What Makes Work Meaningful?

Samuel Mortimer
Legal Studies and Business Ethics Department
The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

Prior scholarly approaches to meaningful work have largely fallen into two camps. One focuses on identifying how work can contribute to a meaningful life. The other studies the antecedents and outcomes of workers experiencing their work as meaningful. Neither of these approaches, however, captures what people look for when they seek meaningful work—or so I argue. In this paper, I give a new, commitment-based account of meaningful work by focusing on the reasons people have to choose meaningful work over other options. I draw on philosopher Ruth Chang's account of voluntarist reasons (reasons that arise from an act of the will) to argue that commitments can create distinctive reasons to pursue certain work. It is the presence of these distinctive reasons that makes work meaningful.

Introduction

The ideal of meaningful work continues to exert a strong grip on both workers and scholars of work. Surveys suggest that the overwhelming majority of Americans would be willing to accept a lower salary for consistently meaningful work, with one study finding that American workers would on average forego as much as 23% of their future lifetime earnings (Achor, Reece, Kellerman, & Robichaux 2018). The media regularly features calls to pursue meaningful work (e.g., Haque 2012) and qualitative studies suggest that workers will often sacrifice a great deal more than just pay, from status to free time, to do so (Bunderson & Thompson 2009; Cinque, Nyberg, & Starkey 2020). It is no exaggeration to say that for many individuals, the search for meaningful work is a central life project.

Scholarship on meaningful work has largely fallen into two camps. The first focuses on identifying the antecedents and outcomes of workers experiencing their work as meaningful. Largely found in psychology and the organizational sciences, this approach rests on an understanding of meaningful work as "work experienced as particularly significant and holding more positive meaning for individuals" (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski 2010: 95). The second, largely comprising philosophical accounts, focuses on the objective aspects of work that help it contribute to a meaningful life (Meyers 1987; Ciulla 2000; Veltman 2016). Reflecting the various philosophical perspectives on meaningfulness in life, philosophical accounts of meaningful work have located its meaningfulness in a variety of attributes, from providing autonomy (Schwartz 1982) and making a social contribution (Ciulla 2000; Care 1984) to developing workers' capabilities (Yeoman 2014) and promoting workers' positive freedom (Bowie 1998).

Neither of these approaches provides a clear answer to the question of exactly what people should be looking for in their search for meaningful work. The search for meaningfulness

is, as philosopher Susan Wolf notes, neither simply a search for happiness nor a quest to do what is morally right, but something in between—something that is both objectively valuable and personally motivating (Wolf 2010). Nor, as many philosophical accounts assume, is the search for meaningful work just one component of the search for a meaningful life: people often pursue meaningful work for its own sake, irrespective of whether it contributes to their broader human flourishing. Even if meaningful work does in fact contribute to a meaningful life, that does not capture what workers are seeking from such work, nor explain what makes it meaningful—or so I will argue. My claim here is not that these approaches do not contribute at all to understanding meaningful work, which, as Veltman (2016) notes, is a complex and multifaceted issue. They just answer a different set of questions. For example, they may answer normative questions about what kinds of work companies should provide (Bowie 1998) or the state should promote (Schwartz 1982), or empirical questions about what conditions lead to higher wellbeing at work or greater productivity. Nonetheless, they offer little in response to questions such as how people should structure their careers to achieve the goal of meaningful work; whether it is rational or ethical for them to forego more lucrative or morally valuable work to pursue their passions; and, most basic of them all, whether their work is meaningful—the kind that is worth their passion, that is worth sacrificing pay and status to obtain.

My aim in this paper is to give a new account of meaningful work by focusing on the reasons people have to choose meaningful work over other options. Sometimes people pursue their work because of commitments they have made—for example, commitments to certain occupations (like being a teacher or doctor), certain projects (like reducing poverty or protecting the environment), or even certain places or people. I will draw on philosopher Ruth Chang's account of voluntarist reasons (2013; 2017; 2020) to argue that commitments can create

distinctive reasons to pursue certain work—and that it is the presence of these distinctive reasons that makes work meaningful. These voluntarist reasons provide individuals with objective, normative reasons to engage in certain kinds of work, while at the same time reflecting what has personal significance for them.

The importance of both objective reason and personal passion is also central to Wolf's (2010) account of meaningfulness in life. However, my account departs from Wolf's in a number of ways. Firstly, my account is narrower than Wolf's. I do not try to give a unified theory of the activities that make up a meaningful life, as Wolf does, but instead an account of what makes work meaningful in particular. I will argue that the qualities that make work meaningful may not always be conducive to leading a meaningful life. It is possible—indeed, I suspect, likely—that what makes non-work activities meaningful, such as friendships, hobbies, family life, and political action, will be different from what makes work meaningful. Secondly, I believe Wolf gives too little importance to the role of personal commitments in actively *making* certain activities meaningful. While I agree with Wolf that meaningful work must be objectively worth our pursuing, I argue that what makes it so must be at least partly determined by our commitments and the distinctive reasons they provide (c.f. Michaelson 2021). Altogether, this means that my account reflects a burgeoning philosophical consensus that there must be both subjective and objective elements to meaningful work (e.g., Yeoman 2014; Veltman 2016; Michaelson 2021), while departing significantly in what I identify as those elements and how I argue they make work meaningful.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. In the first section, I discuss and argue against the two aforementioned scholarly approaches to meaningful work, which I term, respectively, the experiential and objective accounts, illustrating my arguments with a series of

