activity*, can be valuable. Valuing making a social contribution can make any form of contribution valuable, of which work is just one type, albeit arguably a particularly important one. In the following, I will formulate the pro-sociality theses as being about ‘valuing making a social contribution’ – the more general notion – noting however that I, for the reasons given above, think that valuing active pro-sociality is the most common form this takes.

We can now formulate a first pro-sociality thesis as follows:

1. Valuing making a social contribution makes work good (in one way).

In other words, for people who have a conception of the good on which making a social contribution, e.g. as active pro-sociality, is considered valuable, and who have a corresponding volitional structure, work will be valuable or good by being an activity which makes a social contribution, or in which one is actively pro-social. The thesis is qualified by ‘(in one way)’ because work will of course also be good and bad in other ways. And Thesis 1 is quite weak: it says nothing about how much better work becomes when people value it as an act of caring, only that this makes it valuable in one more way than it otherwise would be. It is therefore perfectly possible to value the fact that one’s work does something good for others, and find that this is just one partly redeeming aspect of work that is quite bad overall. Nevertheless, valuing making a social contribution always makes work better in one way, regardless of how good or bad the work is in other respects, or overall.

It is also worth noting the close affinity between valuing active pro-sociality, as this was described above, and another value, namely community. G.A. Cohen (2009) defines community as follows:

 [T]hat people care about, and, where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one another (Cohen, 2009: 34–35).

He specifies that one form (or ‘mode’) of community is what he calls ‘communal reciprocity’, which is characterized by the following attitude:

I (...) find value in both parts of the conjunction – I serve you and you serve me – and in that conjunction itself (Cohen, 2009: 43).

Community on Cohen’s understanding thus has exactly the same structure as I describe above: it is ‘caring about caring’; that is, to ‘find value in’ the fact that one does something good for others who are doing the same. Active pro-sociality and community are not the same thing, because active pro-sociality, and contributing more generally, can take other forms, such as altruism, whereas community as described here, unlike altruism, has a reciprocity element. Rather, community is one ‘thicker’ form active pro-sociality can take, and moreover, it is one which many value. Below, I will continue to limit my discussion to valuing making a social contribution in the general sense, rather than specific forms it may take. But it is worth noting that in cases where making a social contribution is also a constituent of a thicker value such as community, we can amend Thesis 1 to say that valuing making a social contribution makes work good in more than one way, or in a thicker way, as it also realizes the value of community.

While this means that valuing making a social contribution does make work good in (at least) one way, it also means that this is not necessarily sufficient to make work a genuine good in life and overcome the problem of work. But I will now show how Thesis 1 provides the basis for doing so, at least when circumstances are favourable.

To see this, think of work that is quite good, but not good enough that one would choose to do it for its own sake. It may be somewhat inherently interesting, or somewhat self-realizing, but not as interesting or self-realizing as what one could do otherwise. Or there may just not be very much of this work that has to be done, so that it does not take much time away from what one would rather do. Recall that valuing making a social contribution will make this work good in one more way, and thus better than it would be to do it otherwise. The idea is that this may in some cases be enough to ‘tip the balance of reasons’ in favour of doing the work, when one considers not just how good the work is for one’s personal interests, but also thinks of it as good in virtue of being an act of caring for others.

In that case, work, which may first seem a (moderate) burden, would turn out to be a blessing in disguise. The possibility of caring and doing something for others (and valuing this) is after all dependent on there being something others genuinely benefit from, something they need or want. The more manna there is, the fewer such opportunities there would be, and if people were entirely self-sufficient, there may be none. Life would be richer in private pleasures, but perhaps poorer in value nevertheless.[[8]](#endnote-8) Thus, at least under favourable conditions where work is not too burdensome, people who value making a social contribution may genuinely want to do the work that needs to be done, and be glad that they have this opportunity to realize the value of making a social contribution (or active pro-sociality) in their lives. In this case, work is not just something to be accepted, which may be better or worse, but a genuine good in life – and there is no problem of work. This gives us the second pro-sociality thesis:

1. Valuing making a social contribution may make work a genuine good in life.

As Thesis 1 does not say anything about how much better valuing making a social contribution makes work, Thesis 2 does not say anything about how favourable conditions must be for work to be a genuine good in life, only that this is possible. Presumably, how favourable conditions must be will depend on how strongly one values making a social contribution, and using a part of one’s life to realize this value.

