

**ON THE VIOLATION INTRINSIC TO MEANINGLESS, NON-
CONTRIBUTING WORK**

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Submitted to Central European University
Department of Political Sciences

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Political Sciences

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Vienna, Austria
2025

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Jengibarjan, R. 2025. On the violence intrinsic to Meaningless Work. MA thesis, Department of Political Sciences, Central European University, Vienna.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, **Ruben Jengibarjan**, candidate for the MA degree in Political Sciences declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

Earlier versions of parts of this work were submitted as coursework at CEU for the course Methods in Political Philosophy (DSPS6659).

Vienna, 30 May 2025

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ABSTRACT

This thesis contributes to the literature on meaningful and meaningless work. The thesis defines meaningful work as an activity that contributes to society beyond the agent doing the action. The thesis defines meaningless work as a paid position that does not contribute to society, in other words that does not create social value. The thesis gives structural reasons for the existence of meaningless work. Building on existing literature on the harms of meaningless work, and utilising empirical literature from psychology, this thesis advances a novel conceptualisation of energy innate to people. Building this notion of innate energy, the thesis argues that meaningless work harms a person's innate energy because it treats the energy and the person as a mean, and does not possess any content that could be a valuable goal for a person's energy to flow towards. Further, I argue that imposing meaningless work can be a violation of the worker, and I explore the conditions under which such work can be imposed.

Keywords: meaningful work, meaningless work

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Zoltán, for being a very kind and available supervisor. I want to thank all my professors for their classes, lessons and our discussions. Looking back, I truly learned so much during this degree and have been deeply inspired by them.

I am grateful for all the work of the philosophers, social scientists, thinkers and academics, whom I cite in this paper and the many more who have inspired my thinking in the past 3 years. This paper certainly would not exist without you.

Most importantly, I thank my parents for their unwavering support and belief in me and for they are the most outstanding role models I could ask for, their dedication always inspires me and has inspired this thesis as well. If to anyone I dedicate this thesis to them.

During these years I lived in 3 different countries, I thank my friends for the love and support. I thank my friends in Vienna for asking me if I Wanna go out with them. I thank my friends in Paris for transforming the Maison des Étudiants Arméniens into a family home and I thank my friends in Brussels for inspiring me.

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INTRODUCTION

I build on the existing literature on meaningful work. I am bringing a novel contribution to the literature because, I focus on the objective component of meaningful work. In chapter two, I review the literature on the definition of meaningful work. The majority of the literature on meaningful work focuses on the subjective component of meaningful work. Several studies argue for methods on how work practices have effects on meaning. These include work from management studies and other scholarship. However, objectively meaningless work is understudied. Another important element of my thesis is the discussion explaining the existence of meaningless work. I argue against classical economic theory showing that jobs can exist that do not create social value. I acknowledge that these jobs often occur because some form of background injustice or imperfection in the market. My main argument is twofold. First, I develop a novel theory of energy innate to humans, then I build on this theory and argue that meaningless work disrespects human's innate energy. While working in a non-contributive job a person's energy is treated only as a mean and its value is not respected enough. I also evaluate what structural pressures push people towards meaningless work. This non-consequential argument is a novel addition to the literature.

In the in chapter one, I will define work. In the first part of this chapter, I will look at literature from philosophy and arrive at a relatively consensual definition that emphasises work as productive and goal-oriented activity. In the second part of the chapter, I will outline the social definition of work, based on the social role of work in modern societies. I will show that work can be a non-productive activity, further, I will outline that work has a special social role in our societies, whereby the majority of the population is dependent on work to earn a living, further, there is some expectation towards productive activity, in line with the philosophical

definition outlined in the first part of the section. This characterisation is important because I want to situate my philosophical argument in empirical reality.

In the second chapter I will advance my definition of meaningful work. This thesis is born out of literature on meaningful work, however, the concept I want to capture is closer to contributive work the opposite of which is non-contributive work. Therefore, in this thesis when I will use meaningful and contributive work interchangeably similarly, I will use meaningless and non-contributive work interchangeably as well.

In third chapter I will define meaningless work and explain its presence. In a meaningless job an employee does not make any contribution to society. This phenomena, is contrary to classical economic thinking, where revenue can only be earned by creating social value. But I will show that in increasingly financialised economies, through rent seeking positions exist that do not create any social value, further, some positions only exist to enhance the status of another person, without creating any meaningful contribution. This chapter raises the problem and the rest of the thesis aims to understand the effects of meaningless jobs and how they could be tackled.

The fourth section, outlines views on current state of the literature on the harms of meaningless work. This thesis is inspired by the discussion in this chapter, however, I doubt some of the arguments and their impact outlined here. Answering these doubts is an important part of my paper, and shows how my paper is different from the existing literature.

The fifth chapter of my paper will develop the idea of productive energy. In forming this view, I rely on the literature from psychologists and philosophy, then I will advance my view of humans' innate productive energy.

In the sixth chapter I will evaluate meaningless work and its relation to justice. I will argue that meaningless work is an intrinsic violation of a person's innate energy, because it does not allow a person to satisfy their basic needs, in particular, meaningless work does not provide the structural possibility to satisfy one's basic need for contribution. Further, through a thought experiment, I will evaluate structural reasons that push people towards meaningless work.

A note on formality, I use chapters and subchapters in the thesis, but I also use not-numbered section headings, the aim of these is to aid comprehension, however, I do not think they are distinct enough compared to the information around them to make them into numbered subchapters.

CHAPTER 1: DEFINITION OF WORK

In this section I will define and characterise 'work'. First, I will advance a philosophical definition of work, this definition emphasises productive activity. I think this is an ideal definition of work, however, in reality, there are several jobs that do not fulfil this criterion. Therefore, in the second section of the chapter I will expand on this definition further, I will explain the social role of jobs, this discussion will be important later, in the sixth chapter of the thesis, where I will describe the unjustness of meaningless work in certain environments.

Chapter 1.1: Philosophical definitions of work

Several thinkers have aimed to define the concept work, some definitions aimed to set work apart from concepts that they saw as non-work or opposites of work, such as leisure or play. Others have argued that there is no point in aiming to achieve a single definition of work that would cover all the relevant uses of the work and instead aimed for a very broad characterization (Veltman, 2016), others have tried conceptual engineering (Tyssedal, 2025). Some of the common themes in these definitions are the following; work aims to produce goods that answer to human wants, needs or necessities (Gheuss, 2021, Cholbi, 2022). Others "define work as productive activity, or as activity performed with an intention to bring about an end-product" (White, 1997 in Veltman, 2016, p.25). Budd (2011, p.2 in Veltman, 2016, p.25) puts work as a "purposeful human activity involving physical or mental exertion that is not undertaken solely for pleasure and that has economic or symbolic value." Based on these Veltman develops a broad definition of work. She argues that "a broad definition of work as purposeful, productive, or goal-oriented activity serves better in capturing the round of activities that we understand as work" (Veltman, 2016, p.26). A more recent, conceptually engineered definition of work by Tyssedal (2025), includes two different but coextensive working

definitions of 'work'. "Definition 1; work is activity that is instrumental and intermediary to satisfy needs and wants. Definition 2; work is activity that produces a benefit (or intermediary product to a benefit) external to the worker(s) doing the activity" (Tyssedal, 2025, p.14). This is an interesting and valuable definition, however, it misses jobs that do not contribute to the wider society. Non-contributing jobs are central to my thesis, I believe and show with empirical research that these are a very real social phenomena, further, non-contributing jobs should be considered part of work and the potentially unequal employee and employer can be observed here. Hence, for this thesis, I will define work largely as paid work and paid activity, to include jobs that are paid but not contributing. With this in mind, I am well aware of the feminist critique of this definition, that it excludes domestic work and unpaid care work. I focus on paid work because the unequal power relations are more clear here, but to apply the final argument to domestic work primarily performed by women. I think it is possible that a husband forces a woman to appear by his side in certain events, purely to try to increase his status in the eyes of others. This example is gendered, it may happen with different genders as well, however, I would think this illustrates the issue better. Later discussion of the flunkies, following Graeber (2018) have a similar role. Albeit the latter is a full time job with formal power structures and the former is a more complex relationship between two people.

Chapter 1.2: Social definitions of work

In this section I will describe the role of work in most modern societies. I will describe the social function of work, some of its impacts on people and expectations connected to it. Firstly, the word work is used very often in modern life to describe things that would not fall under the category of work. We use the words working out for exercising, working on a relationship, when a relationship needs betterment and more attention, and even grief work. Hence our life is increasingly becoming understood in work terms (Cholbi, 2022). However, I do not consider these work in the sense of my thesis.