thought experiments. Thought experiments are an important methodological resource for resolving conceptual problems, and they are widely used in both philosophy and the social sciences (Brown & Fehige 2019). I then discuss recent attempts to integrate the experiential and objective accounts, arguing that this is a productive goal but that existing approaches remain incomplete. In the second section, I propose and argue for a new account, which I call the commitment-based account of meaningful work. According to this account, it is our commitments that make work meaningful. To make this argument and provide its philosophical underpinnings, I draw upon Chang's notion of voluntarist reasons. In the third section, I discuss the practical, normative, and theoretical implications of this account.

What we talk about when we talk about meaningful work: experiential and objective accounts

Contemporary accounts of meaningful work can largely, I believe, be split into two groups: what could be called the experiential and objective accounts of meaningful work. Experiential accounts, which underlie the study of meaningful work in psychology and the organizational sciences, rest on the premise that meaningful work is work that the worker experiences as meaningful (Pratt & Ashforth 2003; Rosso et al. 2010). Objective accounts, on the other hand, identify the meaningfulness of work with the work's possession of certain attributes—such as autonomy, or the capacity to develop workers' capabilities, or social contribution, etc. Not all accounts of meaningful work fall into these two groups, and I will discuss some attempts to move beyond this dichotomy later (e.g., Wolf 2010; Veltman 2016). But discussing the limits of these two approaches will provide a good foundation for determining the criteria that any account of meaningful work must meet, which will allow me to both critique

other contemporary accounts and also, in the next section, develop a positive account of meaningful work that avoids these limitations.

Experiential accounts

Recent empirical studies of meaningful work largely rely, explicitly or implicitly, on the experiential approach to meaningful work. The pervasiveness of this view is captured in Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski's review of the empirical literature (2010: 94): "...the vast majority of meaning of work research in the organizational behavior realm emphasizes individual experiences, cognitions, and feelings… Therefore, given our goal of reviewing empirical and theoretical organizational research on the meaning of work, our review is largely centered on individual perceptions of the meaning of work."[1] This approach captures the intuition that whether work is meaningful or not depends on the individual worker's perspective (Pratt & Ashforth 2003). This insight has motivated empirical accounts of meaningful work since at least Frankl (1946/2000), who is frequently cited as the inspiration for the psychological approach to meaningful work (Rosso et al. 2010); it also received early support in the philosophical literature from Taylor (1970). Following this intuition, empirical scholars in the psychological and organizational sciences usually operationalize meaningfulness as employees' contemporaneous self-rated perceptions of their job as meaningful (for example, Rodell [2013] draws conclusions about the meaningfulness of work from asking survey participants to rate the level of meaningfulness in their jobs). The questions these disciplines explore typically involve the causal antecedents and implications of experiencing work this way. This approach has proven empirically productive, capturing a construct predictive of both workplace behavior and employee wellbeing (Rosso et al. 2010: 92), and so it has value both for students of organizations and for managers and policymakers.

However, does this approach capture what people are really looking for when they are seeking meaningful work? According to some philosophers (e.g., Michaelson 2021), it does not. Our search for meaningfulness will not be satisfied by work that merely makes us *feel* fulfilled, because we seek work that actually warrants such feelings of fulfillment, or in other words that has value independent of our own perspective—or so these scholars' accounts suggest. Building upon and extending their arguments, my strategy for critiquing the experiential account is to first explore the terrain of the concept of meaningful work that motivates many people's career decisions and life plans, and then to show how this diverges fundamentally from the experiential account. My aim here is to show that the experiential account of meaningful work is insufficient to account for the concept of meaningful work that motivates so many workers: not only does it diverge from commonly-held beliefs about what meaningful work is, it also cannot fulfill the role that we require the notion to play in our career and life decisions.