Despite this vagueness, I think Thesis 2 is both a radical thesis and potentially very good news. It is good news because I think it unrealistic that automation can ever do away with all (unpleasant) work, and, moreover, that at least some care work probably should be done by humans anyway. Thus, even if I do not know whether conditions will ever be favourable enough to make all work that has to be done a genuine good in life, given that work will always be with us, just the possibility that work can make our lives go better is good news.

The thesis is radical because, arguably, the general position on work in the history of philosophy has been negative (e.g. Aristotle, 2002: X.8-9; Kandiyali, 2014: 118). Moreover, well-known myths tell of work as a punishment from God, and contrast the working condition with a previous paradise without work.[[9]](#endnote-9) Finally, the passage from Marx in Section 1 ends on a negative note: while some freedom is possible in the realm of necessity, ‘it none the less remains a realm of necessity’, and the best we can do is to shorten the working day. Thesis 2 claims, radically optimistically, that at least under favourable conditions, work may be a genuinely valued part of the best life. I will briefly discuss the implications of this in the conclusion.

I have thus shown how valuing making a social contribution makes work good, and may even make it possible for work to be a genuine good in life. I will now go one step further and argue that valuing making a social contribution is in most cases also necessary if work is to be a genuine good in life.

## 2.2 Valuing Making a Social Contribution is Necessary for Work to be a Genuine Good in Life

Work can be good and bad in numerous ways, but in this section, I argue that the other ways in which work can be good are typically not sufficient for work to become a genuine good in life. For this, valuing making a social contribution is therefore necessary.

The point of departure of this argument is the premise of the problem of work: work gets its content from needs and wants, and the work that needs to be done therefore largely differs from the activities we spontaneously want to do for their own sake. This does not mean that work is all bad – far from it. It simply means that the ways in which it is good typically do not make it good enough that we would spontaneously want to do all our work if we did have a free choice. This is the case both at the level of all work for sociey as a whole, but also at the level of the work of each individual, for the following two general reasons:

1. When the work society needs done is divided into jobs for specific individuals, it is highly unlikely that all the work society needs a specific individual to do will correspond to activities she spontaneously wants to engange in. This dividing into jobs will presumably be constrained by concerns such as efficiency and perhaps also justice in the distribution of labour burdens, and it seems very unlikely that any resulting job would consist only in activities that are so good that someone would spontaneously want to engage in them.
2. Many forms of goodness that are possible at work are also possible outside of work, and typically, they are easier to realize outside of work.[[10]](#endnote-10) For unlike work, activities outside work can have their content given by how to best realize other goods, whereas the content of work is given by necessity.[[11]](#endnote-11)

For these two reasons, work, at least some of the work any one person has to do, will typically not be good enough to be something they genuinely want, at least unless they value making a social contribution. This is the general argument for the third pro-sociality thesis:

1. Valuing making a social contribution is necessary to make work a genuine good in life (in most cases).

Below, I will examine specific ways in which work can be good, to show that the general argument holds for these specific ways of being good. Note that the third thesis does allow exceptions but claims that these will be few. This should also be supported by the argument that follows.[[12]](#endnote-12)

We can divide other ways in which work can be good into forms of goodness that are intrinsic or extrinsic to the work activity itself.

