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## What is Meaningful Work? *Caleb Althorpe*

**Abstract:** This paper argues that two orthodox views of meaningful work—the subjective view and the autonomy view—are deficient. In their place is proposed the contributive view of meaningful work, which is constituted by work that is both complex and involves persons in its contributive aspect. These conditions are necessary due to the way work is inherently tied up with the idea of social contribution and the interdependencies between persons. This gives such features of the contributive view a distinct basis from those found in existent accounts of meaningful work.

**Keywords:** meaningful work, complex work, social contribution, autonomy, division of labour, workplace democracy

### 1. Introduction

While the normative weight of meaningful work has received much attention in recent years from political philosophers, far less attention has been placed on meaningful work itself as a concept. There is little argument among writers on what meaningful work actually is, and it often gets characterized as one of either two views that have come to be the orthodox understandings of the term—the subjective view and the autonomy view. The subjective view sees meaningful work as work from which persons derive feelings of subjective meaningfulness. The autonomy view sees it, primarily, as work which has a level of complexity that enables the development of a person's skills and individuality. But what exactly makes either of these views a particularly attractive account of meaningful work as a concept? Answers are rarely forthcoming from the meaningful work literature, where, for the most part, there is little defence over why one view of meaningful work is chosen over the other or why the view chosen is the best characterization of 'meaningful work.' More work needs to be done to delineate the idea of meaningful work from other types of work that might have normative weight, such as valuable work, fulfilling work, unalienating work, and so on. This paper aims to make good this gap by defending a particular

account of meaningful work that focuses not only on subjective feelings and complexity in the work process, but also the extent which it involves an individual in the contributive aspect of the work. While this paper is concerned with what constitutes meaningful work, its conclusion does have implications for those arguments on its normative weight. By involving the idea of contribution, it opens the door for a very different kind of defence of meaningful work's normative weight that what is currently offered by its proponents.

I begin by arguing that while both the subjective and autonomy views of meaningful work capture part of what makes a work process meaningful, taken either alone or together they are insufficient. The issue with the subjective view is that it is vulnerable to the problem of adaptive preferences (§2), and while the autonomy view does better, taken by itself it fails to provide a convincing explanation as to what makes a meaningful work activity distinct from a claim about meaningful activities more generally (§3). I then turn to the positive argument and argue that given there is utility in understanding work in terms of a contributive activity, the idea of contribution needs to feature in what makes it meaningful (§4). In particular, I argue that meaningful work involves the person doing it in its contributive aspect—i.e., it involves them in questions and decisions over the details of how the work is contributing, to whom it contributes, and so forth (§4.1). All in all, I argue that meaningful work is best understood when its two constitutive conditions—complexity and contribution—are treated not as distinct requirements but taken as mutually supportive (§5).

## **2. The Subjective View**

The view of meaningful work I will defend is pluralist in the sense that it combines subjective feelings of meaningfulness with objective features of the work process.<sup>1</sup> As such, it is important at the outset to outline not only the underlying rationale for the inclusion of subjective feelings of meaningfulness, but also why such feelings cannot be sufficient and certain objective conditions of meaningful work are also required. I will consider each of these in turn.

Any convincing account of meaningful work seems to require the inclusion of subjective feelings of meaningfulness, as to call an activity meaningful suggests a certain act of interpretation or assignment of value on the part of an individual—a recognition of its meaningfulness. To say some activity is meaningful is to imply that at some point, it is meaningful *for* somebody, who identifies with it and incorporates it into some overarching point of view or outlook. Furthermore, when it comes to assessing whether an activity is meaningful, it is often the perspective of the person actually undertaking the activity that seems most relevant. This we can call the first-person perspective.<sup>2</sup> Applying the first-person perspective to the topic that is our concern here, meaningful work is work that is meaningful for the worker.

The combination of the first-person perspective and the necessity of subjective feelings, naturally leads to the ‘subjective view’ of meaningful work—meaningful work is work that is simply believed to be meaningful by the person doing it. Yet what I am calling the ‘subjective view’ goes one step further and says that subjective feelings of meaning are sufficient in classifying meaningful work. The subjective view is endorsed by much of the social science and

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<sup>1</sup> In this the account is similar to recent accounts of the goods of work, e.g. Gheaus and Herzog 2014; Clark 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper I limit the discussion to this first-person perspective (which includes but is not limited to subjective feelings of meaningfulness). In relation to the subjective view then, I leave aside the possibility that work which is felt as subjectively meaningful by others, but not the person doing it, could also be seen as ‘meaningful work.’

organizational studies research on meaningful work, where meaningful work is described and analyzed purely in terms of the psychological state of the person carrying it out (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010: 95; Schnell, Höge, and Pollet 2013). And while I am unaware of any political philosophers who defend the *normative* weight of the subjective view of meaningful work, a number of writers do, in the process of defending some other sort of work's normative value, view, or at the very least imply, meaningful work as being at bottom a subjective concept, determined by subjective feelings of meaningfulness alone.<sup>3</sup>

The subjective view has intuitive appeal through the way it brings in a level of relativity to what counts as meaningful work. For instance, while the work of a tax accountant might be meaningful for them, it will unlikely be meaningful for a professional surfer, and so on, given persons' different aims and values. However, I will argue that the subjective view of meaningful work is false. This is because, while incorporating first-person attitudes is necessary in a theory of meaningful work, the view's claim of such attitudes' sufficiency leads to problems with the view. The strategy here is to show that the subjective view leads to a *reductio*. When meaningful work is equated to meaningfulness in and from work, it leads to several counterintuitive prescriptions of what could count as meaningful work.

## 2.1 Drudgery, Pointless Work, and Adaptive Preferences

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, Adrian Walsh (1994: 247) distinguishes between meaningful work "in the distributive sense" and meaningful work as a concept "in the general sense." And while Walsh understands the former in terms of eudaimonian activity, he recognizes that for the latter there will be a fundamental diversity given it is subject-dependent and based on internal psychological factors. Walsh's argument concedes that in terms of an account of meaningful work by itself (and so issues of distributive justice aside), "whether or not a person's work is meaningful is entirely determined by their subjective attitudes towards it" (238, also 244). Similarly, in a defence of Marxian unalienated labour, Jan Kandiyali (2020: 558) claims that the application of the term "meaningful work" to Marx can be misleading given that "unalienated labour is not just whatever one happens to find subjectively meaningful."