In this paragraph, I will outline the social role of work in modern societies, these characteristics do not apply in every case, but are usual. To characterise the modern work environment, permanent employment contracts are the dominant form of employment in most of Europe and North America, and are to a degree the product of industrial modernity (Suzman, 2021). Further, work is a necessity for most people to earn a living. Most people have to work in a full-time job, some even have to take further part time work, to make a living. Work is in many ways a social fact that structures the lives of most people in certain ways (Durkheim, 2023). Further, work shapes workers in many ways, it shapes the skills and capabilities of workers, I will expand on this in fourth section of the thesis (Yeoman, 2014). Additionally, the insight outlined in the philosophical definition are important. Tyssedal, (2025) and others defined work as a productive activity. This is reflected in the expectations of many people when taking up work. Many people expect that work is a place of production where with an "activity that produces a benefit (or intermediary product to a benefit) external to the worker" (Tyssedal, 2025, p.14). This is not to say that people expect that all meaning in their lives can be derived from work or that through work they can contribute maximally in line with their abilities, rather that there is some expectations in people when entering work that they will produce some, physical or non- physical benefit external to themselves. I will evaluate the limitations and relevance in this statement more broadly in the limitations section of my thesis.

CHAPTER 2: DEFINITION OF MEANINGFUL WORK

In this chapter, I will define meaningful work. I will primarily rely on the work of Wolf (2010) and Martela (2017). My definition centers around contribution. An activity is meaningful if it makes a positive contribution beyond the person doing it. In the chapters after this, in my thesis I will focus on the objective component of meaningful work.

Chapter two is very important because meaning in life and in work has been defined in several different ways by many different authors. These definitions emphasise different things and maybe contradictory in some cases. My argument in the following section could be different based on what definition of meaning is used. In the next paragraphs, I will evaluate different conceptions of meaning in life and in work, firstly, the subjective view, secondly, the objective view, thirdly, the hybrid view by Wolf (2010). Then I will outline Martela's (2017) view. Later, I will evaluate the definition brought by Gheaus and Herzog (2016) and Veltman (2016) and I will show their relation to the definition I will be using, primarily following Wolf (2010) and Martela (2017).

Chapter 2.1: Subjectivist view of meaning

Subjectivist accounts of the meaning in life say that meaning varies from person to person depending on individual preferences and desires. So one's life is "more meaningful the more one gets what one happens to want strongly, achieves one's highly ranked goals, or does what one believes to be really important" (Metz 2023). One formulation within the subjective view is that the relevant mental state is caring or loving, so life is meaningful to the extent that one cares or loves something (Frankfurt 2006). Another formulation of the subjectivist view is that a meaningful life means an engagement and affirmation of a project that is to the highest concern of the person (Belliootti 2019). Critiques of this view point out the argument's

vulnerability to the lack of objective value. Critics argue that a person might be subjectively inspired by maintaining 3000 hairs on their head, and this would also be a challenging task to accomplish (Taylor 1992). However, critics of the subjectivist view, do not see this as a meaningful activity. To avoid some objections some subjectivists argue that what matters are not the preferences and desires of the individual but the group. I think this point is motivated by the idea that a group may be less likely to choose something inherently meaningless, however, a group may also value something meaningless.

Chapter 2.2: Objective view

Objectivist accounts of the meaning of life say that there are certain conditions of the material world that give meaning to one's life. These confer meaning not because people view them as meaningful or desirable, but rather because they are inherently worthwhile or valuable in themselves (Metz 2023). For example, several philosophers think that morality (the good), inquiry (the true), and creativity (the beautiful) are instances of activities that confer meaning to life. On this view doing these activities confers meaning regardless the individual cares about them (Metz 2023). This is the purely objectivist view, but very few thinkers are purely objectivists. The objectivist view is critiqued for example by referring to the Myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus is punished by the gods to push a rock up a mountain for eternity, once Sisyphus reaches the top of the mountain, the rock falls down again, so Sisyphus has to start again. This existence is generally agreed to be meaningless. However, what if a temple is being built on the mountain from the stones that are being pushed up the mountain (Taylor 1970). The critique argues that achieving an objective value does not make the activity meaningful, as it did not make the lives of the slaves meaningful either, even if they were building the pyramids.

I think there is a point to the critique, however, it is also true that part of what drives the strength of the critiques is that I do not find temples or pyramids as necessarily meaningful structures,

maybe schools would be more useful. But I think rolling up stones to a hill that builds a school, but without any personal recognition of this activity does not make the life of Sisyphus more meaningful. So I think personal recognition that the activity is meaningful is important.

Chapter 2.3: Hybrid View from Susan Wolf

Susan Wolf (2010) advances a hybrid view of meaning in life, arguing that a meaningful life has to have both objective and subjective components. As she puts it; “meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness” (Wolf 2010, 9). She starts reflecting on her experience and what she finds meaningful in her life and in the life of others. She then outlines two prominent views of meaning in life that she thinks are present in people's thoughts, then she brings these two views together to form the bipartite view of meaning. The first view is when a person loves doing something then that activity would be meaningful and the activity would contribute to a meaningful life. In this view, only positive experiences matter. Proponents of this view urge people to follow their passions, she calls this view the fulfilment view. The second view, for her, is about doing something larger than oneself or getting involved in something other than oneself. She calls this the "larger-than-oneself" view. On this view, a person lives a meaningful life if he or she contributes to or connects positively with something the value of which is source outside the subject. Wolf does not think that either of these views separately is adequate in bringing about a meaningful life. However, she thinks that combining these two may provide a more adequate answer to what is meaning in life. She posits that these two views need to be both present in a meaningful life. She also notes that active engagement is important, so it is in doing certain activities that meaning arises. Further, she notes that meaning is distinct from morality, so pursuing a meaningful life is different from pursuing a moral life. However, she thinks that there is likely to be a high correlation between objectively valuable pursuits and morality. As she puts it:

"For meaning involves an appreciation of what is valuable independently of one's own interests and attitudes, and an interest in meaning involves an interest in realizing and affirming what is valuable in this way. Moral concerns are perhaps the most obvious and most typically engaging of such valuable aims" (Wolf 2010, 61).

So, morality in many cases reinforces the objective component of meaning. Another important point that she makes is that meaning is not a binary value, it is not the case that a person's life or a given activity is either completely meaningful or completely meaningless. Rather she thinks that most activities have at least some meaning, but some activities may not have "enough" meaning (Wolf 2010, 38). She brings the example of a person who only takes care of one goldfish. She thinks that even though on the subjective view this could be a meaningful life, this is not a meaningful life. Because, only taking care of the goldfish is not valuable enough in terms of the time and energy that is spent on this activity, compared to other alternatives. She does not think that taking care of a goldfish is completely meaningless. Wolf's view is on meaningful life, not particularly on meaningful work. However, I think work is a very important part of most people's lives in our modern societies and Wolf's notions of meaningful life can be applied to define meaningful work. Wolf's view also emphasizes activities and action as a basis for a meaningful life, making it more suitable for discussions of meaningful work. Wolf's view is applied to work and meaningful work by Yeoman (2014) too.

Chapter 2.4: Focus on Contribution

Martela (2017) argues that "an activity is meaningful to the extent that it contributes to something beyond itself " (Martela, 2017, p. 233). Martela develops his definition with three important clarifications in mind. Firstly, he aims to develop an evaluative concept, not a descriptive one. He aims to evaluate meaningfulness. Secondly, and relatedly, Martela aims to understand what is meaningfulness as such, he is not in search for what makes life meaningful. Hence, his definition aims to establish an evaluative tool that can point if a life is more or less

meaningful. Thirdly, Martela is concentrated on the meaning in life, which for him, is about understanding the meaningfulness of a particular human life. He is not focused on the meaning of life, which is a more cosmic or metaphysical concept.

Martela (2017) separates meaningfulness from the broader question of a good and worthwhile life. He notes that a life with a steady stream of hedonistic pleasures might be considered more worthy, but this does not make it any more meaningful. This point is a defense against the experience machine thought experiment by Nozick. For him meaningfulness is within worthiness.

Martela (2017) separates meaningfulness from authenticity. He advances this argument in response to Metz (2013) who argues that values such as "integrity, virtue, authenticity and autonomy" are internal to a person, yet are candidates to a meaningful life (Metz 2013, p. 29). Hence Metz, argues that meaningfulness need not to center around contribution to something external to the individual. Martela (2017) posits that these values are not necessary for meaningfulness, and maintains that contribution is the essential element of meaningfulness. Martela's insight is led by the experience of a cardiologist doctor, who hated his job, and contemplated becoming a poker player. According to Martela, some meaning is lost from the doctor's life, if he decides to become a poker player.