1. Intrinsically good work

The first and perhaps most obvious exception to the claim that valuing making a social contribution is necessary for work to be a genuine good in life is that some work does consist in activities that are so inherently interesting or enjoyable that some people genuinely want to do them, even if no one had to. However, it seems plausible that jobs in which all of the tasks are of this kind are likely to be very rare, for Reason (i) in the general argument. It would seem to take an enormous fluke for a job that a society needs done to consist only in tasks that someone wants to do for their inherent interest, given that the pool of work to be divided up contains a large number of activities that are not very intrinsically interesting, and especially if we think that the work society needs done is divided into jobs respecting concerns of efficiency, justice, and so on. What is plausibly more common is socially useful jobs that consist mostly, but not entirely, of activities enjoyed for their inherent goodness. But then at least a part of one’s work is not wanted as a genuine good in life. Perhaps we can also find some jobs in our society that consist only in inherently enjoyable activities and that create some benefits to others, but it is very unlikely that this job actually corresponds to a job that would result from a good division of labour which takes both concerns for efficiency and justice into account. Most of the jobs a society really needs done would not be like that – and jobs of this kind typically do not really correspond to the jobs society needs done.

1. Extrinsically good work

Second, working often comes with or realizes goods that are extrinsic to the work activity itself, such as self-realization, a side effect of using one’s skills at the right level of challenge (Elster, 1986: 100), or social relationships that arise from working together. This gives rise to the second exception to the third pro-sociality thesis: people may genuinely want to do some work because they thereby realize extrinsic goods that are achieved by working. Extrinsic goods of work tend to be central to accounts of how work can be good, including Marxist responses to the problem of work. James’ (2017) response, which I drew on above, is an example of this. He suggests that when workers are in charge of organizing work, it will become an arena for developing and exercising distinctively human capacities, and thus for self-realization. Work will then realize human goods such as ‘to deliberate and to engage in acts of self-direction’, satisfy a ‘need to associate with others’, and allow people to ‘engage in a common project’ (James, 2017: 284–86). For James, these goods are what will make work genuinely wanted, independently of its instrumental value (James, 2017: 284).

Extrinsic goods may appear to make work instrumentally good, unlike the forms of intrinsic goodness discussed above, and thus not really to give reasons to want work itself. However, at least for some extrinsic goods, things are more complex. For at least some extrinsic goods of work are such that they cannot be conceived of without a process wherein they are realized. For example, valuable social relationships typically require some common history. Willing self-realization implies willing a process of activities wherein self-realization takes place, and some of the pleasure of self-realization is in the unfolding of this process. The goods of partaking in deliberation, association and a common project require something to deliberate and associate about. Things and products can be conceived of independently of the process of producing them, as we do when we think of manna. But many human goods are not like that, and they therefore cannot be treated as a good distinct from the activity in or through which they are realized.[[13]](#endnote-13)

However, as I will now show, both Reasons (i) and (ii) support that it is likely to be very rare that extrinsic goods make someone’s work so good that they genuinely want to do it. Let us first see why Reason (ii) holds. Even if one wants an extrinsic good that may be had through work, such as self-realization or social relationships, it is likely that there will be other ways to realize this good outside of work, and that these ways will be better. After all, the content of work is given by needs and wants, and this is likely to constrain how self-realizing or social it can be. While many people have valuable relationships with co-workers, at work one is also stuck with certain colleagues and certain tasks, and it is plausible that there are better ways to bring together people who enjoy each other’s company and foster relationships than working.

An interesting corollary of this is that at least for some extrinsic goods of work, Pro-sociality Thesis 3 seems to extend from work itself to the specific goods of work. That is, valuing making a social contribution is necessary for the extrinsic good of work to be a genuine good in life. The reason is that it is only if one values making a social contribution that one will prefer to secure at least certain extrinsic goods from work, such as self-realization at work and social relations from work, rather than to secure self-realization and social relationships outside of work. If someone simply wants self-realization or social relationships, there is most likely a non-work way to achieve this goal that would better suit them. But if someone values making a social contribution, then securing self-realization and social relationships through working may be the best thing for them, according to their conception of the good.