There are many jobs in contemporary economies that, as a result of scientific management and the detailed horizontal division of labour,<sup>4</sup> are forms of drudgery which are excessively mundane and repetitive (see Braverman 1974: 70–123; Bowles, Edwards, and Roosevelt 2005: 328–30). One example of such drudgery would be the role of a ‘picker’ in Amazon’s warehouses, whose job is to repeat the same task—pick item, scan item, place in bin—for the entire shift (McClelland 2012; Bloodworth 2018). Or consider jobs that are simply pointless, insofar as they do not contribute anything of value to anyone at all. These are the jobs that the anthropologist David Graeber terms ‘bullshit jobs,’ examples being security guards who sit in empty rooms in museums for weeks on end, or office workers undertaking useless tasks (such as making mind maps nobody will see) (see, respectively, Graeber 2018: 95 & 129–30).

The objective features of these two sets of jobs—drudgery and pointless work—make them (taken together) analogous to an exemplar of unmeaningful activity, Sisyphus’ fate in Greek mythology. Sisyphus’ fate was to constantly roll a boulder up a mountain only for it to roll back down again when he reached the top, requiring him to walk back down and start again, ad infinitum. Just like Sisyphus’ day is taken up with the same few movements with no prospects of change, so too is the day of the Amazon picker. And just like Sisyphus begins his day knowing at the end of his efforts the boulder will only roll back down again, so too do many workers start their shift knowing that they are not going to produce or do anything of value. Given then that they share the same core features, it does not seem too much of an abuse of language to call such jobs Sisyphean. And just like we might think that the activity of Sisyphus cannot be a

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this paper I use the term ‘detailed’ horizontal division of labour to differentiate the strict division of labour within a single organization from the social division of labour between distinct occupations and professions across society.

meaningful activity no matter how Sisyphus himself comes to think of it,<sup>5</sup> so too might we also think that drudgery and pointless work cannot be meaningful no matter how the persons doing the work feel about it. This is the *reductio* for the subjective view, as denying this seems the wrong conclusion to draw. It is not the way these workers feel that drives the intuition that their work is not ‘meaningful work,’ it is the nature of their work itself, its endless repetition of mind-numbing drudgery, or its pointlessness, that seems to discount it.

We might try to avoid this *reductio* by insisting that drudgery and pointless work could never be experienced as subjectively meaningful by those carrying them out. Yet such a reply ignores the way subjective feelings of meaningfulness are vulnerable to the problem of adaptive preferences.<sup>6</sup> It is not implausible that persons could—indeed they do—derive a sense of meaningfulness from either uncomplex drudgery or pointless work.

First, a subjective attitude of meaningfulness might be a result of intentional manipulation by those with power in companies, given how such an attitude can affect performance outcomes like productivity and engagement, reducing absenteeism, and so on. Much of the research in management and organizational studies on meaningful work (where the subjective view is dominant), has this goal front and center, where the ‘management of meaning’ is seen as a vital means to attain organizational goals (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010: 92–93, and the references there). Strategies range from implementing corporate euphemisms (at Amazon there are no bosses or managers because everyone is a ‘team member’ and there are giant messages

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<sup>5</sup> See Wolf 2010: 19–30 for an influential argument to this effect. My argument is only that understood as a *work* activity, Sisyphus’ fate seems to require more than subjective meaningfulness in order to be meaningful.

<sup>6</sup> Broadly understood, the idea of adaptive preferences is that given persons often adapt their preferences as a reasonable response to unfavourable circumstances, the subjective feelings of an individual cannot alone determine the wrongness of certain situations. See Nussbaum 2000: 111–66.

plastered on the walls such as ‘work hard, have fun, make history’) (Bloodworth 2018: 18), to using ‘transformational leadership’ to frame workers’ experiences to change the way they perceive the nature of their job (Piccolo and Colquitt 2006).

Jobs might also come to be seen as meaningful as a function of what the current alternative opportunity set is for workers, and the relative comparisons which are available to them. Knowing the poor conditions and treatment of workers, one might wonder how a person could ever decide to work at a place like Amazon. But this ignores the alternatives—even worse work, or no work at all. Working at a place like Amazon might be seen as subjectively meaningful simply because its conditions have become the standard of low wage work, and it is better than sitting at home worrying about how to pay the rent and keep the heat on. Alternatively, constructing some story of meaningfulness might simply be a palliative survival strategy just to get through the days (e.g., see Graeber 2018: 307).

These examples should give one pause in endorsing the subjective view, as to try and avoid the *reductio* by claiming that uncomplex drudgery or pointless work could never be experienced as subjectively meaningful ignores the reality faced by many workers in the economies of today. Unless then we bite the bullet and concede that Sisyphean work can be meaningful work, we should reject the subjective view. While meaningful work requires a subjective sense of meaningfulness from the worker, the argument here suggests it also requires objective conditions. The question then becomes what these conditions might be.

### **3. The Autonomy View**

I have argued that the objective features of at least one class of jobs—jobs that are uncomplex drudgery—exclude them from being properly considered meaningful work, no matter whether those working these jobs derive a sense of meaningfulness from them. This naturally leads to the second orthodox view of meaningful work—the autonomy view. Richard Arneson (1987: 522) provides a nice summary of the view: “[w]hat I am calling ‘meaningful work’ is work that is interesting, that calls for intelligence and initiative, and that is attached to a job that gives the worker considerable freedom to decide how the work is to be done and a democratic say over the character of the work process and the policies pursued by the employing enterprise.” As expressed here, the autonomy view sees meaningful work constituted by two objective features—a level of complexity that enables initiative and discretion on the part of the worker,<sup>7</sup> and democratic involvement such that workers have a level of decision-making making power over the work process. Clearly, it is the complexity aspect of the autonomy view which allows it to exclude work resulting from the detailed horizontal division of labour, such as the Amazon picker, as potential forms of meaningful work.