Martela (2017) in concluding his paper points out that his contribution based analysis of meaning can be applied separately to both subjective and objective values, and he notes that we can make sense of Wolf's (2010) hybrid view by suggesting that "the most choiceworthy and worthwhile lives are ... those where a subjective sense of making a contribution meets objective evaluation that a real contribution is actually been made" (Martela, 2017, p. 254)

Chapter 2.5: My Definition of Meaningful Work

My definition of meaningful work build on Wolf (2010) but primarily reliant on Martela (2017). I think contribution is an essential element of meaningful work. But I am aware that there is a difference between objective meaningfulness and subjectively meaningful experience of work.

I like Martela's reformulation of Wolf, but I would say that an activity is meaningful if a subjective sense of making a contribution meets objective evaluation that a real contribution is being made. This differs from Martela to the extent that I use this can be used a condition of a meaningful activity, and meaningful work, whereas Martela only notes that the most choice worthy life is such.

Further, Martela notes that meaningfulness in life is evaluated at the deathbed, however, I disagree with this formulation, I think meaningfulness is evaluated not only in a retrospective basis, but in 'present looking' basis too. A person may evaluate the meaning of their activity while doing it or at the end of the workday. Lastly, I take from Wolf, that meaningfulness is in line with morality. Therefore, meaningless work is not one which strongly harms people, such as murdered, rather one that makes no contribution and has no substantial negative or positive effect.

Overall, in this essay, I focus on the effects of objectively meaningful and meaningless work. I define meaningful work as one that makes a contribution. However, I know that many empirical studies that aim to test for meaning in work focus on the subjective component, therefore, I found it important to outline both and show that they are used connectedly in the philosophy literature. In my thesis, I will use meaningless work and non-contributing work interchangeably as for me, in this essay, they mean the same thing. Even if this is not their universal use in the philosophy literature.

CHAPTER 3: DEFINITION AND SOURCE OF MEANINGLESS WORK

Chapter 3.1: Definition of Meaningless Work

In the previous section, I defined meaningful work. However, the opposite of meaningful work, meaningless, is the central concept of my thesis. Therefore, this section will define meaningless work and explain how and why it exists. I define meaningless work as a form of paid employment where the worker is asked to work in a job that does not produce any positive social value. In other words, work that does not make any contribution to the world. The existence of such meaningless and non-contributing jobs is contrary to classical economic thinking, where it is assumed that revenue and profits are gained for providing social value. However, people in large numbers report that they have a meaningless job. In the next section, I will give structural reasons for the existence of jobs that do not create social value.

Chapter 3.2: The Existence of Non-Contributing Jobs

In spite of the assumptions of classical economic theory, people report to have meaningless jobs. Dahlgreen (2015) found the 37% of British voters responded to a survey saying that they believed that their job is not "making a meaningful contribution to the world". According to Walo (2023) around 20% of US workers perceived their job as socially useless. There are numerous other studies, showing that many people report having a meaningless job. Graeber (2018) illustrates the problem with a wealth of qualitative evidence. In the next section, I will outline Graeber's theory, then I will explain the structural reasons behind non-contributing jobs.

Bullshit jobs according to David Graeber

Graeber argues that due to the profit-making incentive of neoliberal capitalism in the last three decades the number of bullshit jobs grew rapidly primarily in the Finance, Insurance and Real Estate sectors. He thinks the reason behind the large number of bullshit jobs is that the system needed to create bullshit jobs to sustain itself. Graeber considers the defining feature of a bullshit job to be "one so completely pointless that even the person who has to perform it every day cannot convince himself there's a good reason for him [or her] to be doing it" (Graeber, 2018, p.2,3). Further, Graeber notes that a certain job is to be considered a bullshit job "if the position were eliminated, it would make no discernible difference in the world" (Graeber, 2018, p.2). What is very important between these two definitions is that the former seems to reflect the subjective whereas the latter reflects the objective element. Graeber clarifies that his definition is primarily on the subjective component. He defines a bullshit job to be one that the worker considers so. However, he clarifies that he "suggest[s] the worker is correct" (Graeber, 2018, p.10). Graeber does not think that there is an existing adequate measure of social value, so he thinks that the worker's perspective is "about as close as one is likely to get to an accurate assessment" (Graeber, 2018, p.10). Graeber makes a brief but important note on the scale of bullshit jobs. He notes that there are partly, mostly and entirely bullshit jobs. He notes that most people have to do increasingly many bullshit activities as part of their jobs. However, he notes that in this book he focuses on "entirely or overwhelmingly bullshit jobs - not mostly bullshit jobs" which would include that 50% of the activities at the job are bullshit (Graeber, 2018, p.25).

Five Types of Bullshit Jobs

Graeber identifies five primary types of bullshit jobs. Firstly, "flunkies", according to him, these jobs only or primarily exist to make others feel important (Graeber, 2018, p.28). Examples include doormen, receptionists in offices where they aren't actually needed, or assistants hired just to signal status rather than to perform necessary work. He notes that "servants of this sort" are usually assigned some minor task in order to justify their existence, "but this is really just a pretext" (Graeber, 2018, p.29). On Doormen, Graeber notes that these jobs are the "old-fashioned feudal style retainer jobs" that can be performed by machines for decades. As Graeber explains, the only reason for such a job is to make someone feel important, the reason this job exists is because no one would take a company seriously without receptionist staff. Similarly, he brings the example of Jack, who was hired to cold call potential clients on behalf of the broker but not to try to sell them something, but to let them know of the availability of some research material on stocks. This was performed, so that later when the broker calls up the same client the broker looks more important and more successful because the broker can afford an assistant cold caller. However, as Jack notes, such cold callers are much more of a status symbol between the different brokers than anything driving sales (Graeber, 2018, p.31).

The second category are "goons". These jobs have an aggressive or manipulative role and often wouldn't exist if other organizations were not engaging in the same kind of work. Further, Graeber notes that their added value can be questioned and they "exist only because other people [often competitors] employ them" (Graeber, 2018, p.36). Examples include lobbyists, PR specialists, telemarketers, and corporate lawyers who exist mainly to help companies outmanoeuvre each other. The third category are "duct tapers" (Graeber, 2018, p.40). These workers temporarily fix problems that shouldn't exist in the first place, or would not exist, if there was not a faulty system that produces the problem, or if someone took the time to fix the problem. Their jobs exist because of inefficiencies, bureaucracy, or bad management rather than a genuine need. Often these jobs could easily be automated. For instance, an

employee whose main role is to compensate for an outdated system instead of replacing it. The fourth category is "box tickers" (Graeber, 2018, p.45) – These jobs exist primarily to create the illusion that something useful is happening. These workers fill out forms, write reports that no one reads, or comply with bureaucratic regulations that don't serve a real purpose. The fifth category identified by Graeber is the "taskmasters" (Graeber, 2018, p.51). – Some managers or administrators fall into this category, especially when they don't manage anything meaningful. They either supervise people who don't need supervision or create unnecessary tasks for others to do. These jobs are usually middle management or higher management positions, that exist to supervise people who are otherwise completely capable of performing their tasks or have not much to do.

Chapter 3.3: Structural Reasons Behind Non-Contributing Jobs

As I showed in the above section people report that their job does not make a social contribution. This would be characterised in the subjective criteria of meaningless work. Graeber thinks that if people think that their job is meaningless then it must be so. I think it is possible that people who have objectively meaningful jobs, feel that their job is meaningless because of organizational structures, management practices and other factors. It is also possible that someone has an objectively meaningless job but perceives it to be meaningful. My thesis focuses on the effects of objectively meaningless jobs. However, it is hard to evaluate the objective contribution of every job, I do not aim to create a list of jobs that are meaningless. What I attempt to do in this section, is to provide empirical economic reasons, why it is possible to gain revenue and profit without actually creating social value. With this I aim to prove that objectively meaningless work exists, without claiming that I uncover all instances of this.

I identify two structural reasons behind meaningless jobs. The first is increased financialization, where companies are able to extract economic rents without creating social value. The second reason is the existence of positions which reinforce status and hierarchy.