There are admittedly some extrinsic goods of work for which it is less clear that Reason (ii) holds. Goods such as ‘deliberation’ and ‘engaging in a common project’ require something that is serious enough to merit deliberation and common engagement, and arguably, work, along with politics, may be most suited in that role. This is not a trivial exception, but it is still the case that Reason (i) holds for extrinsic goods of work just as it does for intrinsic goodness. For again, it would arguably take an enormous fluke for a specific job that society genuinely needs done to consist only in activities that realize extrinsic goods. There may be jobs where many tasks realize extrinsic goods well. These parts of the job may be genuinely wanted, but another part still may not be. Moreover, we may find jobs in which all parts realize extrinsic goods, but again, I expect that very few of the jobs a society really needs done are really of this kind. For example, take a person who wants self-realization by developing her talent for abstract thinking. Working as a professor of mathematics at a university may be a good way to do this, but devoting more time to mathematics without the constraints of teaching, correcting assignments, fulfilling administrative tasks and so on that come with this job would be better. Yet quite probably, there would be no (or very few) real jobs of the latter kind in a well-ordered society.

This does not rule out exceptional cases of jobs a society needs done where all the work is either intrinsically or extrinsically so good that it is what a person genuinely wants to do (hybrid cases where parts of a job are intrinsically good, and other parts extrinsically good, or both, are of course also possible). But it should show that it is likely to be rare that someone can have an entire job of this kind. In most cases, what needs to be done will at least in part come apart from the activities people spontaneously find most intrinsically good or that best realize the extrinsic goods people want. Therefore, in most cases, valuing making a social contribution is a precondition for genuinely wanting one’s work, and thus to overcome the problem of work, as Pro-sociality Thesis 3 states.

To give this argument further support, I will now examine some other motivations to work that readily come to mind but that cannot overcome the problem of work or give rise to exceptions to Thesis 3, unlike (I) and (II) above.

1. Money

Work in the labour market as we know it is rewarded with money, and given the importance of this institution in current society, it is worth seeing why money cannot solve the problem of work. Monetary reward makes socially useful work into work also for own benefit, as money is a multi-purpose means that can be used for own ends. However, if one wants monetary reward, or the goods it can buy, this does not make work itself good, as it is here clearly money or other distinct benefits, and not the activity of working, that is wanted.[[14]](#endnote-14)

1. Recognition for work

Recognition plays an important role in some accounts of what makes work good (Gheaus and Herzog, 2016; Gomberg, 2007). Recognition is typically recognition for something, and on Gomberg’s view, work is associated with two bases of recognition. The first is performing complex work tasks, through which one earns recognition and esteem (Gomberg, 2007: 70–73). This is far from sufficient to make work in general good, as Gomberg (2007: 51) also recognizes, because it is plausible that there will always also be non-complex work that has to be done. However, unlike recognition for complex work, recognition for social contribution may be possible for all work in a well-ordered society. Moreover, recognition may seem to make work itself good in a way similar to how valuing making a social contribution does so: recognition for work as an activity that contributes, or an act of caring, seems to confer value on this activity itself and not only the result it produces.

However, despite the fundamental fact that people are motivated by and also need recognition, I will argue that recognition cannot really make work a genuine good in life. First, Reason (ii) has at least some force also for recognition. This is the case because many bases of recognition are possible. Many people will have access to other bases of recognition, such as complex and interesting leisure, and for these people, wanting recognition may therefore rather be a reason to want more time away from work. Admittedly, there may be others for whom making a social contribution may be their best avenue to recognition. But at the very least, this shows that recognition does not provide a general way to make work a genuine good in life, because while it may be a reason to value work for some, it will be a reason not to want to work for others.

Second, while social contribution and some extrinsic goods of work are realized by working, we can question whether the relationship between recognition and its base, work that makes a social contribution, really is close enough that valuing the former implies also valuing the latter. A reason to doubt this is that, as noted above, many sources of recognition are possible. Hence, the good of recognition is arguably not intrinsically connected to any of them. Moreover, it sometimes seems to happen that someone is esteemed without anyone having a clear idea of why. Therefore, I think recognition is not closely enough tied to a specific base such as socially useful work activity to confer value on the base. This means that working for recognition is ultimately more like working for money: it is the recognition, not the work itself, one wants, and the work is then only instrumentally good.