The democratic and complexity aspects of the autonomy view reflect the fact that is both the overarching organizational structure of the work, and the content of the work itself, that are relevant to the autonomy of the worker being supported. The democratic condition is focusing on how workers exercising considerable decision-making power seems necessary for a work process to be seen as the result of their self-determined and unconstrained choices (Esheté 1974: 43; Schwartz 1982: 639–42; Arneson 1987: 522; Breen 2019: 59–61). The complexity aspect, meanwhile, is highlighting that when the work process fails to be reasonably complex, it leaves

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<sup>7</sup> Emphasizing complexity in the work process does not mean a focus on ‘intellectual’ work at the exclusion of ‘manual’ work. Manual and practical work can be very complex, requiring skill, adaptability, and planning. For some examples, see Rose 2004; Crawford 2009.

the worker with no room to use their own discretion in deciding for themselves how to carry it out.<sup>8</sup> The narrow functions of the work process are constraining in themselves (Esheté 1974: 42; Nozick 1974: 247; Schwartz 1982: 639–42; Hsieh 2008: 76–79; Moriarty 2009: 448). Furthermore, some writers on meaningful work also link complexity in the work process to a slightly more substantive idea of autonomy,<sup>9</sup> focusing on how the developed skills and talents required in complex work are necessary for a level of personal agency, initiative, and individuality in the work. For this idea of autonomy, complexity allows a person’s work to become self-determined and ‘theirs’ not only through the way it is a result of their own choices, but also insofar as it enables and is dependent on their own individual capacities and abilities (Schwartz 1982: 635–638; Attfield 1984: 143; Roessler 2012: 85–91; Yeoman 2014: 238–39).<sup>10</sup>

The autonomy view of meaningful work is the dominant understanding of meaningful work within political philosophy, where it is endorsed both by those who think it has normative weight, and those who don’t.<sup>11</sup> In this paper I focus primarily on the complexity aspect of the autonomy view, for two reasons. First, while complexity is generally seen as an inherent component of meaningful work, not all writers see democratization as strictly necessary (e.g., Hsieh 2008; Roessler 2012: 85). Second, it is the way complex work and its connection to

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<sup>8</sup> Two stipulations are in order here. One, given work is tied to the achievement of some end, the discretion complex work affords will still have limits (a surgeon might kill their patient if they go too rogue). And two, complexity should not be understood in a maximizing way where its increase automatically affords the worker more autonomy—work that is too complex is simply overwhelming (only the very talented are able to exercise discretion in cutting-edge theoretical physics). Nevertheless, there is still a qualitative difference between these more natural limits to autonomy through complex work, and drudgery’s complete occlusion of autonomy and discretion in work.

<sup>9</sup> A different characterization of meaningful work in terms of ‘thin’ or ‘thick’ autonomy is given by Hsieh 2008: 76–77.

<sup>10</sup> Many writers then make the further point that as work has such a dominant place in many persons’ lives, the skills and capacities developed in complex work are then crucial for the development of a person’s capacity for autonomy generally. For some examples, see: Schwartz 1982: 637–38; Hsieh 2008: 77–79; Roessler 2012: 76–85; Yeoman 2014: 238–39.

<sup>11</sup> For the latter, see: Nozick 1974: 246–50; Arneson 1987; Arneson 1990; Kymlicka 2002: 190–95. The remaining references in the above paragraph form the other side of this debate.

discretion and autonomy can be tied to the first-person perspective that I think makes it especially relevant to work being meaningful.<sup>12</sup> To say meaningful work requires the inclusion of a first-person perspective leaves space for more than subjective feelings in the account and is consistent with a focus on how the features of work influence and affect the objective actions and states of the individual persons doing the work, and the things such features enable or inhibit them to do or to be.

Surprisingly, the connection between complex work and meaningful work is often taken for granted, and in the absence of an explanation one wonders why writers employ the term meaningful work at all.<sup>13</sup> What is it then about complex work that connects it to the first-person perspective in a way that makes it meaningful? The key, I argue, is the way the discretion afforded by complex work enables the work to be engaging for the person doing it, such that it relies on their own agency and the development of their individual skills, talents, and capacities, all of which are distinct from the skills and talents required of other persons in other forms of work. This allows both the person undertaking it, and others, to recognize and identify the work as ‘their’ work, a result of their own agency, in a way that is not possible for work that is simple drudgery (even if such drudgery occurs within a democratically organized firm). It is this consequence of complex work that provides the rationale for it being meaningful. As outlined earlier, for work to be meaningful it must be meaningful for somebody. The issue with uncomplex drudgery, with the way it precludes any sort of development or initiative in the worker, is that it takes the somebody—the individual—out of the equation.

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<sup>12</sup> While I do think there is space for workplace democracy within the idea of meaningful work, I argue later (§4.1) that this is best derived from the idea of contribution, not autonomy.

<sup>13</sup> Exceptions are Attfield 1984: 143; Roessler 2012: 86–88. For accounts that emphasize the connection between complex work, autonomy, and the development of skills and talents, without relying on ‘meaningful work,’ see Taylor 2004; Arnold 2012.

So far so good for the autonomy view, but is it enough? What about the other type of work that seems equally unmeaningful—pointless work? The prevalence of David Graeber’s bullshit jobs suggest that there is no guarantee that complex work won’t be pointless. We do not want to say that a worker whose job is to make pointless mind maps has meaningful work, no matter how much complexity and skill is required in their construction. Here insisting on work’s complexity (even in combination with subjective meaningfulness) does not seem to fully capture what might make work meaningful, some other sort of objective feature seems required. My claim is that the example of pointless work suggests that the idea of *contribution* needs to also feature in an account of meaningful work.

### **3.1 The Disjointed Approach**

Before elaborating on exactly how I think contribution can feature in the account of meaningful work, I will first respond to a reply to this argument about autonomous or complex work being insufficient for work to be meaningful. The reply accepts that it may well not be possible for pointless work that does not contribute, like Graeber’s bullshit jobs, to be meaningful work, but denies that this should lead to any additional conditions in the account. To make this move, all we need to do is say that what is pumping our intuitions in the above case is simply that work which is pointless and does not contribute is not really ‘work’ at all.