The finance, insurance and real estate sectors have expanded over the recent decades, accounting for around 20-21% of the GDP of the United States (YCharts, 2025). Similarly, these sectors have also increased as a share of the economy in the UK. The finance sector has increased to 12% in the UK (UK Government, 2023). Further, their practices have also changed. Financial corporations are able to extract economic rents due to their market power. These firms often function as a monopoly or an oligopoly.

Foroohar (2016) argues that the financial sector has shifted from supporting productive business activities to engaging in practices that prioritise short-term profits and self-enrichment. She notes that only 15% of financial investments go to businesses, with the majority fuelling market speculation.

In their book *Private equity at work: When wall street manages main street*, Appelbaum and Batt (2014) find that when private equity firms take over companies, they often turn publicly traded firms private, where less regulation and lower transparency apply. Further, private equity restructures management to excessively extract short-term profit, without focusing on the long-term health and development of the company or on the quality of the service. Further, these actions by private equity can leave companies saddled with debt and vulnerable to bankruptcy. Showing that the work of private equity firms is able to extract profit by restructuring a company without creating any social value. Nor are they necessarily creating harm. Because the service the organisation provides, at least in the short term, is not harmed. The trajectory of the company may change in the long term. But that is not necessarily a purely negative effect.

Financial institutions and other institutions in charge of handling and distributing money and other financial resources earn large sums of money by taking small fees from each transaction. In these cases, these institutions try to make the process of transactions as complicated as possible to have the opportunity to extract fees as much as possible. Graeber (2018) cites that in 2006, JPMorgan and Chase & Co. reported that two-thirds of its profits were derived from "fees and penalties". These companies often have monopoly or oligopoly power, to be able to extract such economic rents. Further, more and more companies beyond the finance sector aim to gain profits from these activities. General Motors, a car manufacturer based in the US, makes money not from selling cars but from the interests collected on auto loans (Graeber, 2018, p.177).

In the finance sector, companies employ people to work on gaining profits by extracting economic rents, by speculation, by appropriation of goods and enterprises, not with the goal of producing social value, but to extract profit. In my opinion, working on these activities and working in a job with these functions means that no social value is created by a person's work.

Another very widespread reason for meaningless work is what Greber calls "flunkies" and "goons", according to him, these jobs only or primarily exist to make others feel important. Someone who already has some power hires another to make him or her seem more important than he or she actually is. In these cases, there is a very unequal power relationship between the employer and the employee, and the employer may treat the employee only as a token. In these cases, the employee's meaningful contribution can be strongly questioned, besides trying to uphold a false image of another person. It is possible that the employee deeply cares about the public image of this specific person or company. However, he or she will likely realise that being a largely passive bystander, hired only to make someone or something appear important, is not a genuine way to contribute the cause, and he or she could do further activities that actually matter towards that cause.

Lastly, with the rise of managerialism, the power of middle management increased (Graeber, 2028). However, middle management often created unnecessary surveillance tasks that kept themselves busy and potentially overburdened the staff. Further, to look important and increase the perception of their weight in the organisation, they hired unnecessary subordinates. This point connects to the previous point on perceived importance.

In the above section, I aimed to show that there could be structural reasons for objectively meaningless jobs, such as creating a false image or extracting economic rents. With this in mind, I think there could be several other structural reasons why meaningless jobs exist in certain sectors. My aim with this section was to show that, contrary to economic theory, there are meaningless jobs. Further that not only do people subjectively experience meaningless work, but also there are economic explanations for the existence of objectively meaningless jobs. Hence, there are objectively meaningless jobs, even if they are hard to measure and pinpoint.

CHAPTER 4: THE HARMS OF MEANINGLESS WORK

Introduction

In the previous section, I outlined the definition of meaningless work, and I brought empirical evidence from economics and sociology to show its empirical occurrence. In this section, I will further explore the effects of meaningless work. I will look at a wide range of academic publications, from psychology, sociology, political science and philosophy on the negative effects of meaningless work. Here, not every scholar follows the same definition of meaningful and meaningless work as I do. When building this literature review, I aimed to be clear about the differences. This section aims to outline the most prominent academic discourses on the harms of meaningless work and point out some gaps in this literature.

Negative Effects of Objectively Meaningless Tasks:

Several studies point out the negative effects of meaningless work on mental health. The two studies below look at the effects of tasks that could be characterised as objectively meaningless. Empirical research suggests that tasks perceived as illegitimate or unnecessary undermine workers' psychological well-being. In a daily diary study, Eatough (2013) found that employees working in such tasks reported increased levels of anger, fatigue, and depressive mood. These emotional consequences often carried over to subsequent days. The study finds, the experience of being assigned tasks devoid of justification or relevance appears to attack the normative foundations of self-respect and professional identity. The paper suggests that workers exposed to illegitimate tasks are not only affected in the moment but may also experience cumulative psychological harm over time.

A 2023 study conducted by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health demonstrated that the assignment of irrelevant tasks leads to increased feelings of boredom and long-term exhaustion (Harju, Seppälä & Hakkanen, 2023). According to their research, employees reported that pointless or repetitive tasks diminish their sense of professional value and erode their engagement with both work and non-work domains.

Effects on Skills

Several papers argue that work shapes the skills and capability formation of workers, affecting even their private lives. Empirical research shows that non-autonomous work affects the kind of activities a person will undertake in their private lives. Schwartz (1982) showed that autonomy or the lack of autonomy affects a person's autonomous actions in their private lives. Workers will do fewer autonomous actions in their private lives if their work tasks are non-autonomous. According to Schwartz (1982), a person's capacity to live an autonomous life overall is impacted by work that lacks autonomy. Lack of autonomy at work cannot be made up for in other contexts, which makes people less capable and motivated to make logical plans and pursue their own objectives outside of the workplace. Their entire capacity to exercise their abilities in all facets of life is hampered by this lack of autonomy. According to Schwartz, autonomy is essential for developing one's goals and plans as well as for carrying them out in all areas of one's life. The study emphasises how people's general autonomy and well-being are negatively impacted by a lack of autonomy at work.

Kohn and Schooler (1983) showed that complex work tasks have an effect on people's activities outside of work too. They emphasised substantive complexity as the central idea while focusing on occupational self-direction. They noted a favourable correlation between complexity and intellectual flexibility and characterised a substantively complicated job as needing independent judgement and reasoning. Even though workers entered various jobs with

varying degrees of cognitive functioning, over time, different job complexities led to changes in intellectual flexibility over time, regardless of previous cognitive function. The study emphasised how employment structures influence employees' beliefs, values, and cognitive abilities through learning processes, which have an impact on a variety of facets of life outside of the workplace. Further, they also showed that workers are likely to have a preference for a similar level of complexity at their outside-work activities as in their work activities. They have found similar results regarding creative work and the presence of creative tasks at work. Those workers who undertook creative work showered preferences for similar tasks in their private lives too. To support these points, Kornhauser (1965), during his research into Detroit factory workers, he found that "factory employment, especially in routine production tasks, does give evidence of extinguishing workers' ambition, initiative, and purposeful direction toward life goals" (ibid. p.252). These studies are not directly about meaningful work, they are about autonomy, complex and creative work. They may or may not be in line with meaningful work, however, these studies show that the content of one's work effects the actions of workers not only in their work life, but also in their private life.

Meaningful as a fundamental human need

Yeoman advances a philosophical argument. Yeoman's (2013) article conceptualises meaningful work as a fundamental human need. This paper is very influential in the meaningful work literature. Her core concept is that meaningfulness is a core human need, and meaningful work is necessary for a person to develop and maintain the capabilities needed to live a meaningful life. I will outline her argument then critique her view and build on it when forming my own argument.

Yeoman frames her argument as a response to liberal theory, where meaningful or meaningless work is merely seen as a preference in the market. Within the liberal framework,

states should remain neutral between different conceptions of living and different conceptions of the good life. It is entirely up to the worker to decide. Further, within the liberal framework, some scholars recognise the potential harm of meaningless work, however, the most common response is that people should be compensated for the harms that meaningless work causes. However, Yeoman objects to this compensation argument for several reasons. She argues that the compensation argument fails for three reasons. Firstly, there is an unfair distribution of the most attractive jobs and unfair distribution of meaningless jobs; in her account, often, otherwise also unprivileged people obtain meaningless positions. Secondly, the harms of meaninglessness on the formation of capabilities that are necessary for equal participation in making a contribution to one's life. Thirdly, the compensation cannot sufficiently compensate for the harms, because the harms of meaningless work harm the satisfaction of fundamental needs. Yeoman quotes Blustein (2008) that satisfying work is fundamental for psychological well-being across various domains of human functioning.