Firstly, the experiential account of meaningful work is (perhaps ironically) inconsistent with our own subjective experience of the meaningfulness of work, in which—as other scholars have pointed out—we are concerned not just with whether we feel that our work is meaningful, but also whether we are correct to experience it as such. Wiggins (1988) and Wolf (2010) argue that when we experience an activity as meaningful, it is because we believe that, objectively, it is. In qualitative studies of deeply meaningful work, the workers interviewed typically explain the meaningfulness of their work not (just) by describing how it makes them feel, but by explaining how their work contributes to some larger purpose or mission to which they are committed: zookeepers explain how their work contributes to conservation efforts (Bunderson & Thompson 2009), animal shelter workers how their work makes a positive difference to animals' lives (Schabram & Maitlis 2017), and stage actors how their work touches people's hearts

(Cinque, Nyberg, & Starkey 2020), for example. If it turned out that these workers were mistaken about whether their work actually contributes to these larger purposes or missions—if the zookeepers' work actually hindered conservation efforts, the animal shelter workers made animals' lives worse, and the stage actors did not touch people's hearts—it would seem reasonable to say (and the workers would surely agree) that they had been wrong about the meaningfulness of their work, because their reasons for describing it as meaningful did not match up with reality. The experiential view does not allow one to draw this conclusion, however, since it holds that experiencing work as meaningful is sufficient for it to be meaningful. While the aforementioned qualitative studies do not reveal any inconsistencies in the experiential account, they do suggest that it does not capture what workers are looking for when they seek meaningful work.

Secondly, people often choose jobs or make a career change with the aim of obtaining more meaningful work, but the experiential account does not seem to capture how the meaningfulness of work guides our career decisions. According to the experiential account, meaningful work is just work that one experiences as meaningful. But the job option we are most likely to experience as meaningful may not be the best option to satisfy our quest for meaningful work. To take an extreme example, suppose that one of the options facing us involves performing mindless, purposeless drudgery, while at the same time taking a pill that makes us experience the work as extremely meaningful. In such a case, predictively, we can be sure that we would experience that job as meaningful—perhaps even more meaningful than the other options. But it would seem reasonable for us to decide that our desire for meaningful work would be better satisfied by some other job, even if we predict that we would experience it as less meaningful in comparison.

Of course, this is an extreme and unrealistic case. But it has everyday counterparts. For example, it is reasonable to suppose that in many cases joining a certain profession and surrounding ourselves with members of that profession will lead us to see it as more meaningful than we did before, especially if we know in advance that many members of that profession do see their work as meaningful. But if we do not already believe that such work is meaningful, this will not make it rational for us to choose it to satisfy our search for meaningful work. So-called 'dirty professions' (work involving physical, social, or moral taint) are a good example of this—despite the stigma associated with such work, there is evidence that workers in these professions tend to develop relatively high occupational pride and esteem (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999: 413). But that fact alone, especially coupled with an understanding of the sociological mechanisms that may lead such workers to come to experience their work as more meaningful (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999: 414), does not place us under rational pressure to revise any of our prior beliefs about the meaningfulness (or lack thereof) of those occupations. From our current vantage point, we may see those members as misguided or perhaps even deluded about the meaningfulness of their work. We may even worry about whether, by joining the professions in question, we would come to share that worldview. So merely predicting that we are likely to experience a job option as meaningful would not satisfy our quest for meaningful work. It follows that the notion of meaningfulness that motivates our career choices is conceptually distinct from that underlying the experiential account of meaningful work. That is not to undermine the value of this account for answering a different set of questions—the empirical literature on the antecedents and consequences of experiencing work as meaningful is undoubtedly valuable, especially for managers and policymakers—but it offers little to workers in their search for meaningful work.

Objective accounts

Since people care about whether their work is actually meaningful and not just whether they experience it as such, it is worth taking seriously the thought that the meaningfulness of work may lie in some objective features of the work. This thought has animated several generations of philosophers of work (e.g., Rawls 1971; Schwartz 1982; Meyers 1987; Bowie 1998, 2019; Cuilla 2000; Veltman 2016; Michaelson 2021). Their accounts share a commitment to the notion that meaningful work is work that, in virtue of its objective or intrinsic characteristics, can contribute to a meaningful or flourishing life. As Meyers (1987: 18) puts it, "To understand what makes work meaningful, it is necessary to ask what makes life worthwhile." Accordingly, objective accounts typically proceed by arguing that certain intrinsic features of work can allow it to contribute to a meaningful life, such as by developing workers' capabilities or providing them with autonomy in the workplace. Which features they identify typically depends on their underlying account of a meaningful life. For example, Bowie (2019) takes a Kantian conception of human dignity as his ideal for a good life and argues that for workers to be able to achieve this ideal, there are several objective criteria that their work must meet (such as allowing them to exercise autonomy at work and not interfering with their moral development). Meaningful work, he concludes, is work that meets these criteria.

Objective accounts provide a valuable contribution by explaining how work can contribute to a meaningful life, but they are lacking as accounts of meaningful work. An activity that contributes to a meaningful life need not itself be meaningful (c.f. Michaelson 2021). Performing one's daily ablutions, commuting to one's meaningful job, and shopping for groceries may for many individuals be constitutive elements of a meaningful life, but they need not thereby be meaningful activities themselves. For workers seeking meaningful work, this

distinction matters. People may—rightly or wrongly—seek meaningful work for its own sake, rather than for the sake of leading a meaningful life. The zookeepers studied by Bunderson and Thompson (2009), for example, were willing to make significant sacrifices to their time spent with friends and family, their respect and status in their communities, and their incomes in order to pursue work they perceived as meaningful. Regardless of whether their work did in fact make their lives more meaningful, their willingness to sacrifice so many other valuable elements of their lives suggests that the notion of meaningful work that motivated them is one they sought for its own sake, rather than as part of a broader quest for a more meaningful life. At the very least, it shows that there is argumentative work required to move from the claim that certain kinds of work contribute to a meaningful life to the claim that such work is itself meaningful. To the best of my knowledge, extant objective accounts of meaningful work have not performed this argumentative work. This is not itself a counterargument to objective accounts of meaningful work (since I have not yet shown that such an argument cannot be provided), but it does raise a challenge for proponents of these accounts.