This reply relies on what we can call a disjointed approach to meaningful work—disjointed because it uses one condition to delineate work from nonwork activities and then another condition to delineate meaningful from unmeaningful work. If a proponent of the autonomy view

endorses such a disjointed approach, then they can say that contribution is only related to meaningful work as a philosophically uninteresting precondition. It would be like saying a condition of a meaningful book is that it first has a front and back cover.

The truth in this move is its recognition of the connection between work and contribution (I rely upon, and defend, such a connection in §4). However, to adopt the disjointed approach where, say, it is work's complexity alone that makes it meaningful (given its effects on autonomy), leads to an account that in the absence of argument is unclear about what makes meaningful work any different to meaningful activity more generally. And this, I argue, is problematic. Surely meaningful work needs to be conceptualized as more than meaningful activity that *just so happens* to occur at work.

For example, the disjointed approach regards the work of a car mechanic and someone just tinkering with old engines on the weekends as both being potentially meaningful in exactly the same way (given both activities seem sufficiently complex). The work of the mechanic is only called meaningful *work* because their activity contributes to others. The issue with this however is that it seems to miss the way that the different contexts in which these activities occur (the professional is fixing an engine for somebody else while the enthusiast is fixing an engine for themselves) do not seem trivial in deciding what might make the respective activities meaningful. If we think about other activities, their nature seems highly relevant in any deliberations over what might make them meaningful. For example, we might think that a meaningful friendship is one that is based on traits such as trust and empathy, but these traits are connected to a friendship in the first place, and not just to the idea of meaningful by itself. What

makes work meaningful is going to be different to what makes a friendship meaningful, or a marriage meaningful, or sports rivalries meaningful, and so on. However, the disjointed approach to meaningful work seems to run into something of a boundary problem here, insofar as the features which are taken as relevant (complexity and self-determined choices) are not unique to the work activity.

My argument is not meant to deny that in some contexts speaking of the meaningfulness of activities in a general sense might be more appropriate. For instance, there is rich philosophical discussion on what we could call questions of ‘fundamental meaning,’ which aim to investigate what might make activities (or more ambitiously life) in general meaningful.<sup>14</sup> But insofar as the discussion is on meaningful *work*, it seems best to try and avoid these questions. If one is concerned with what makes activities meaningful in and of themselves, it would be arbitrary, and certainly quite odd, to only focus the discussion on what makes work meaningful. I differ then from the methodology adopted in accounts which explicitly treat meaningful work in terms of fundamental meaning. For instance, Andrea Veltman (2016: 105) argues that “[t]he question of what makes work meaningful is indeed of the same stock as the more general question of what makes life meaningful.”<sup>15</sup> I disagree. I do not think the question of what makes work meaningful necessarily needs to be “of the same stock” as the question of what makes life meaningful; we can try to sidestep such claims of ‘fundamental meaning’ altogether.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See note 5.

<sup>15</sup> See also Yeoman 2014, who derives an account of meaningful work from a larger account of the fundamental human need for meaning in life.

<sup>16</sup> A source of skepticism about such sidestepping might be that if, as I will argue, the idea of contribution plays an integral part in the account of meaningful work, then once we start unpacking what it means to ‘contribute’ certain questions of fundamental meaning will inevitably crop up (e.g., related to considerations regarding our social condition as a species defined by an inherent interdependence). However, one aim of the subsequent section is to show that this is not necessarily the case. A robust analysis of the idea of contribution can be made without falling

I also do not deny that any account of meaningful work is going to lead to interesting questions about its relation to an account of fundamental meaning. But it still seems logically possible, and worthy of pursuit, to develop a rigorous account of what might make work *itself* meaningful, without embedding the concept within a larger theory of fundamental meaning. Indeed, we do this with other activities all the time. When LeBron James makes a consequential basket in the NBA playoffs, we would be hard-pressed to deny that he has made a meaningful basketball play. But we can say this without coming to any judgement on the role of the play in some theory of fundamental meaning. Whether the play is meaningful as a basketball play, or meaningful ‘fundamentally,’ are separate questions. Why should we not think the same point applies to work?

For most proponents of the autonomy view, meaningful work is understood in its own terms without any claims being brought in about ‘meaning’ in and of itself. Yet, in the absence of argument, it is not immediately obvious why this should be the default position. The preceding discussion, then, can be seen as providing an argument to *justify* this exclusion of fundamental meaning from accounts of meaningful work. As far as I can see a proponent of the autonomy view is then left with two options, either concede that the view potentially classifies examples of pointless work, such as Graeber’s bullshit jobs, as meaningful work, or accept that the idea of contribution needs to feature in what makes work meaningful.

#### **4. The Contributive View**

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back onto claims at the level of fundamental meaning, and such an analysis can still lead to a rich and convincing account of meaningful work.

The reality of pointless work suggests that an account of meaningful work requires not only the conditions required for the work to be self-determined and autonomy-enabling, but also what I am calling a contribution, or contributive, condition. Just as the Amazon picker naturally led to the autonomy view and its emphasis on complexity, I will argue that the examples of pointless work lead to the contribution condition of meaningful work.

While such a focus is rare, there are several writers who claim that details about a work activity's contribution to others, or its 'social worth,' is relevant to whether that work is meaningful (Veltman 2016: 124–31; Breen 2019: 53), or if not to it being meaningful to it having normative weight (Gomberg 2007: 66–74; Gheaus and Herzog 2016: 75–76; Brudney 2018; Kandiyali 2020). The connection here might first appear trivially obvious—if a worker's mind maps actually contributed to some end or purpose, then the work becomes more meaningful. However, the way the example of pointless work leads to the contribution condition of meaningful work is not as straightforward as it first appears. For a convincing account, we need to take some extra steps and give more argumentation. The rest of the paper is devoted to that task.