Yeoman constructs her argument in the following way. She posits that there are fundamental human needs that are profoundly important for human life: "human needs are the things that must be if human life is to be" (Yeoman, 2013, p.241). Further, she puts forward that "fundamental needs address vital interests that are characteristic of a person's essential nature" (Yeoman, 2013, p.241). As I noted above, she says meaningfulness is a fundamental human need, and as outlined above, meaningless work can harm meaningful living. Yeoman then identifies two important capabilities that are needed for experiencing meaning. These capabilities mirror the criteria set out by Susan Wolf (2010) in her book, where she advances the idea of the bipartite value of meaningfulness (subjective and objective meaningfulness). Yeoman argues that in order to experience meaning, one needs the capability for objective valuing and the capability for subjective attachment. To elaborate, to experience meaning, there needs to be a meaningful task, however, to experience meaning, one needs to become a valuer,

a valuer who is able to recognise what is objectively valuable (Yeoman 2014). When one is a valuer, they have the opportunity to "become appropriately related to what has worth" (Wolf 2012, 179). Further, being a valuer should be incorporated into one's self-view and identity. Meaning that one should be aware of their ability to evaluate the meaningfulness of objects or tasks. Developing this capability to experience meaning and developing the identity of a valuer depends upon being able to engage with activities that are meaningful that connect one to things that matter. Wolf (2012, 189) writes, "connecting us in a way that enables us the direct appreciation of the value of one's activity". Therefore, only through engaging in worthy activities can the capability and identity to value meaningfulness be developed.

Further, Yeoman argues for a politics of meaningfulness; she says that having institutional guarantees in place about the content of the work does not go against liberal neutrality. A politics of meaningfulness does not channel a person into a particular life, but it does prevent the degradation of capabilities. So, according to Yeoman, institutions will not guarantee that a person experiences meaning, but governments can ensure that the social structures do not disable a person's search for meaning.

Overall, Yeoman's account is a powerful argument for a politics of meaningfulness by positing that "meaningful work can be understood as a fundamental human need, which all persons require to satisfy their inescapable interests in freedom, autonomy and dignity" (Yeoman, 2013, p. 235). I appreciate the overall direction of the argument, however, I think it is possible to experience meaningfulness in one's private life even if one is working in a meaningless job. I think the capabilities for valuing meaning are innate capabilities or developed in childhood that might be somewhat diminished while working in a meaningless job, but not enough for a person not to be able to experience meaning in their private lives.

Conclusion

In the sections, I showed some of the ways the negative effects of meaningless work (meaningless work according to their definitions, not mine) are conceptualised. Some scholars look at the negative effects of non-autonomous or non-creative tasks. The most important account of the effects of meaningless work is the work of Yeoman (2014), who argues that the effects of meaningless work thwart the capabilities to experience meaningfulness in one's private life so much that it will likely not be experienced.

CHAPTER: 5. INNATE ENERGY

Having seen some of the discussion around the harms of meaningless work, the literature primary focuses on the harms of meaningless work outside of work. How it prevents people from living meaningful lives or achieve flourishing. I certainly think that meaningless work has a negative effect on people and may decrease their chance to live a meaningful life even outside of work. However, I think it is possible and common enough to pursue meaningful activities outside of work.

But based my reading of literature in philosophy and in psychology, further by reading several testimonies of people doing meaningless jobs and based on my experience of working in a meaningless, non-contributing position. I have the following intuition: meaningless work is in itself negative it is in itself bad for people, harms people or violates people. Even if people are able to have meaningful contributive and otherwise good lives outside of work. In the next sections, I want to explore my intuition and develop this thought. I want to examine what is wrong about meaningless work, in itself and build an argument, based on this, towards a politics of meaningful work.

I say that people have intrinsic productive energy. Further, people have an intrinsic need for contribution. Building on this, I posit a sufficientarian perfectionist argument that when people invest their energy into something they have an intrinsic expectation that at least some reward besides money, in the case of work, importantly a sense of contribution will be derived. Otherwise, it is a waste of their energy and a violation of their essence.

To make this argument, first I will outline my idea of productive energy. To do this, I set my view apart from hedonistic utilitarian thinking, where idle consumption could maximise utility. I rely on literature from psychology, including the self-determination theory, which

argues that people derive utility and have a need for contribution. Then I look at how philosophers through about this. I will summarise the Aristotelian potential view, which is used by numerous philosophers in the meaningful work literature, I also summarise the Marxian conceptions of species being and alienated labour. I set my view apart from these views and develop my view of productive energy.

Chapter: 5.1 Distinguishing from Other Views on Human Nature

There are several different views on the role of work and people's attitude towards it. One prominent conceptualisation in the hedonistic utilitarian thinking. According to this view labour is a pain that is to be avoided. In utilitarian thinking, as Bentham, (1970) put it "nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure" (Bentham, 1970, p.11). The primarily motivation of people is pain-avoidance and pleasure seeking. Within this framework, labour is seen as a pain. An activity that serves only an instrumental purpose, primarily to earn income and more fundamentally to ensure survival. For some thinkers, if it was possible, getting rid of physical labour would be the ideal state. According to Hume, who is not a utilitarian thinker, but very influential for later utilitarian thinkers and for classical economics thinking, in an ideal state: "No laborious occupation required; no tillage, no navigation" (Hume, 2006). In the ideal state for a person "music, poetry, and contemplation form his [or her] sole business: conversation, mirth and friendship his [or her] sole amusement" (Hume, 2006).

Hedonistic Utilitarian thinking is very influential for classical economic thought. In classical economics it is a central assumption that pleasure is maximised with consumption and leisure time. Work time takes away from leisure time, but income gained for work enables consumption. Therefore, in classical economic thinking, work is seen as a necessary but unpleasant pain that is valued only for its instrumental purpose, to earn an income. Within this

view, humans are seen as consumers. I want to challenge this view and say that humans are not mere consumers, rather active beings that derive happiness from action and contribution.

Chapter 5.2: Scholarly Work on Production or Creation Being an Important Part of Human Life

Several scholars have put forward a view that creative or productive activity is an important part of human life.

Chapter 5.2.1 Literature from Psychology

In this section, I will look at literature from psychology, evaluating empirical research findings that show the intrinsic motivations of people to be producers and impactful agents. I will look at several empirical papers and the theory behind them. Further, I will look literature on the creative and productive potential of people. This section situates my thesis in empirical research findings besides the largely philosophical literature I am using in other sections. I will first, look the intrinsic motivations theory in psychology.

Intrinsic Motivations Theory

Within the psychology literature, the idea of intrinsic motivations was developed by Harlow (1958) and White (1959). At the time psychologist believed that there were only two main drives of human motivation, the biological drive to survival and the need to seek reward and avoid punishment. Harlow (1958) experimented with monkeys and found that the animals completed tasks, even if no reward was presented to them. Harlow argued that the monkeys completed the tasks because it offered intrinsic reward for them. White (1959) relying on studies on animals and children argued that humans have an intrinsic motivation for competence which is independent of the basic drives for food and sex. Under competence, White meant that people are inherently motivated to engage in activities which enable them to develop their skills

and effectively interact with their surroundings and environments. White argued that activities that foster competence are intrinsically motivating.

Self-Determination Theory

Building on the intrinsic motivation theory, Deci developed the self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Ryan and Deci, 2000). Following studies and experiments on human motivation Deci and his colleagues developed the self-determination theory. The theory has three essential elements. Firstly, that humans are inherently proactive, possessing the potential to act on, to regulate and shape both their internal impulses (such as emotions and drives) and the external circumstances and environments they face, rather than being merely reactive to these forces. This foundational belief is widely accepted among positive psychology scholars, like Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000). Secondly, people exhibit an innate propensity for growth and development. Thirdly that, while the capacity for activity and optimal development is intrinsic to the human organism, these processes are not self-actualizing by default. For individuals to realize their inherent dispositions and potential that is, to function optimally and undergo effective development, they must receive essential resources from their social context. According to the self-determination theory, three intrinsic psychological needs are the need for competence, relatedness and autonomy. Competence is the intrinsic desire to be effective in dealing with one's surroundings (Deci and Vansteenkiste, 2003). Relatedness is the inherent human tendency for social connectedness and caring for others. Need for autonomy is the universal human desire to be causal agents and, to act in accordance with their integrated sense of self (ibid.). Self-determination theory is supported by numerous empirical papers, for my thesis, I find it very important that it emphasizes the presence of basic needs, further, that "human beings are inherently proactive" is a central component of the theory (Deci and Vansteenkiste, 2003, p. 3). Related to Deci's work, deCharms (1968) after researching children and adults argued that individuals possess a fundamental motivational tendency to engage in

actions that allow them a sense of personal causation, which he identified as the foundational basis of intrinsic motivation. Further, building on self-determination theory and the idea of intrinsic goal, that they satisfy basic psychological needs on the own right because they reflect people's basic growth tendencies (Deci and Vansteenkiste, 2003, p. 10). Research by Kasser and Ryan (1996) identified community contributions, among other things, as an important value that falls into the category of intrinsic goals. Besides self-determination theory these are several different scholars who argued for the presence of community contribution as an intrinsic human need.