A deeper objection to objective accounts is that by locating the meaningfulness of work in person-independent features of the work, these accounts cannot explain why what we value about meaningful work is not just that it contributes to something objectively valuable, but that we ourselves are the ones responsible for making that contribution. To illustrate this, consider an example Wolf (2010: 5) gives in her discussion of what makes activities meaningful:

> "…what draws us on… is a perceived or imagined value that lies outside of oneself. I agonize over the article I am trying to write because I want to get it right—that is, because I want the argument to be sound, the view to be correct, the writing to be clear and graceful. It is not for my sake—at least not only for my

> sake—that I struggle so with my work. I do not know or care whether it is best for me—that is, whether it is best from the point of view of my self-interest—that I try to improve my work beyond a certain point."

While this is likely to be an experience shared by many philosophers, one other element that usually accompanies it is the desire not just that good philosophy gets written, but that we ourselves be the ones to write it. If we were just motivated by a value that is wholly independent of ourselves, such as the writing of good philosophy, there would be little need for us to be the ones to do it, unless we possessed some rare talent that meant we were the only ones able to do it. For most people, there are likely better ways to bring about the writing of good philosophy than by being a philosopher.[2] This point generalizes. As the controversy between Leibniz and Newton over who really discovered calculus demonstrates, people can care deeply not just whether something valuable has been achieved (such as a mathematical discovery, or political change, or the healing of the sick), but that they are the ones to have achieved it. This is not merely a desire for respect or acclaim (which can be satisfied by the mere appearance that the achievement is theirs, even if in reality it is someone else's), but a desire for any such respect to be warranted, in the same way that people desire that their work not merely appear valuable, but actually be valuable. For example, there are undoubtedly many mathematicians who are motivated by the desire that a certain theory be proved—not just to get other people to think that it has been proved, but for it to actually be proved—and at the same time, who want to actually be the ones to prove it, not just to think that they did or develop a reputation for having done so. In such cases, the personal and the impersonal intermingle, such that our goal in pursuing meaningful work—the objective reason we seek for our participation—is that we ourselves are the agent who actually accomplishes something worthwhile.

The personal and impersonal intermingle not just in the reasons for which we value meaningful work, but in what makes meaningful work valuable in the first place. To illustrate this, consider the following example:

> A worker is choosing between two jobs: one for a disability rights activism group, the other for a mosquito net charity. Both roles are intellectually stimulating and would allow her to contribute to a purpose she cares about, and both involve a high degree of control and decision-making autonomy. Let us suppose further that both are morally valuable for the worker to participate in, and that neither one is more morally valuable than the other. While the worker is attracted to both positions, she decides that the disability rights movement is particularly important to her. Committing herself to the disability rights movement, she chooses the disability activism job.

In this case, the two options are—ethically speaking—on a par. In other words, they are comparable, but neither is more ethically valuable than the other, and yet they are also not equally good: they are distinct roles that contribute to distinct moral goods in the world.[3] Let us assume that objective ethical considerations give the worker no all-things-considered reason to choose one over another. Nonetheless, the worker's commitment to the disability rights movement both makes it rational for her to choose the disability activism job, and also—crucially—makes that job meaningful in a way that the other is not. Having made this commitment to the disability rights movement, her search for meaningful work would be frustrated by choosing the mosquito net charity job over the disability activism job, even though the former is on a par with the latter on every salient objective dimension.[4] Since objective

accounts have nothing to say about why one of these options should be meaningful while the other not, there is at least some dimension of meaningfulness at work that these accounts are unable to capture.

Integration accounts

The above reflections suggest that commitments play an important role in making certain options more meaningful than others. They also suggest that meaningful work—or at least the ideal of meaningful work that many workers seek—integrates both subjective and objective aspects. However, the mere combination of subjective attraction and objective value is not enough. There must also be a connection between why a worker values her work and what makes the work valuable. Consider the following example:

> Anne spends several years working for a charity that donates food and medicines to impoverished citizens of a distant country. She finds her work very meaningful. One day, an independent organization audits the charity's effectiveness, and finds that rather than helping these citizens, its donations are being appropriated by another charitable group and donated to a neighboring country, where the citizens are at least as needy, if not more so.