1. Manipulation of preferences

Finally, I will discuss the possibility of manipulating our preferences (or those of others) to the effect that what we (they) end up willing is exactly that work which has to be done, whether this manipulation is done by heavy socialization, or, say, by taking a pill. The result in one way resembles (I), namely work that is willed for its intrinsic goodness, for we would have become, or have made ourselves into, the kind of creatures whose preferences and desires now align exactly with those activities that have to be done.

However, this does not really overcome the problem of work, but rather, submits to the problem by adjusting human psychology to fit the demands of necessity. Moreover, even if one is inclined to say that this is one way to make work a genuine good in life, I think it seems too sinister to be a good way to do so.[[15]](#endnote-15)

It is nevertheless worth clarifying how manipulating preferences differs from the pro-sociality theses. These can, after all, be read as recommending that one adopts a certain value and attitude, because this will make the working part of one’s life better. A first difference is that this would be a much smaller change, the adoption of just one new value, rather than a general psychological overhaul. Second, many will find it a desirable rather than a repulsive change, as I have suggested that caring, and making a social contribution more generally, are often considered valuable. Unlike manipulating preferences, then, the pro-sociality theses point towards a way to overcome the problem of work, rather than a way to submit to necessity.

I will end the argument with a note on how the pro-sociality theses should be understood. As noted in Section 1, I treat the question of whether work can be a genuine good in life as a matter of whether work can be genuinely willed, and thus as something which is ultimately up to each person’s own conception of the good. The argument for the three pro-sociality theses shows that work will be better, and may even be willed as a genuine good in life, for a person whose conception of the good is such that it endorses making a social contribution as valuable, i.e. a person who values making a social contribution.

As the argument is entirely theoretical, the three pro-sociality theses should be understood as providing a theoretical, philosophical solution to the problem of work. Theoretical arguments about the good of this kind are perhaps of most obvious interest when one treats the good as a matter of what a person can rationally will, as I do here. However, I will now argue that the argument above is also of interest on other common views of the good.

First, another common way of thinking about the good is as given by an objective list. On a view of this kind, the crucial question is not what each person can will based on their conception of the good, but what is found on the objective list. Theoretical deliberation about the good can shed light on the content of the list, and will therefore also be of interest on views of this kind. For the argument above, if one takes an objective list view, the three pro-sociality theses can be reformulated as saying that work is better in one way, and may even be a genuine good in life (typically only) if making a social contribution (or active pro-sociality) is on the objective list.

Second, a further common view is that what is good, hereunder the goodness of work, is a matter of people’s subjective experience, and thus whether people experience work as something they want (independently of whether it is something that it is rational for them to want, on their own conception of the good, or according to an objective list). On this view, the content of the good cannot be discovered by theoretical argument. However, a theoretical argument can still shed light on the good, and the argument for the pro-sociality theses does this by showing that work is likely to be enjoyed more, or even to be what people most want for a part of their lives, (typically only) if they experience making a social contribution as something they enjoy.

This concludes my argument for the three pro-sociality theses. I will now use the lessons from the above argument to expose a common shortcoming in contemporary philosophical thinking about good work.

# 3 ‘How is it Good for Me?’ Misunderstanding Good Work

In this section, I argue that contemporary philosophical thinking about how work can be good makes the mistake of focussing too much on how work can be good for the person who does it while not appreciating the full importance of valuing the good that work does for others. I first show that this holds for a recent broadly liberal-egalitarian discussion of the ‘goods of work’ (Gheaus and Herzog, 2016), and then that Marxists have been making their own versions of this mistake.

Gheaus and Herzog (2016) have recently developed an interesting, broadly liberal-egalitarian approach to labour justice. Their suggestion is that we can approach labour justice as concerning several ‘goods of work’, which are goods people tend to care about, which are hard to realize outside of work in modern societies and which are suitable objects of distributive justice, because access to them is regulated by public institutions (Gheaus and Herzog, 2016: 70). They identify four such goods:

1. excellence (in accomplishments or developing one’s skills),
2. making a social contribution,
3. community (understood as the experience of working together and being a ‘part of a project of collective agency’) and
4. recognition (Gheaus and Herzog, 2016: 74–79).