Further Studies by Groos and Tomasello

Groos (1901) studied the behaviour of young children and found that they expressed extraordinary joy when realizing their ability to produce predictable effects in their environment. Groos used the phrase "the pleasure at being the cause" (Groos, 1901). He theorized that children understand their sense of self by separating themselves from the external world and realising they can be the cause of changes in the world. This realization is accompanied by a distinct form of joy, and it remains the fundamental for all later human experience.

Tomasello (2009) studied the behaviour of children and found that cooperation is a fundamental and intrinsic aspect of human nature, which distinguishes humans from other primates. Other primates engage in competition for resources, humans naturally collaborate and share with others, even outside kinship groups. Tomasello found that children display cooperative behaviours (helping, sharing, informing) from a very early age, even before formal socialization.

Overall, in this section I reviewed several empirical, primarily psychology papers that show several important things for my argument. First that there is empirical backing for the

idea that humans are not merely motivated by external rewards, or driven purely by the instinctive survival needs. Rather, humans have intrinsic needs and capabilities to fulfil these intrinsic needs. One of these intrinsic needs identified by the literature is the need to act, to be proactive, to be a causal agent. Further, being a cause brings joy to humans and cooperation is an intrinsic and not though behaviour for children.

Chapter 5.2.2 Literature from Philosophy

Productive Potential: Aristotle and Veltman

Aristotle develops the idea of eudaimonia, often translated as 'happiness' or 'flourishing' or 'living well' (Shields, 2023). Aristotle presumes that people want to leave a good life, so he questions what the ideal or best life consist of. He believes that the best life is not entirely subjective, and people may live sub-optimal lives. Aristotle sets out criteria for the ideal way of life and argues that eudaimonia satisfies these criteria. "Eudaimonia is achieved, by fully realizing our natures, by actualizing to the highest degree our human capacities, and neither our nature nor our endowment of human capacities is a matter of choice for us" (Shields, 2023). Therefore, Aristotle relies on the idea of innate human potential and capacities, and for him, the ideal way of life, a flourishing life consists of rationally realizing these potentials. Several scholars have used Aristotle's ideas on human flourishing, one example is the work of Veltman (2016) who applies the idea of human flourishing to discussion of meaningful and meaningless work, arguing that meaningful work is not a sufficient but an essential part of human life. Veltman (2016) shows several ways through which meaningful work can enhance a flourishing life and show several avenues through which meaningless work can detract from a flourishing life, providing a "cumulative case" for the central role of meaningful work to a flourishing life.

Here it is important to note that Veltman, does not use Wolf's (2010) or Martela's (2021) definition of meaningful work, rather provides a complex definition with several components.

Marx: Species-Being and Alienation

Marx, following Hegel, uses the German term, 'Gattungswesen', to refer to something along the lines of human nature, often translated as species-being or species essence. Marx uses the term to set humans apart from other animals. Marx believes that animals " produce only [for] their own immediate needs or those of their young " (Marx, 1975). On the contrary, humans engage in free and conscious material production which sets them apart from animals. This also distinguishes Marx from Hegel, the latter saw humans as self-conscious contemplative beings, Marx saw humans as practical active beings.

Marx thought that alienated labor cuts the worker off their Gattungswesen (species-being or human essence) (Marx, 1975). For Marx, labor should be an expression of this essential human capacity. But under capitalism, that potential is blocked. Work becomes only a means for survival, not an avenue for self-realization. Instead of being a free, life-affirming activity, labor turns into something external and forced onto the worker, something that represses, rather than reveals, our human nature (ibid.).

Marx's notion of alienation is very influential in discussions around meaningless work. Marx outlines how workers becomes alienated from the product they produce. Under capitalism, the product of the worker is not owned by them, rather it is owned by the factory owner. The product is sold on the market, which generates profit, but not for the person who made it, but for the owner. The more the worker produces, the less they have; their labor becomes externalized in a thing that stands outside of them, even confronting them as

something foreign. The product is no longer a reflection of the worker's activity, rather it becomes something alien to them (ibid).

Sayer (2005) goes against the view that humans are simply consumers and against the instrumental view of work. He endorses Marx view that non-alienated labour realises people's essential essence.

Productive Justice

Gomberg's (2007) theory of contributive justice posits that the distribution of work, and not only its pay or conditions, is a matter of justice. Gomber thinks that contemporary societies have failed to distribute the opportunities for meaningful and socially valuable work fairly. According to him, justice requires that everyone should have access to socially necessary and engaging labour.

Sandel (2020), notes the importance of work in Aristotelian view of human flourishing. Further, he endorses contributive justice and writes that "we are most fully human when we contribute to the common good" (Sandel, 2020, p.213). He thinks when political economy is reduced to questions of GDP growth and distribution, it neglects the dignity and moral value of work, leading to an impoverished civic life.

Overall, these sections outlined the productive potential view, the Marxian notion of species-being and the views of contemporary scholars. Gomberg and Sandel's and the theory of contributive justice, posits that people derive utility from active engagement with socially valuable work, further, this assumes that people have energy with which they can use to engage in an activity.

Chapter 5.2: My Characterization of Energy

In the previous sections, I have looked at academic literature from psychology and philosophy on productivity, creativity, productive potential and productive energy. One theme that is very prominent in the literature is the idea of productive potential, which has its origins in Aristotle's thought. However, I want to develop an alternative view, the view of productive energy that is innate to humans.

Chapter 5.2.1: Summarising the Human Potential View, Responding to the Literature

The notion of productive potential is widely used in the philosophy literature. Productive potential means that a human is capable of achieving something positive; he or she is capable of making a positive change or capable of mastering a certain skill. After having developed this skill, the person has the potential to make a certain impact. Within this framework, if something positive is achieved, then it is a good. However, if some potential is left unused, it is not necessarily a negative. Largely the person is responsible for unrealised potential, or to some extent, the environment, which could thwart the development of skills or hinder the full experience of the potential.

5.2.2 My View of Energy

I want to develop my view of productive energy. Firstly, what is energy. Self-determination theory and the other psychology theories cited above believe that people gain utility from action, but this presupposes that people have some form of energy. People have some energy in them with which they can act. Which they can use to pursue different kind of activities. Similarly, the Aristotelian view of potential also assumes that people have some form

of energy with which they can master their skills and through which they can apply the skills they have mastered. Similarly, contributive justice presupposes some form of energy with which people contribute and derive esteem and utility. Therefore, the idea that people have some innate energy is not controversial. Further, I think this energy is largely already formed within a person. In my view a mentally and physical healthy adult possess enough energy to act in the world and act towards certain objectives he or she may have. These objectives can include reproduction or making a contribution or a myriad of other goals.

Now I will outline how making a contribution relates to this energy. As I showed in the psychology literature, humans have an intrinsic motivation towards being the cause towards making a contribution, further, this is often characterised as an unescapable human interest (Yeoman, 2013). Therefore, I have outlined that humans have innate energy and innate desire for making a contribution.

When I say that this energy is fully formed, I mean that there is enough energy in an adult person to contribute to society, further assuming basic knowledge of the social world and the social functions within their community, which a person learns just by growing up in a society, without any specific education, a person has enough knowledge to make a contribution. I see my view of energy different from the Aristotelian view of potential where the realisation of innate endowments and capabilities is required. My view is more adequate for my argument as the scope of my argument is different. Aristotle questioned the requirements of a good life and argued that a flourishing life entails the realisation of one's innate potential. In this framework, the bar for good and meaningful action and for meaningful work is relatively high. On the comparative, my definition sets a relatively low baseline above which a job can be considered sufficiently contributing or sufficiently meaningful. I say that the activity must make a positive impact, it has to make a contribution, not a maximal contribution.

Overall, in my view of energy, a person has innate energy, and among other things, they have a fundamental desire and interest in using this energy towards meaningful action. This energy is fully formed, further mastery of skills is not required. Further mastery may enable the person to make a bigger contribution, however, some contribution can be made with this form of energy.