How Anne would react to this news depends on why she values her work. If she values the provision of aid to impoverished citizens of distant countries in general, then the meaningfulness of her work may not be undermined by this revelation. On the other hand, suppose she instead values providing aid to that specific country—perhaps she has family connections there, or a deep appreciation for its culture, for instance. In that case, the news that the aid has been misappropriated may leave her feeling that all along, her work had not been meaningful. Even if she recognizes that her work is no less valuable than she had thought it was,

she now knows that she valued it for the wrong reasons. This suggests that for work to be actually meaningful for a worker, according to their own notion of meaningfulness (and not just to be experienced as such—after all, Anne experienced the work as meaningful before, even if she now thinks she was wrong to do so), it matters why they value the work: they must value the work on the basis of what makes it valuable.

I am not the first author to argue that meaningful work integrates both subjective and objective components. Several recent accounts (e.g., Yeoman 2014; Veltman 2016) also suggest that meaningful work is something that must be both objectively valuable and subjectively appreciated by the worker. For example, Yeoman (2014: 247) writes, "to secure the value of meaningfulness to their lives, a person must also experience… worthy objects as subjectively attractive." Similarly, Veltman (2016: 112) argues, following Wolf (2010), that "meaning draws from both subjective experiences of fulfillment and from engagement with projects of objective value."

Where I depart from other integration accounts is that I argue that the meaningfulness of work does not lie in the mere presence of both subjective and objective reasons to participate. Instead, the above reflections show that there must also be a deep integration between the subjective and objective components of meaningful work. Firstly, when we seek meaningful work, we seek to engage with something that has objective value—but we also care about being the ones to realize that value. Secondly, the objective reasons we have to choose meaningful work—and indeed what makes such work meaningful—depend in some way on our subjective commitments. Thirdly, the reason we value meaningful work must also reflect what actually makes the work valuable.[5] In each of these three conditions, the subjective and objective aspects of meaningful work are inseparable. This raises a challenge for accounts of meaningful

work: how to explain this deep integration? In the next section, I will give a new account of meaningful work that answers this challenge.

The commitment-based account of meaningful work

In this section, I give a commitment-based account of meaningful work. I have already argued that commitments play an important role in making work meaningful. Here, I go further and argue that choosing one job over another on the basis of one's commitments is precisely what makes work meaningful, rather than just one component of meaningful work, because it is commitments that integrate the objective and subjective aspects of meaningful work. Drawing on the work of philosopher Ruth Chang (e.g., 2013; 2017; 2020), I argue that there are certain conditions under which workers' commitments give them normative reasons in favor of choosing one job over another that are both objective[6] (that is, the workers would be correct to regard them as normative reasons to choose the job) and personal (they are volitional, coming into being only because they are willed to be a reason by the individual workers).

The kind of commitment that I am concerned with here is what philosophers term *substantive commitment,* which comprises commitments "whose objects are candidates for inclusion in a life plan, or that give shape to a life, or define an identity, or answer the question of what one's life is about" (Calhoun 2009: 614). Chang (2017: 17) describes them as a matter of putting one's will behind something, which she explains as follows:

> "The idea of putting your will behind something, although seemingly elusive, is perfectly familiar. It is what you do when you commit to a loved one, a cause, or a personal project. When you commit to something, you put your very agency—your very self—behind, say, the needs or interests of your children or spouse, nuclear disarmament, or learning to play the piano. You stand for what

> you have committed to. Your commitment provides the grounds for new will-based reasons to, say, make a life with your beloved. In the same way, you can commit to the intellectual excitement of a philosophy career and thereby give yourself a new will-based reason—that the philosophy career will afford you intellectual excitement—that you did not have before."

This kind of commitment is distinct from what is often termed *affective commitment*—defined in organizational contexts as a psychological attachment to and involvement with an employing organization or other related entity through feelings including loyalty, affection, warmth, and belongingness (Jaros et al. 1993: 954; Meyer & Allen 1991; Meyer & Herscovitch 2001).

Substantive commitments are part of a family of behaviors, including promising and consent, by which one can generate new normative reasons for action (Calhoun 2009; Chang 2013). These reasons are generated by an act of one's will, rather than by some external state of affairs: according to Calhoun (2009: 617), "all genuine commitments are active in the sense that they are made, not merely discovered as facts about one's psychology, and they persist through being sustained, not through being persistently suffered." They are thus both authored and sustained by the agent herself, rather than imposed on the agent or responsive to some independent normative fact. Chang (2013) refers to reasons brought about by such an act of the will as 'voluntarist reasons', as opposed to 'given reasons' which derive their normativity from facts external to the agent. Despite being a product of the agent's own will, a voluntarist reason still has normative force (Geurts 2018; Chang 2017). For instance, if someone commits to giving up cigarettes, they have a normative reason to do so, and they are liable to blame themself if they fail. But commitments need not be eternal. For example, if someone discovered they were

already dying of a terminal illness, and that smoking would therefore not hasten their death—and assuming they could avoid the risk of harming others through passive smoking—then they could retract their commitment to giving up cigarettes without thereby becoming worthy of censure. At the same time, the discovery that smoking will not hasten their demise—even if prolonging their life were the original ground of their commitment to quit—does not necessitate the retraction of their commitment: our commitments are always down to us.