The second of these four goods is precisely the good of making a social contribution. The other three goods were discussed in Section 2.2: (1) and (3) as extrinsic goods that fall under (II), and recognition separately in (IV). Gheaus and Herzog themselves say that their account ‘assumes a mild version of perfectionism’ (Gheaus and Herzog, 2016: 82), but I have nevertheless characterized it as ‘broadly liberal-egalitarian’, because their notion of a ‘good of work’ is explicitly meant to identify goods that people themselves find ‘particularly valuable’ (Gheaus and Herzog, 2016: 70). The goods of work thus seem to be given by people’s own conceptions of the good life rather than a particular view of this.

Gheaus and Herzog are right that work can be good (and bad) in several ways, but the argument for the three pro-sociality theses suggests that the goods of work approach nevertheless has two shortcomings. The first is that it treats making a social contribution as just one among several goods of work, without appreciating its special importance, both for the possibility of work itself becoming a genuine good in life, and for the goodness of other extrinsic goods of work. I deliberately call this a ‘shortcoming’, for I do not think what Gheaus and Herzog say is directly wrong, but rather that a complete understanding of what it means for work to be good requires recognizing the special importance of valuing making a social contribution. Second, and closely connected, this gives the account the wrong perspective on what it means for work to be good. The goods of work approach seems to suggest that this has to do with whether the worker secures certain goods through the work. But as the argument above shows, this is only a part of what it means for work to be good, and is typically not sufficient for work to be a genuine good in life. Instead, what makes work a genuine good in life is very crucially also about not caring too much about the fact that work does not realize as much of the goods of work as other activities could, and instead valuing what it does for others, and valuing that one is doing this good for others. Finally, let me note that these theoretical shortcomings have at least potential practical significance. The argument above suggests that if one wants to make work better, at least if one is so ambitious that one wants to overcome the problem of work, this is not simply a matter of giving people more of just any good of work: valuing making a social contribution has special significance.

I will now move on to Marxist scholarship on good work. Interestingly, although Marx scholars are the ones who have studied the problem of work, freedom and necessity more carefully, their accounts of good work tend to make their own version of the same mistake – that is, to focus too strongly on how work may be good for the worker who does it. The main difference is that Marxist accounts do not attempt to be neutral on what this good consists in, but instead typically emphasize goods like self-realization and opportunities to realize ‘distinctively human capacities’ (James, 2017: 286; see also Elster, 1985: 521).

Indeed, I think even the Marxist view that goes the furthest in recognizing the importance of doing something good for others, and thus the view most similar to my own, namely that of Kandiyali (2017; 2020), ultimately makes the same mistake. According to Kandiyali (2020: 571), unalienated work according to Marx is characterized by the following:

1. Self-realization
2. Satisfying another’s need
3. Intention of (2)
4. Appreciation of the work by the beneficiary of (2)
5. Performed freely.

A minor revision in light of the argument in Section 2 above is that one should add a clause about ‘valuing acting to achieve (2) by the worker’ (or perhaps modify (3) accordingly). After all, making a social contribution, i.e. (2), is not enough – we need valuing making a social contribution as well.[[16]](#endnote-16) The main problem with Kandiyali’s account, I think, however, is that it insists too strongly on the importance of self-realization. When he summarizes his view, he does so as follows: ‘unalienated production consists in realizing oneself through providing others with the goods and services they need for their self-realization’ (Kandiyali, 2020: 587, see also 555, 557). However, I have argued that valuing making a social contribution may be sufficient to make work a good in itself, at least under favourable conditions. With my terminology, we agree that (valuing) making a social contribution is necessary for work to be good/unalienated, but Kandiyali’s account suggests this happens via self-realization, an extrinsic good for the worker, whereas I disagree; no detour via self-realization is needed.