While in the previous section I argued that the 'meaningful' in meaningful work needs to be understood in relation to the nature of work as an activity, I will now defend the premise that work can be understood in some sense as a contributive activity. It has been argued that one major feature of work that separates it from other activities is its inherent instrumentality, and how it requires a sustained effort directed at the achievement of some task or end outside of (or in addition to) the satisfactions of the activity alone (Becker 1980: 44). I find this a useful starting point as it seems to nicely capture how work is inherently different from play or leisure,

wherein it is explicitly the satisfaction of the activities alone which explain why they are done. However, without further refinement the idea of work as effort towards some end is overinclusive. A person making a ship in a bottle for their grandchild has a particular end and the activity requires much effort, and so on with many other obviously nonwork activities.

However, if we refine instrumentality by understanding work as activity that contributes to the needs and or wants of unassociated others, the account seems to do much better at capturing a set of activities that we would want to call 'work.' I add the stipulation of contribution to *unassociated* others as while some nonwork activities are self-focused, many others are not and do contribute to the needs and or wants of close connections (such as the above example of making a ship in a bottle for a grandchild).

By talking of contribution to *needs and or wants of others* I mean the following: activities that contribute to the successful carrying out of the aims and plans of others, insofar as such aims and plans meet a minimal standard of reasonableness. All I mean by the rider is that the content of a person's aims and plan of life meets uncontroversial standards of acceptable conduct between moral equals (does not harm or manipulate others, for example). In determining then whether an activity is indeed a work activity, what counts is assessing whether it is useful for other (unassociated) persons, given their particular circumstances, abilities, and plan of life. Activities could be a contribution either by providing some good or service that is useful to specific plans of life (the work of luthiers is useful to musicians and music buffs), or by being useful generally (the work of garbage collectors is useful to everyone). I characterize work as contribution in this way to capture the idea of work being an act of 'social contribution,' but in terms that are less

vague and opaque. If a person's work is a social contribution then at some point it must be useful for somebody else, albeit often indirectly.<sup>17</sup>

The account of contribution does not indiscriminately track subjective wants or preferences but relies on activities' objective utility to other persons given their plan of life. In cases where a person is mistaken about the facts of the matter, or has not properly considered the consequences of actions, the meeting of certain preferences might be ineffective as a means towards the achievement of their plans or, in extreme cases, could even be destructive of such plans. For example, according to the account presented here, if a person spends their paycheck gambling on slot machines and later comes to regret their decision in light of their overall plan of life, then in this case the casino owner has failed to provide an objective contribution. Furthermore, activities that are useful to aims that are plainly unreasonable are also not contributive in the way I understand it, even if they satisfy subjective wants. To use the same example, if the casino owner wanted slot machines merely to greedily exploit the addictions of the vulnerable, then the builder of the slot machines has also failed to provide an objective contribution through their selling of the machines to the owner. At the same time however, the account takes seriously the diversity of desires and aims between persons, given objective usefulness is understood only in relation to the standpoint of the recipient, and the content of their own plan of life. It is this combination of an objective element along with the taking of the aims and plans of individuals as primary, that explains why I talk of contribution to needs and or wants of others. For the account of

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<sup>17</sup> The idea of contribution as activity which is useful for persons given their aims and plans is not a claim about what is good for persons at the level of value theory. As I will outline there is merit in understanding work as an activity which has social utility, and to make sense of this idea seeing work as contributive activity in terms of its usefulness to the aims and plans of others is all we need.

contribution used here, what people *need* is partly contingent on what they actually *want* to do with their lives and the things they want to prioritize.

Conceptualizing work in these terms captures most of the activities defined by the employment relationship, which obviously need to be included under ‘work.’ The rationale here is simply the information function of the price mechanism, it is because people have had, or will have, their needs met by your activity that they are willing to pay. I say most of the activities of the labour market because, as we have seen, there will be some market activities that do not contribute to the successful carrying out of a person’s plan of life at all, or which contribute to plans of life that are plainly unreasonable. Yet this need not detract from the contributive view, as while such a view provides an underlying rationale as to why we want to call participation in the labour market ‘work,’ in doing so it highlights that there is utility in maintaining the distinction between the activity of ‘work’ and the thing of a ‘job.’ This is the takeaway from studies like Graeber’s—in some jobs people aren’t really working at all.

But contribution to unassociated others also captures why certain activities that are unremunerated should still properly be classified as work. Take parenting as an example, while many of the activities one does as a parent that meet the needs of a child are going to be personal and affective such that it would be inappropriate to regard them as work, these are not the only sorts of activities involved. Parenting is also an act of social reproduction where one contributes to the development of traits and capacities of future public citizens, which is not only meeting the needs of the child (although they are this), but also contributing to eventually meeting the needs of unassociated others. Similar comments can I believe be made regarding other unpaid

activities (care work, volunteering, etc.) that we think should be classified as work. Such contribution is an objective feature of such activities, the particular reasons why they are unremunerated (such as societal devaluing of what is seen as ‘women’s work,’ or persons free riding on public goods) does not detract from this fact.

It seems reasonable then to see work as an activity that contributes to unassociated others. Work is activity that meets the needs of others, needs that are determined by the content of their particular aims and plan of life. Doing so allows the account to pick up on the idea of work as, in part, an interpersonal and social activity based on and reflecting the mutual, but often indirect, interdependencies of talent between persons. Work cannot be entirely ‘me time’ in the same way leisure and nonwork activities can – this is why a bullshit job comes across as oxymoronic, but not bullshit leisure.

#### **4.1 Involvement in Work’s Contributive Aspect**

Given I have argued that the ‘meaningful’ in meaningful work should be understood relative to the nature of work (§3.1), the consequence of the above argument on the connection between work and contribution is that the idea of contribution *should* feature in the idea of meaningful work. In this section I outline *how* I think the idea of contribution is best incorporated as a constitutive aspect of meaningful work.

The first thing to say is that the mere fact that through work one is contributing to the needs of unassociated others does not suffice for the contributive condition of meaningful work. If this were the case, given my argument that there is utility in understanding work as a contributive

activity, this would then mean that it would be difficult for any sort of work to not satisfy the contributive condition, and this would not make for a very useful inclusion in an account of meaningful work.