The commitments that give us voluntarist reasons to pursue certain work options can be made at any stage in one's life and career. For someone who commits to becoming an astronaut as a child, and continues making choices as they grow up on the basis of this commitment, being an astronaut would be meaningful to them in a way that other jobs would not. And the relevant commitments need not just be to a career. They could be to a greater purpose, for instance, or to a location, each of which could provide reasons to pursue a diverse range of jobs.

Even though by virtue of making a commitment we can bring new reasons to bear on a decision, these reasons will not always be decisive. Other normative considerations may outweigh the normative force of commitments. Chang has argued that given reasons always take priority, acting as constraints on what we should do (2013; 2017). Voluntarist reasons cannot change what one has most reason to do in virtue of one's given reasons—even if they can change the extent of the support for the most favored option (Chang 2013: 178). A commitment to doing something unethical, for example, does not make it the case that we should do it, all things considered. Voluntarist reasons can still be decisive, but only when the options are on a par. According to Chang's usage, this means that there are some respects in which one option is better and some respects in which another is better, yet none is at least as good as all the others once all the relevant considerations are taken into account (Chang 2013; 2017). Career decisions

are a paradigmatic case. There are many valuable ways to live a life. Being a teacher, lawyer, nurse, manager, monk, stay-at-home parent, etc., are all valuable in their own way. None is inherently better than the others, yet nor does it make sense to say they are precisely equally good. They are on a par, and so voluntarist reasons can be decisive in choosing between them. Of course, some careers are definitely not on a par with others. There are strong given reasons to avoid a career as a thief or an assassin, for example. Also, once we have embarked on a career, we may build up skills and experience that make us more suited for that career than for others we once could have pursued, regardless of whether we maintain the commitment that led us to embark on it in the first place. Still, whether or not the voluntarist reasons that follow from our commitments are decisive, our work is meaningful as long as we maintain the relevant underlying commitments.[7]

In the context of choosing a workplace or a career, this has two important implications. First, it is not always rational to choose meaningful work over other options. Second, meaningful work is not always ethical work. Suppose someone is facing a choice between job options, where given reasons make one option more choiceworthy than the others—for instance, the other job options are unethical, or are much less suited to the worker's skills and abilities. If an option favored by the worker's commitments is not already the most choiceworthy option according to these given reasons, then the voluntarist reasons provided by the worker's commitments would not make it so—even though that option would be meaningful in a way that the others are not, according to the commitment-based account. This means that there may be circumstances in which one should not choose meaningful work over other options, because doing so would be irrational or unethical.

Chang's account does not just explain how workers' subjective commitments generate normative reasons to pursue meaningful work, but also points to how these normative reasons develop personal significance for workers—thereby explaining the deep integration between the subjective and objective aspects of meaningful work. Following the philosopher Thomas Nagel (1986), I will distinguish between impersonal values, such as reducing other people's pain and increasing their happiness, and personal values, including the particular projects and commitments we form. While everyone has a duty to promote the former, the latter nonetheless have a particularly important role in determining our reasons for acting. As Nagel notes, "most of the things we pursue, if not most of the things we avoid, are optional. Their value to us depends on our individual aims, projects, and concerns, including particular concerns for other people that reflect our relations with them" (1986: 168). Something does not develop personal value for us just because we recognize it as valuable. We perceive all sorts of value in the world, and even recognize our obligation to promote it, without it becoming an important project or concern of our own. Instead, we make something into a personal value by committing to it. Even impersonal values can develop such personal importance. For instance, by committing to ending world hunger, or combatting climate change, one gives it a degree of importance and priority in one's life that cannot arise merely in virtue of its impersonal value. Everyone has some obligation to promote such goods, but not to the extent that one must abandon one's own projects of value. However, for someone who has affirmed the personal significance of a particular good by committing to it, then dedicating one's energies to it does not mean abandoning one's projects of value, but instead pursuing them.

Participating in some project on the basis of our commitments makes it personally significant in a way that merely participating, even upon perceiving its impersonal value, cannot.

As Chang (2013: 180) argues, "when you will something to be a reason, something further beyond mere stipulation is involved: your agency is implicated. Very roughly, when you will something to be a reason, you put yourself behind some consideration that, as a logical matter, counts in favor of one of the alternatives." In the absence of commitments, our reasons for acting would be exhausted by given reasons, which are grounded in normative facts independent of us (Chang 2013: 177). Indeed, we often commit to something precisely because we believe it to have objective value. However, by committing, we personally create normative reasons to participate that apply to ourselves alone. A project can thus be personally significant at least in part because we are the source of its significance to us. At the same time, making such a commitment reciprocally impacts who we are as a person: as Calhoun (2009: 614) argues, "one's deep identity is defined by one's fundamental commitments to projects and relationships." Work we pursue on the basis of our commitments is thus personally significant both because it reflects who we are and because we are personally the ground of its significance for us, since our commitments are something we make and sustain.