Kandiyali returns to the point that self-realization is necessary, and valuing making social contribution not sufficient, elsewhere in his argument as well. Specifically, he says that a change in motivation will not be sufficient to make factory work lacking in self-realization unalienated (Kandiyali, 2020: 566). This may provide a nice test case to adjudicate between our accounts of what it takes for work to be a genuine good. Assume favourable technological conditions in which there is some, but not much, drudgery that just has to be done; let’s say this keeps people busy with dull factory work about two hours per day. While someone who passes their whole day by the sweat of their brow reasonably longs for the Garden, I think it plausible that people in this society may appreciate this work as a chance to do something good for each other, even if this work itself is not enjoyable: they may prefer some small amount of drudgery to the Garden, because this is the way they have to make a social contribution, to realize active pro-sociality and perhaps also community as communal reciprocity with one another, which they value. And this suggests that even drudgery, at least if it comes in sufficiently small amounts, may be a genuine good in life.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Finally, Kandiyali’s emphasis on self-realization leaves him with the problem identified in the discussion of extrinsic goods in Section 2.2 (II): if one desires self-realization, there will typically be some other activity more conducive to this goal than is any available job. Typically, therefore, it is only if one also values making a social contribution that work will be what one really wants. Therefore, I think Kandiyali, too, overemphasizes self-realization. This might be orthodox from a Marxist point of view, but I believe it is ultimately mistaken, at least if the ideal is that work be a genuine good in life.[[18]](#endnote-18)

# Conclusion

I have argued that Marxists have identified a problem of work of general relevance to living a good life: how can work be a genuine good in life, given that its content is given by necessity, and therefore typically differs from the kind of activities we spontaneously want to engage in? The answer, I argue, is through valuing making a social contribution, typically as valuing active pro-sociality, or caring about caring; that is, valuing work activity as an activity wherein one does something good for others. The three pro-sociality theses together state that this makes work itself good in one way, and that it is typically necessary and potentially also sufficient to make work a genuine good in life. Finally, I argued that while existing accounts of good work, both liberal-egalitarian and Marxist, recognize the good of making a social contribution, they fail to recognize its special importance. Work can be good in several ways; but only if we care not just about what work does for us personally but also care about work as a way to do something for others will we have a reason to value having work, rather than just any potentially self-realizing, or social, or interesting activity in our lives.

I will end with a brief reflection on the practical significance of this finding. As I suggested in the introduction, the problem of work is of significance for the question of the role of work in a good life, the desirability of a post-work economy, and related policy issues. The first pro-sociality thesis shows that as long as people have to work, valuing making a social contribution makes their lives better. The second pro-sociality thesis has the most radical implications: it shows that work need not stand in the way of the best life and may even make life richer, as it provides an opportunity to enrich one’s life by living out the values of social contribution, active pro-sociality and community. Apart from politics, it is hard to see what else other than work (understood broadly) could provide this arena. I also suggested that it may require quite favourable conditions for work to be a genuine good in life: making a social contribution is usually only one of the things people want from life, and the best life is one in which there is time and opportunity to realize both this and other values and the right balance between them. As things are today, I think many people have to spend too much time at work relative to how much time they want for realizing values that are best pursued outside it; and moreover, the general unequal and unjust sharing of burdens in the labour market undermines appreciation of goods like active pro-sociality and community that could be realized through work. But this also suggests that we should think twice before we decide that it is the Garden that we are really longing for and for which we should aim with our policy choices. Perhaps a society with fairer and smaller shares of less burdensome work may be better – and given how many things there are that simply have to be done, perhaps this is good news.