We can get around this problem however by recalling the first-person perspective implied by the idea of meaningful work—i.e., for work to be meaningful it must be meaningful for the person actually doing it. It is worth noting here that work which is highly contributive and vital to social reproduction could be extremely meaningful from a *social* perspective, despite, because it is drudgery, failing to count as meaningful from a *first-person* perspective (think of backbreaking food harvesting or dirty and repetitive sanitation work).<sup>18</sup> Of course, the overall social meaning of a person's work might play an important part in their subjective feelings of meaningfulness in the work (perhaps they identify with the good it serves). But, even if an individual worker was to derive such feelings of meaningfulness from contributive drudgery, the work would still fail to qualify (given the argument of §3) as properly 'meaningful work' from the first-person perspective. It still fails to provide the worker the necessary discretion to develop and deploy their individual skills and talents such that the work can be seen as 'their' work that results from their own agency.

How else then might work's contribution be linked to the first-person perspective? We could focus on how occupations from different sectors of the economy vary in their contribution (if they contribute at all), as a result of the nature of the product being produced or service being

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<sup>18</sup> While I think this is plausible, full consideration of what might constitute socially meaningful work lies outside this paper's scope. See note 2.

offered.<sup>19</sup> However, in this paper I try to avoid making these sorts of judgements on the nature of contribution or on what sort of work might contribute ‘more’ than others. This is why I characterize contribution as activity that meets the needs of persons given their particular aims and plans of life, without speaking much on the content of such aims (other than them meeting an undemanding baseline). The reason I employ this strategy is because while some answers are plainly obvious (a paramedic contributes more than a corrupt lobbyist, a parent contributes despite not being paid), such judgements over what types of work contribute more will quickly fall back on particular and contested ideas of value once we make more fine-grained distinctions. Does a professional surfer or a tax accountant contribute more to society? People will reasonably disagree about this and the multitude of other such comparisons. This is not to say that such judgements about contribution cannot be made or are not worth pursuing, but only that such judgements seem inappropriate within an account of meaningful work given its inherent first-person perspective.

An alternative way to link contribution to the first-person perspective is to focus on the position and involvement of an individual in the contributive aspect of their work, a position that often seems to be taken for granted by those accounts focusing on the nature of the contribution. By the ‘contributive aspect’ of a work activity, I mean the portion of a work process that is concerned with the details and specifics of how the work actually does meet the needs of unassociated others by contributing to them successfully carrying out their aims and plan of life.

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<sup>19</sup> This is the approach taken by accounts within the meaningful work literature that do consider the relevance of work’s social worth. For instance, see: Gheaus and Herzog 2016: 75–76; Veltman 2016: 124–131. Somewhat similarly, Paul Gomberg 2007: 69–74, characterizes the social esteem one earns through making a social contribution through work as being sensitive to only the complexity of that contribution.

It is the portion of the work process that is involved with questions such as ‘why this product over that product?’, ‘who are the people that will most benefit from this activity?’, and the like.

The basis of including involvement in the contributive aspect of work in the account of meaningful work derives from what we take work to be—an activity that contributes to others. The idea is that it is only when a person is involved in a work process’ contributive aspect that there can be an alignment between the individual objective features of a person’s work and the characterization of work more generally as a contributive activity. Such involvement with the details of contribution enables a person to be acquainted, integrated, and engaged with the particular needs their work meets, enabling their work to be constituted by a more direct connectedness with the persons who benefit from it in some way. Without such involvement the work process, from the perspective of the individual, is disconnected from what makes it work in the first place.

Not all types of work involve persons in this contributive aspect to the same degree. Consider the following:

“It’s hard to take pride in a bridge you’re never gonna cross, in a door you’re never gonna open. You’re mass-producing things and you never see the end result of it. (Muses) I worked for a trucker one time. And I got this tiny satisfaction when I loaded a truck. At least I could see the truck depart loaded. In a steel mill, forget it. You don’t see where nothing goes.” (Terkel 1974: 1–2)

“Most people at the bank didn’t know why they were doing what they were doing. They would say that they are only supposed to log into this one system and select one menu option and type certain things in. They didn’t know why.” (Graeber 2018: 173)

In each of these cases the issue is not that the work is not contributing at all, but that the person in their role has been disconnected from the details pertaining to its contribution, there is a large distance between the person and the outcome of their labour—their contribution is not palpable. This makes such work very different to many other kinds of work, where details about the work's contribution are front and center for the person carrying it out (think here of the work undertaken by a parent, or a self-employed craftsman, or a garbage collector).

What sort of factors then influence the extent to which a person is involved in the contributive aspect of their work? We might first think that it is the detailed horizontal division of labour, with the way it restricts workers to narrow functions, that brings about a disconnect between the worker and details over how the outcome of their labour contributes to others (Braverman 1974: 125). This is what is occurring in the above example of the bank worker, their being limited to a small set of functions precludes their involvement with the contributive aspect of the work. Contrast this with, say, a skilled car mechanic in a workshop who repairs a customer's car through a series of complex tasks over which they have discretion. For the mechanic, the nature of their contribution is clear.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that complexity and discretion in the work process might not only be relevant to it being meaningful through the way it enables autonomy and individualization in the work, but also through the way it enables a greater palpable involvement in its contributive aspect.

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<sup>20</sup> Trends in work organization away from Taylorism and towards 'team production' (where worker groups are given discretion and fragmented tasks are replaced with jobs that are more complex and larger in scope), have been shown to give workers a more intimate understanding of the overall production process and how their work contributes to the larger organizational output. For examples in the automotive sector, see Berggren 1993.

However, focusing on the complexity of work does not seem to guarantee involvement in the contributive aspect of all types of work. In the operation of modern complex economies, the social division of labour across and between occupations means that many social contributions are not only the result of the skills of a single individual, but the different and in some ways complementary talents of several. For example, if we return to the skilled car mechanic, even if they are a master with decades of experience there are still likely certain jobs that they simply cannot do. If, say, a car had a damaged piston inside the engine, the mechanic would likely send it off to a specialist whose expertise is fixing those particular engines. As such, for the mechanic and the specialist their work is now only one part of a larger process, where it is the totality of which that ends up contributing to others. I do not think the social division of labour in this simple example influences to any meaningful extent the involvement of either the mechanic or the specialist in the contributive aspect of their work. However, I do think the example has heuristic value if we generalize out to consider the social division of labour that exists in economies around us.