To sum up this section, I have argued that commitments provide both objective and subjective reasons to pursue certain work. Commitments can generate normative, voluntarist reasons to choose a particular work option over others. They also make that work personally significant, while non-voluntarist normative reasons to choose it—based on impersonal values—do not. Drawing together the conclusions of this and the previous sections, I suggest that the presence of these voluntarist reasons, arising from our commitments, is what makes work meaningful. The claim that meaningful work reflects the commitments of workers is not a new development in and of itself. For example, Veltman (2016: 108) writes, "work can endow meaningfulness by integrating elements of a life or by reflecting the deeply held values and

commitments of a worker, thus helping to render the patchwork of life more coherent or consistent." However, what makes my argument distinctive is the claim that our commitments can actually make work meaningful, rather than being just one component of meaningful work. Commitments involve putting one's will behind some feature of the work, making it both part of an explanation of why one should pursue the work but also the ground of the work's personal significance. Because of this, commitments serve to integrate the subjective and objective aspects of meaningful work, answering the challenge I set at the end of the previous section.

Practical, normative, and theoretical implications of the commitment-based account

In this section, I discuss some of the theoretical and practical implications of this account, as well as clarifying the scope of its contribution. In particular, I will discuss why meaningful work may not be experienced as meaningful, and may not even contribute to a meaningful life; what obligations organizations and governments have with respect to providing or promoting meaningful work; and the practical implications for workers seeking meaningful work in the context of the rise of automation and artificial intelligence.

Defining meaningful work in terms of a worker's commitments means that it no longer follows analytically that meaningful work must either be experienced as meaningful or contribute to a meaningful life (as suggested by the experiential and objective accounts, respectively). Indeed, the kind of commitment I suggest is essential for meaningful work may even detract from leading a meaningful life, since it may prevent one from achieving other important goals or developing certain important capacities.[8] For example, the zookeepers studied by Bunderson and Thompson (2009) were deeply committed to their work, but some of them reported this damaging the quality of their relationships with their families. As I argued in the previous section, there may be circumstances in which one should not choose a meaningful

job over other options. But it does not follow that people should in general avoid seeking meaningful work. After all, when their options are on a par, or when the most meaningful option is also the best option for independent reasons, then it can be rational to choose meaningful work. Moreover, while experiencing one's work as meaningful is not necessary for work to be meaningful, on my view, it seems likely on the face of it that people who are deeply committed to their work will also tend to experience it as meaningful.

Given this, what I hope this paper provides is not an account of what work should be (that is, a normative account of work targeted at managers or policymakers that describes the kinds of work they should provide), but an account that captures the kind of work workers seek when they search for meaningful work. A normative account of work is undoubtedly important, and there are many resources in the existing literature on meaningful work that can provide the material for such an account; for example, Bowie (1998) argues that work should develop workers' rational and moral capacities, allow the exercise of autonomy and independence, and provide a wage sufficient for physical welfare. But work that meets these requirements—call it 'good work', following Veltman (2016)—is not the same as meaningful work, even though the term 'meaningful' is normatively loaded with positive valence. There is some value to being conceptually clear. Distinguishing between good work and meaningful work allows us to make normative claims about how work should be, while still recognizing the volitional reasons individuals may have to choose one good job over another. The former notion is valuable for managers or policymakers but has little to offer for workers seeking meaningful work, and it is to this latter audience that I address my account.

It also follows from my account that organizations or governments have no obligation to ensure workers are provided with meaningful work. Work becomes meaningful due to a personal

commitment by the worker, which is something organizations or governments can facilitate and promote, but not something they can provide. This stands in tension with some philosophical accounts of meaningful work (e.g., Schwartz 1982; Michaelson 2021). However, the disagreement is largely verbal. I disagree with these accounts about whether work that meets the normative requirements they identify is properly described as meaningful, but I do not deny that organizations or governments may be obligated to provide work that meets those normative requirements.

Nonetheless, it does follow from my account that governments or organizations have an imperfect ethical duty to refrain from undermining the possibility of meaningful work, which would involve making it difficult for workers to form or pursue the commitments that I have argued make work meaningful. While the personal value that an individual perceives in her projects does not automatically generate reasons for others to help her achieve them (Nagel 1986; Scanlon 1975), they may nevertheless generate reasons for others not to hinder them. Consider the following example:

> Someone badly wants to participate in a competition, and to do so they need to use a computer they share with a friend to apply before an imminent deadline. However, the friend decides to perform an optional, non-urgent, lengthy system update at just this moment, fully cognizant that it will jeopardize the person's ability to apply for the competition.

There are some circumstances in which the friend may be justified in hindering the person's plans in this way: if participating in the competition is not ethically permissible, or if doing so would harm the friend or someone to whom the friend has a duty of care. In the absence of such considerations, however, the friend has clearly done something morally wrong.