Following this I will argue that meaningless work wastes the productive energy of a person and making someone do meaningless work, under certain conditions is a violation of that person's productive energy and productive essence.

5.2.3 Connecting Energy and Meaning

In the previous section I outlined my view of productive energy, in the next two subsections I will connect it to meaningfulness. In these sub-sections I will talk about the effects and experience of an objectively meaningless jobs on employees.

Meaningful Work and Productive Energy

When a person has a meaningful job, as per my earlier definition, a position where he or she can have an impact beyond him or herself. Then the person can have a positive feeling about this activity. He or she can feel that her energy is flowing in a meaningful direction. It may not be the most meaningful activity she could do, but it is a sufficiently meaningful activity, doing which she feels that her energy is having some impact.

Meaningless Jobs and Productive Energy

A meaningless job also uses energy, but it does not give the ability to look back the impact of one's work with satisfaction. In an objectively meaningless job, the worker is also asked to perform tasks, the worker also has obligation, he or she is also asked exert their energy and at the end of the workday the worker will also feel tired. Maybe less tired maybe more tired, but it is certain that at a job, some energy was used.

In a non-contributing job it feels like the employee is asked to waste their energy. Although they are getting paid, they are not getting in return something they also have a desire for which is impact and contribution. Given that the employee has a knowledge of the objective meaninglessness of the position he or she cannot point out something which is or will be the intrinsic result of her energy, besides that instrumental reward: salary.

This creates emptiness and resentment towards the position, but most importantly a sense of a part of themselves is begin wasted, not used properly, misused or abused. Several studies report on the negative effects of meaningless work. Graber (2018) brings qualitative evidence, on the harms of meaningless work, using words as 'pointlessness' or 'misery'. Eatough (2013) found that tasks perceived as illegitimate or unnecessary undermine workers' psychological well-being increasing levels of anger, fatigue, and depressive mood. Yeoman (2014) also cites Arnold et. al. (2007) to show the negative effects of meaningless work.

Note on Subjectivity and Objectivity

The focus of my thesis is on objectively meaningless work. In section three I gave empirical explanation for its existence. I also assume that most people who do objectively non-contributing jobs, will have or develop an understanding that their position is meaningless. With

this in mind it is possible that a person may think there is some meaning in their work, however, I think sooner or later a person will figure it out and will likely develop even more resentment after the period. Further, I know that not everyone may experience the objective meaninglessness the same way, however, I do think that for most people a meaningless job will have some of the above effects.

CHAPTER 6. JUSTICE AND MEANINGLESS WORK

This section expands the previous discussion on innate energy and non-contributive work. This chapter evaluates under what conditions meaningless work is unjust. I argue that when a person has to do meaningless work then that is a violation of a person's innate energy. Two crucial points need to be defined here. Firstly, what is meant by “has to do”? What level of coercion, what can be a source of that. Secondly, what is the nature of this violation. In the next sections, I will begin with the first point. I aim to show the ways in which there can be unjust pressures in the labour market that push people towards meaningless work. If not, everyone has access to meaningless work, then that is a clear violation of a person's ability to experience meaningful work. This is recognised by many scholars. I want to go beyond this and uncover other structural factors that can push people towards meaningless work, which cumulatively can create an unjust environment within which a politics of meaningfulness is essential to achieve justice.

6.1 The bucket thought experiment

In this section, I aim to show the ways in which there can be unjust pressures in the labour market that push people towards meaningless work. To do this, I develop an analogy, the bucket thought experiment and show the potential unjust practices in the labour market. This thought experiment also helps to illustrate the idea of energy developed in the above section.

6.1.1 Characterisation of the thought experiment

To illustrate this, I will use the example of a bucket with water, then I will show to what extent the scenarios outlined in this thought experiment are reflected in real life. With this thought experiment, I aim to illustrate the adequate use or waste of energy of a person. In the thought experiment, I will say humans are like buckets that are used for carrying water for the purposes of gardening. The buckets are full of water. The water symbolises the energy that humans possess. As I said, it is fully formed within a person, ready to use. Further, let's say that the buckets have little legs that lift them away from the ground, and they can move. They also have consciousness and care about how the water is used. Additionally, there is a hole on the side of the bucket near the bottom, where water flows out. In this thought experiment, I focus on creating an example about work, most people have to go to work and while at work, they use their energy. Some may have more or less tiring jobs, but every job uses some energy.

6.1.2 What it means to have a meaningful or meaningless job within the thought experiment

Having a meaningful job means that the water in the bucket is watering plants, trees or grass. Somewhere where the water serves its purpose and makes a contribution to the vegetation. In this case, when the bucket evaluates its activity, it sees that it is meaningful; this evaluation can take place both in the moment and in a retrospective way, looking back at a certain period.

In a meaningless job, the water is also flowing, but using the metaphor, it is watering a concrete floor. When placed on a concrete floor, the water is still flowing out, and the bucket has a knowledge of this. The bucket can feel a sense of violation if the bucket is placed on a concrete floor and a fence is put around it, so the bucket cannot move. In this case the bucket may experience that the water internal to it is being wasted and at the end of the life, which I say when the water runs out and the bucket is empty, as the bucket looks back and looks at its

'life' with disappointment, with anger towards the force that placed it on the concrete floor and jailed it there and maybe with jealousy towards the buckets that had the chance to water plants or grass.

6.1.3 The thought experiment in action

In the previous section, I established that a bucket, when seeing that its water has been wasted because it has been placed on a concrete floor and jailed there, feels deep frustration, anger and disappointment. In this section I will argue that people may choose meaningless work, however making someone do meaningless work is a violation of the person. However, what are the boundaries of making someone. In this section I will explore these boundaries.

Saying that a person who is condemned to meaningless work is severely violated. This is not a controversial statement, even in Greek mythology, Sisyphus suffered a violation from the gods when he was condemned to meaningless work. Both the meaninglessness of the activity and the unfreedom create the violation. Similarly, Dostoevsky (1862), in his book 'Notes from the House of the Dead', writes about and reflects on his own experiences in Siberian prison camps. He writes that what would really destroy the soul of the prisoner is not necessarily the difficulty of the task, but the meaninglessness, as he writes:

"Hard labor, as it is now carried on, presents no interest to the convict; but it has its utility. The convict makes bricks, digs the earth, builds; and all his occupations have a meaning and an end. Sometimes the prisoner may even take an interest in what he is doing. He then wishes to work more skillfully, more advantageously. But let him be constrained to pour water from one vessel into 'another, to pound sand, to move a heap of earth from one place to another, and then immediately move it back again, then I am persuaded that at the end of a few days, the prisoner would hang himself or commit a thousand capital crimes, preferring rather to die than endure such humiliation, shame, and torture" (Dostoyesky 1862, p. 13)

I am using this illustration by no means to justify slavery or say that that is okay, but rather to show that condemning someone to meaningless work is unjust and a violation of a person.

Using the bucket metaphor

I will go back to the bucket example and aim to discover where injustice lies. Let's imagine there is a big garden at one end, there are trees, then more towards the middle, there are roses, and then around the middle and towards the other end, there is grass. A bucket placed in this garden can choose what and where to water, and it will be a meaningful use of the water. But what if the gardener pours a little amount of concrete at one end of the garden, taking up some of the space of the grass? This in itself is not a violation towards the bucket, because the bucket can still find plenty of space where its water can have a positive impact and where it can contribute to the plants' life. But there are different scenarios, with which I aim to test what are the limits of justice and injustice. Scenario one: Now let's say many more buckets are introduced to the garden, they all have space in the garden and can all water different plants. But what if, in scenario two, half of the plants get cut down and half of the garden gets covered with concrete, half the trees, half the roses, half the grass? Now, only 75% of the buckets have space in the green area, 25% have to stay on the concrete. Is taking away the green area and pouring concrete there so that some buckets will necessarily have to be on concrete a violation for the buckets? I say yes. Because even if the buckets can choose between themselves who should go to the concrete, someone has to. Maybe some buckets will be forced to stay on the concrete. This is a violation of those buckets who now have to let their water pour on concrete and maybe towards those as well, who had to fight for their chance to pour their water onto plants. Scenario three, now what if the buckets on the concrete get painted over twice more often than the buckets on the green area, not because the buckets on the concrete get used more

or lose their colour quicker, or other practical reason, but because the gardener creates an external reward for these. Additionally, what if the gardener adds banners to the garden which say that the best buckets are those that get painted over the most? Further, what if the gardener adds a slope to the garden so the concrete section is on the lower end of the slope and the green section is on the higher end, so that it is harder to stay in the green section but much easier to stand on the concrete section? Further, in scenario four, what if the gardener paints flowers onto the concrete to deceive some of the buckets, and some buckets may think for a short time that they are actually watering plants. The introduction of external rewards and status symbols, making it more difficult to water the green part with the slope, may achieve that some buckets will water the concrete.