Indeed, I argue that there is one class of work where there *does* seem to be a potential danger of workers being disconnected from the contributive aspect of their work to an extent that becomes relevant to an account of meaningful work—work within firms that are large and complex. These firms contain within them a significant degree of specialization across a diverse set of roles. Large banks, to take just one example, employ data scientists, lawyers, accountants, consultants, analysts, and so on. While these jobs are surely highly complex and give workers much discretion in how to carry them out, the diversity within the firm (as well as simply its sheer size) brings in the potential for the actual way a worker's labour contributes to meeting the needs of

others to be far less palpable. This means that for these workers, despite their work being complex and engaging there is the potential that, to use the words of the aforementioned steel mill worker, they “don’t see where nothing goes.”

Does this mean prospects for meaningful work are simply precluded for those who work in large complex firms? No, but it does suggest is that the *organizational form* of firms (especially when they are large and complex) might be relevant to the question of what might make work meaningful within them. By themselves there is nothing wrong with firms from the perspective of meaningful work as, if anything, the way they exploit the social division of labour allows individuals to contribute to a greater set of needs than if they were independent market actors. However, when firms are organized hierarchically certain aspects of the work process, aspects that are directly related to the contributive aspect of the firm, are often under the exclusive control of high-level managers and executives.<sup>21</sup> I have in mind here not so much those decisions pertaining to the work process itself, but the decisions relating to the *externally-oriented strategic* decisions of the enterprise, i.e., decisions pertaining to the overarching goals and end of the firm.<sup>22</sup> These are the sorts of decisions that bear on, for instance, the markets in which the firm will operate, or the ways in which the firm decides to respond to consumer demand. As such, these decisions are directly concerned with the social contributions and consequences of a firm’s activity, encompassing details regarding the larger role of the firm’s work, how it is

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<sup>21</sup> It goes without saying that the reason firms are in actuality often organized vertically, is because such an organization is more efficient. But all that shows is that the determinants of maximally efficient work and meaningful work might sometimes be in tension, and this should hardly be surprising. The brutally repetitive and monotonous conditions in Amazon warehouses are based on efficiency too.

<sup>22</sup> Here I am (roughly) following both Bernstein 1976: 493, and Arnold 2017: 113, on the different kinds of organizational decision-making available within a firm.

situated in relation to other contributive firms and social institutions, the kinds of persons it benefits, the nature of how it meets needs, and so on.

What I propose is that changing the structural organization of large and complex firms from one of vertical hierarchy to one of shared involvement, at least in relation to these kinds of strategic decisions, might make the social contribution of the firm far more palpable for many of its workers. Democratic organization might act as something of a corrective to the disconnect the complex social division of labour can bring in between the day-to-day work of an employee and the persons who benefit from it.<sup>23</sup>

It is worth emphasizing that the point here is not just epistemic. Workplace democracy is not relevant to an account of meaningful work only through its capacity to help workers understand the contributions made by the firm. The point, rather, is that in certain contexts workplace democracy can bring about an objective change to the nature of a person's work that allows it to align more closely with the characterization of work as a contributive activity, enabling them to be more integrated and engaged with the particular needs their work meets. By actively involving workers in the externally-oriented decisions of a firm, workplace democracy directly integrates decisions determining the nature and kind of contribution being made by the firm into their ordinary work process. This is why having higher-ups in large and complex firms simply tell workers about their contribution would not suffice as a corrective to the disconnect between workers and the contributive aspect of their work to the same extent. Passively receiving such contributive details from bosses and managers won't necessarily make it palpable.

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<sup>23</sup> This is supported by research suggesting democratic organization, at least in the form of worker cooperatives, can connect workers more closely to the social effects of their work. See Rothschild-Witt and Witt, 1986.

Now, for at least some of the proponents of the autonomy view workplace democracy is a necessary component of meaningful work as it is only when workers have a say in the firm's policy and planning that their work be properly understood as self-determined and unconstrained.<sup>24</sup> However, this does not mean that the contributive aspect of meaningful work, and its implications for workplace democracy, simply fold into the autonomy dimension. This is because while I am not denying the link between workplace democracy and autonomy, I do not think this fully captures what it is about the vertical division of labour that can sometimes be problematic from the perspective of meaningful work. The value of democratic initiatives is not only found in the agency they give workers through procedural involvement in the firm's decisions, but also in the way they substantively change the set of decisions and details that constitute their work in the first place. And such a change to a person's work, from the perspective of the individual undertaking it, can go some way in transforming it into a more palpable contribution to the needs of others, enabling both the worker and others to regard their activity as properly reflecting the connectedness to others that the characterization of work requires.

The relevance of contribution to the account of meaningful work extends then beyond the question of just *whether* or *how much* a person's work is contributing to others, but also how they, as an individual person, are situated and *involved* with that contribution. Details pertaining to the contributive aspect of work are front and center for many workers, but for others—and I have suggested especially those workers who are employed in large and complex firms—there is an objective disconnect between their daily work and its role as a form of social contribution.

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<sup>24</sup> See §3.

This means that it will often not be enough to look at the contribution of a large and complex firm and, almost as a logical extension, assume that its employees who have jobs with complexity and discretion will have meaningful work. This misses how involvement in the contributive aspect of work is often unequally distributed.