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**Notes:**

1. The passage also seems to equate work and production, but the necessary or instrumental character of work is just as much a feature of e.g. care work, which is of course just as necessary to ‘maintain and reproduce life’. This picture of work also clearly extends beyond work done for pay in the organized labour market, as house work, volunteer work, community service and so on are all instrumental or necessary to satisfy the needs and wants in a society. Note that the emphasis on work as necessary or instrumental activity is common in definitions and broader characterizations of work (Geuss, 2021: 5, 15–21; Marshall, 2013: 54; Muirhead, 2004: 4–6). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Note also that not all necessary or instrumental activities are work. For example, eating and sleeping are necessary but are not work. Cp. how Goodin et al. (2008: 34–36, 40–51) distinguish between three ‘realms of necessity’: the economic (earning an income), the social (household labour) and the biological (bodily needs). Moreover, Graeber (2018) has identified a category of jobs that often serve no need or want, which he refers to as ‘bullshit jobs’. These are a part of the institution of work in our society but may fall outside work understood as necessary activity. The problem of work which I am interested in here, and which Marxists have discussed, pertains to work as (broadly) necessary activity, which presumably still encompasses much of the work in modern societies and includes production, care work, house work, volunteer work, etc. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This is similar to Cohen’s (2008: chap. 5; 2000) ethical solution to the problem of achieving equality at a high standard of living without violating freedom: this is possible if people choose to work so as to realize equality at a high level of welfare. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. On constructivism as a normative theory, see e.g. Street (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Fourier thought this would improve service work in several ways, including the quality of the service offered, and most importantly, that it would remove the element of servility that often goes with service work; but from his description of the scheme, it is also clear that he thinks it would make service work attractive to perform. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. A part of this may be that parents are often best situated to do good for their children, but I think people often attach more importance to caring (in the second sense) for their children than this instrumental reason would support. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Perhaps one is still worried that the active contributing, unlike the good for others that results, is still a somewhat strange thing to value, and that there may still be some kind of contribution-fetishism going on. However, I think we should rather think of the fact that people are inclined to value doing good for others as a fortunate side of our nature. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See also the interesting discussion in Kandiyali (2014: 120–21). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The Expulsion from the Garden is one such story, and in a similar fashion, Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (2006: l. 90ff.) tells of how life was without toil (or disease) before Pandora opened the jar from which evils were released into the world. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. As noted in Section 2.1, work is just one form of contribution, and other forms are possible as well. Hence, valuing making a social contribution may be a reason to pursue a way of contributing different from work, if one can better contribute in another way (unlike valuing active pro-sociality, which is realized in work activity, but not in contribution without activity of some substance). However, as non-work forms of contributing typically do not take much time and effort, it will arguably typically only mean that a person who values making a social contribution and can do so in other ways has a reason to value these in addition to work. Moreover, I suspect that most contributing to the good of others involves at least some substantial activity (earning money to donate, making an effort to donate to the best cause), which makes it (similar to) forms of work, on the broad understanding that underlies the problem of work (Section 1). For example, politics, an alternative arena for pro-sociality, could be seen as work on this broad understanding. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. It is of course typically possible to realize the same needs and wants in different ways, some of which are better for the worker; the point is that the fact that the activity has to realize needs and wants does constrain the forms it can take. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Recall also that Pro-sociality Thesis 1 implies that even work which is a genuine good in life for other reasons will be better in one way for people who value making a social contribution. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Simply being talented can be conceived of coherently without the process of acquiring talents, but arguably, self-realization is a good distinct from the desirable end state. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. A perhaps ethically very different but structurally similar possibility is that one may will work out of a sense of justice, which tells one to do one’s fair share of work. Again, this gets the work done, but does not overcome the problem of work: here one wills justice, and work is again willed instrumentally under conditions which are such that burdens have to be shared. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Indeed, this possibility is explored in Huxley’s *Brave New World*, where the lower-caste menial workers have their development manipulated from the pre-natal stage to become simple creatures who have no other will than to do the simple work they are assigned (Huxley, 1932/2016). I think heavy socialization for the same purpose after birth is only somewhat less sinister. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. This does not make it explicitly into Kandiyali’s definition of unalienated labour on p. 571, but it is close to (3), and moreover, I think Kandiyali basically affirms it elsewhere when he discusses how the enjoyment of doing something for others is good in itself (Kandiyali, 2020: 564) and a part of what makes work free (Kandiyali, 2020: 568–69, 580). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. It is worth noting that Kandiyali also agrees that drudgery can be good in one way, for the fulfilment of satisfying the needs of others (Kandiyali, 2020: 582). And I agree that work that is both self-realizing and fulfilling is better than work which only lives up to the latter standard. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Kandiyali’s explicit aim, however, is to provide a new interpretation of Marx’s account of unalienated production, and I think he is right that self-realization belongs in such an account, as he suggests.

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