6.2 Interpreting the Bucket Experiment

In this section, I will interpret the bucket thought experiment and show the way it reflects the real-life environment of the job market and the way it can push people towards meaningless jobs. Hence, I argue for a politics of meaningfulness and the importance of this.

6.2.1 External factors Cumulate

In the thought experiment, I outlined several external factors that push people towards meaningless work. In the second scenario, there are not enough meaningful jobs available, which means some people have to do meaningless work. This mirrors reality to the extent that Walo (2023) shows that around 20% of Americans self-report doing meaningless work[1]. However, it is not necessarily the case that the absolutely most disadvantaged will do meaningless work. There are several other factors in the labour market. It is often not the

absolutely but the relatively disadvantaged who have to do the meaningless work in a given industry. For example, in the case of finance. It is possible that a student decides to study finance in order to have a meaningful career, where he or she can help small businesses thrive. However, it is possible that the only job he or she can find after graduating is a meaningless one. He or she does not want to change industries, even though she could find a job as a street cleaner, a contributing job, because of societal expectations, pressure from parents and friends. Another factor might be the case where buckets are painted over more often, it is possible that the employer introduces rewards for employees who actually do meaningless work. In the case of flunkies whose job only or primarily exists to make others feel important. It is possible that a person who hires another to make them seem important generously rewards that person, or a rent-seeking financial firm generously rewards its employees. I think, in theory, the state could regulate such practices and not allow meaningless jobs to pay significantly more than meaningful jobs. Further, on deception, this is the scenario in which the gardener paints flowers on the floor, making people think they are doing something meaningful. In meaningless work, there can be a sense of deception in many ways. Firstly, as I explained in the section on the social role and perception of work, people have an expectation to make an impact when going to work. This is not to say that people expect to change the world or contribute maximally, but most people have an expectation to do something that at least makes some positive contribution. People do not expect that their efforts will not matter at all. Secondly, companies that know some of their activities do not make a contribution may aim to paint themselves as if they are making a positive contribution, partly to attract new workers to the company, partly to better their public image. As I said in an earlier, people will sooner or later get an understanding that their job is meaningless, so, sooner or later the employees will realise that they are watering concrete but not flowers, However, it is very possible that a person is lured into a meaningless job due to some form of deception, and although it seems easy, it is usually not that easy to

leave a job and find a new one. Similarly, job openings that do not make a contribution often have extensive job descriptions, making it seem like important work that matters will be the output of the activity. Thirdly, there is an element that people have to pretend to display that they think that their work matters towards their managers, who often also know that it is meaningless, but would want their employees to think otherwise. Overall, meaningless positions often have an element of deception.

6.3 Intrinsic Violence of Meaningless Work

I want to argue that meaningless work is intrinsically bad because it treats human beings, particularly their innate energy, with inadequate respect. To make this argument, I rely on non-consequential ethics (Kamm, 2013). I do not think that the rightness or wrongness of meaningless work can be determined solely by the goodness or badness of the outcome. Most scholars of meaningless work say that the wrongness of meaningless work is in its harms. Yeoman (2014) says that the problem with meaningless work is that it harms the ability of workers to live meaningfully in their private lives. I develop an argument that is not about the consequences of meaningless work.

My argument has several important assumptions and building blocks. An important building block of the argument is the idea of innate energy developed in the previous chapter. I believe this energy is inherently valuable. This energy is part of who human beings are and should be given adequate respect while being used. It is being used when the person is undertaking some form of action. Thirdly, I do think that work is an important place for contributive action. I do not think that work is the only place to act towards something that makes a contribution beyond the individual. However, I do think that work has a social function and social definition, within which people expect to make a contribution through their work. I

am not saying that everyone expects to contribute maximally given their abilities, nor am I saying that work is the only place for making a contribution and having an effect on the world. However, I do think that people expect that while at work, their energy will contribute to something at least somewhat valuable and useful. I do think that people expect that they will use their energy in a somewhat productive and contributive way at work, and that their actions will contribute to something. Therefore, I see the workplace as a place where people expect to use their energy in a productive and contributive way. Additionally, at work, most employees perform tasks with specific instructions and reasons given to them by a superior. Therefore, people need to apply their energy at work, and the work environment reinforces the expectation towards contribution. I do not think that the work environment in a meaningful or meaningless job is drastically different within the same sector, so the above description applies to both. The social role of work and the way it creates an expectation in people is important for my argument to the extent that it creates an expectation in people on how to use their energy. I aimed to show that people expect to use their energy, *inter alia*, to contribute. However, even if this expectation does not exist, and people go to work without any expectation of contribution and do meaningless tasks, my argument still stands to the extent that they will use their energy meaninglessly.

Having defined some of the terms I am using, I will move on to the argument. I am building this argument by stating it and then explaining the controversial elements of the argument. My argument is that meaningless work is intrinsically bad. Intrinsically bad means that it is bad not because of the harms it causes to the person that affects the person's life outside of work, but the practice of meaningless, non-contributive work is bad because of its nature. What do I mean by the nature of meaningless work? Its nature is that it uses people's energy only instrumentally, only as a means towards something. Using a person's energy only instrumentally is bad because this is not how it is supposed to be. This is not how it is supposed

to be because people's energy is innate to them, it is part of them, it is valuable and using it as an instrument means not giving adequate respect to the energy and therefore to the people. To expand this point, using a person's energy only instrumentally means that people's energy is made to flow in a direction that does not bring any intrinsic value to the person. In the case of work, as I outlined in the fifth chapter, people have an innate desire towards contribution. If the work makes a contribution, their energy is used in a way that fulfils one of their innate desires, which is intrinsically valuable to people.

Here I want to make a note on the following question. Can people use their own energy instrumentally? From a non-consequentialist, ethical point of view, it can be objectionable for a person to use their energy only instrumentally. Because this means they are using part of themselves only as an instrument. However, pushing another person to use their energy only instrumentally is qualitatively much worse and can be considered a violation of that person's energy and a violation of that person.

As I outlined above with the bucket examples, there can be several structural factors that push people towards meaningless jobs. Further, it is important to note that the employer-employee relationship is almost always deeply unequal. The employee has to earn money to survive, and to that extent, depends on the will of the employer.

A critique of the argument could be that what if people work for other goods? Gheaus and Herzog (2016) outline four benefits of work, only one of which is contribution. What if people go to work and want their energy to be channelled towards gaining social recognition or esteem, or to get a community and achieve excellence? I think it is possible that this is very important for a worker; however, I think that the main focus of work is the activity in itself. That is the central point. Community esteem or mastery may be secondary benefits of work,

but I do think that the central goal toward which the person channels their central energy is on contribution and the impact of the work.

With this in mind, I am well aware of the many limitations of this argument. Firstly, arguably it overly relies on the role of work. Because I assume that work people want to channel their productive energy. I think this is a realistic assumption but certainly a limiting one, as it could be pointed out by a reader of Gheaus and Herzog (2016). Further, I operate under a very strong ethical framework that sees wrong in actions that only derive instrumental value. I am aware that in real life people often do many things that are instrumental. Thirdly, I operate under a sufficientarian perfectionist framework, arguing that at least some level of meaning and contribution should be made it one's energy.

Overall, what I aimed to argue is that non-contributive can be seen as an intrinsic violation of the employee, to the extent that it does not allow the employee to channel their essential energy towards something that has intrinsic value. This can be seen as a waste of a person's energy. Further, I have outlined several structural factors that can push people towards meaningless work, even if none of these are a direct restriction of the freedom of an individual. Therefore, I aimed to outline another argument for the negativeness of meaningless work and because of my characterisation of the labour market through the water bucket thought experiment, I call for a politics of meaningfulness.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in this paper, I have developed a new understanding of (productive) energy and have argued that meaningless work when imposed is a violation of a person's productive essence. Which is new argument for the negativeness of meaningless work. With this in mind, I am well aware of the many limitations of this argument.

It is interesting to consider whether meaningless work has always been present in history and is it a socially necessary thing? I think it is not socially necessary, however, I do think that most societies had some form of meaningless work, because when one person gained access power, he or she aimed to abuse it and hired "flunkies", or other imperfections in the market or unjust outcomes enabled non-contributing work.

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