Respecting someone as a person means respecting the value they take their personal projects and desires to have. While such respect does not itself generate any obligations to help someone achieve those projects (the friend is under no obligation to help with the competition application, for instance, and similarly companies are under no obligation to offer individuals any job they desire), it does generate an imperfect duty to not hinder someone else's pursuit of their important projects. The philosopher Onora O'Neill (1989) argues that there is an obligation to respect the humanity of others, and that one way this manifests is a duty to pursue policies that give others the freedom to achieve their chosen ends. We have to "allow others the 'space' in which to pursue [their maxims and projects] for themselves," and we also have to respect, and not undermine, those ends (O'Neill 1989: 115). Since meaningful work involves following one's commitments, then respecting these commitments means not undermining workers' ability to pursue them. The precise ways in which governments or organizations may undermine this ability is a matter for further theoretical and empirical investigation, though plausibly it will include subjecting workers to unnecessary employment instability; making them feel like they do not belong in the workplace by subjecting them to bullying or discrimination; or obscuring aspects of the true nature of their work (e.g., any negative social or environmental outcomes).

This has further practical implications for both workers and organizations in the context of the changing labor market. Recent years have seen a significant rise in the automation and digitization of work. These developments, sometimes referred to as the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab 2017), are likely to have a significant effect on the nature of work and careers, including an increase in gig work (De Ruyter, Brown, & Burgess 2018), boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau 1996), and so-called protean career models wherein the individual, rather than any particular organization, is the driver of career development (Hall 2004; c.f.

Hirschi 2018). For individuals yet to develop commitments, especially those entering the labor market for the first time, this has implications for the kinds of commitments it would be worthwhile cultivating in order to achieve meaningful work. Commitments to professions at high risk of automation may become more difficult to pursue, as may commitments to participating in particular organizations and teams, especially if one faces employment instability or a rapidly revolving cast of coworkers. In some professions (e.g., academia) which increasingly require high geographic flexibility, there may be less opportunity to form commitments to carrying out work in certain locations. On the other hand, commitments involving high-skilled professions and difficult-to-automate skills may be easier to fulfill, as there will likely be increasing demand for such narrowly and highly skilled work (Bughin et al. 2018).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented and defended a new commitment-based account of meaningful work and discussed its implications for theory and practice. I have argued that existing approaches to meaningful work, despite making valuable contributions to the empirical and normative study of work and organizations, do not capture the notion of meaningful work that motivates people to pursue such work. As a result, these existing accounts have little to offer individuals who seek to understand how they can achieve the goal of meaningful work, and whether they even should. In contrast to earlier accounts, I have argued that what makes work meaningful is neither some objective feature of the work, nor the worker's experience of it as meaningful, nor even some combination of the two, but instead the worker's commitments—an act of the will. When our commitments lead us to pursue certain work, that makes the work meaningful. It follows that individuals do not need to seek out especially ethical or enjoyable jobs in the search for meaningful work. Meaningful work is something made, not found.

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[1] Rosso et al. elsewhere distinguish between the terms 'meaning' and 'meaningfulness', but here they are referring to both (2010: 95): "Following tradition, we also use the broad phrase 'meaning of work' to encompass both meaning and meaningfulness." In other words, their point here is that the empirical literatures on both meaning and meaningfulness at work center on individuals' perceptions of their work.

[2] A similar argument is made by William MacAskill (2014), who argues that if one wants to support certain charitable causes, it is in general better to pursue a lucrative career that will enable one to pay multiple other people to do the relevant charitable work than to become a charitable worker oneself. After all, if one only cares about the charitable goal, it shouldn't matter who accomplishes it, and if one can make enough in a non-charitable role to pay the salaries of multiple charity workers, then one can do more to achieve the goal by donating a large proportion of one's earnings to support those workers than by merely becoming one such worker.

[3] The notion of being on a par I borrow from Chang (2017), and I discuss Chang's account in detail in the next section.

[4] Note that this commitment need not be lifelong for it to make the disability activism position a more meaningful job to choose now than the mosquito net job.

[5] I am assuming that if it is objectively valuable for someone to participate in some work, then they have objective reasons to participate.

[6] That there is an objective reason to pursue certain work does not mean that there is always, on balance, greater reason to pursue that work. Even if an option has some value, there may be stronger reasons to avoid choosing it.

[7] Chang suggests that we can only generate voluntarist reasons when the relevant normative criteria do not allow fully determinate measurement of the difference in choice-worthiness between the options. However, Chang and others have argued that this is likely to obtain in many, if not most, of the decision-making scenarios we face (Parfit 2016; Chang 2013: 178; but c.f. Dorr, Nebel, & Zuehl 2022).

[8] On the other hand, some philosophical discussions of flourishing emphasize the importance of pursuing one's interests, suggesting that meaningful work may in at least some cases also contribute to a meaningful life (e.g., Feinberg 1974).