### **5. Meaningful Work as a Person-Engaging Contribution**

I have argued that two popular accounts of meaningful work, the subjective view and the autonomy view, are both insufficient, and do not capture the heart of the concept. Meaningful work is more than work from which a person derives a subjective feeling of meaningfulness, and it is more than work whose complexity enables autonomy and discretion such that the work is person-engaging. I have argued that the work of an individual can only be properly meaningful when its features align with the larger characterization of work, which requires the individual to be substantially involved in the details over the contributive aspect of the work. For the view defended here, for work to be meaningful it needs to provide persons the opportunity to perform a ‘person-engaging contribution.’<sup>25</sup>

Seeing contribution as inherent in an account of meaningful work does not of course mean that involvement in the contributive aspect of work is the whole story. Involvement in such a process that is otherwise not in any way complex, either in a democratic firm or as an independent

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<sup>25</sup> This account of meaningful work as a person-engaging contribution to others has affinities to the kinds of work activities that Paul Gomberg thinks are vital to his account of ‘contributive justice.’ For Gomberg, justice requires the fairer distribution of the opportunity to engage in complex work, insofar as it is a means to “contribut[e] developed abilities to the good of others and [earn] esteem for those contributions” (2007: 66). And while Gomberg does not put his account in these terms, given the emphasis is on complexity and contribution in the labour process, we could understand the argument for contributive justice as pertaining to a fairer distribution of meaningful work. However, while Gomberg makes some brief comments on the vertical division of labour (77–80), he does not link it—as I have attempted to do here—with the contributive aspect of work and a worker’s distance to the outcome of their labour.

worker, does not make up for the autonomy deadening aspects of the drudgery, where the rote repetition not only lacks any expression of skill or talent but actively degrades it.<sup>26</sup> The objective features of complexity and contribution taken together are not the whole story either, as the subjective component requires the work to be felt as meaningful by the person doing it. While using subjective attitudes alone to determine what counts as meaningful work inevitably leads to problems of adaptive preferences, we cannot forget their necessity. For what it's worth, both the variety of skills and capabilities encouraged and fostered by work, along with an involvement in the positive impact of one's work on others, are two features of work that have been found to be strong predictors of subjective meaningfulness in quantitative studies (Fried and Ferris 1987; May, Gilson, and Harter 2004; Grant 2008; Schnell, Höge, and Pollet 2013), and they (or their absence) also constantly get raised in qualitative studies looking at what persons find meaningful or fulfilling in their work (Terkel 1974: 1–10, 57–59, 221–32, 256–65, 344–51, 675–83; Graeber 2018: 39–40, 55, 76–77, 98, 115–16).

To characterize meaningful work as a 'person-engaging contribution' aims to convey that the two objective conditions of meaningful work are not entirely discrete but are in fact mutually supportive. When work is complex such that it enables a greater level of autonomy and discretion, this bears on how the contributive aspect of work affects it being meaningful. When one is contributing to unassociated others through work which relies on individually developed skills and abilities, then it becomes more meaningful as it can be seen as 'their' contribution in a way that contribution through drudgery cannot. Complexity is important in the account of meaningful work not only because it makes an activity reflect a person's own unique skill and talents, but because it imbues a person's *contributive activity* with a more personal and

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<sup>26</sup> But see the discussion in §4.1

individualized element. When a mechanic spends all day troubleshooting a misfiring engine and eventually comes upon and fixes the issue, they have benefitted an unassociated person through a full display and deployment of their own skills. The same cannot be said of an Amazon picker, even if they were heavily involved in the work's contributive aspect. Theirs is a contribution that is easily replaceable, in the sense that any other human body could come in and serve the same function.

The inclusion of the contribution condition also bears on the way a work process' complexity affects the way it is meaningful. Indeed, the complexity of a work process and its contribution are, in one sense, not so disjointed as they might first appear. Taking a(n) (albeit somewhat idealized) conception of the interdependencies between persons, activity that is complex has an *inherent* contributive element. In the third part of *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls (1971: 529) states:

“It is a feature of human sociability that we are by ourselves but part of what we might be. We must look to others to attain the excellences that we must leave aside, or lack altogether.” Given this, “we cannot overcome, nor should we wish to, our dependence on others ... [persons] rely upon [others] to do things they could not have done, as well as things they might have done but did not.”<sup>27</sup>

These are interdependencies between persons not simply because we rely upon others to do the sorts of things that we don't want to do, or things we cannot be bothered doing, but because we need others to do the things that we simply cannot hope to achieve at all. Seeing meaningful work as a person-engaging contribution then, is saying that work can only be properly meaningful when it enables the sort of interdependencies expressed above by Rawls. Complex

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<sup>27</sup> I note in passing that in this passage Rawls makes mention of meaningful work as the means through which the division of labour can be overcome. What Rawls had in mind as 'meaningful work' and how it could find a place in the principles of justice, I leave aside. Although see the discussion in Moriarty 2009.

work is meaningful not only because the skills and development it requires enables discretion and autonomy on the part of the worker, but also because such skills are related to the ways in which persons rely and depend upon others. A person's complex work activity then has a natural connection to the idea of contributing to others, a contribution which reflects the chasm between what one individual alone can do and what persons taken together can do. As such, the view of meaningful work as a 'person-engaging contribution' is not only adding an additional contribution condition to the pre-existing autonomy view and its emphasis on complexity. It is also adapting the way in which complexity is seen as necessary for the account. It is when the objective features of an individual's work enable the person doing it, and others, to see it as their own unique contribution to the needs of other persons, that the work can be properly called meaningful.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that there is more to meaningful work than is generally thought. Rather than being merely any work that people believe is meaningful, or work that enables and relies upon a worker's autonomy and discretion (through either its complexity or democratization, or both), I have argued that we should understand meaningful work as a 'person-engaging contribution.' This characterization results from two things, the first-person perspective implied by the term 'meaningful,' and the importance of contribution implied by the term 'work.'

I will only briefly speculate on how the opportunity for the contributive view of meaningful work might be realized. The first thing to say is that given it seems to require the overcoming (or

at least the blurring) of the detailed horizontal and vertical divisions of labour within the market—divisions which are hallmarks of contemporary economies—increasing the opportunity for meaningful work would require meaningful change. For instance, a focus on reducing the detailed horizontal division of labour—to increase the opportunity for complex work—might underpin aims for a more equitable sharing of routine labour. Examples here include imbuing in each work role both complex and routine aspects (skilled professionals would still have to clean up, etc.) (Gomberg 2007: 75–91; Kandiyali 2020: 579–81), or, perhaps by having some sort of routine work requirement for persons before they enter a profession or higher education (Barry 1973: 162–65). An alternative could be the use of government levers—both positive and negative—to encourage companies to offer complex work, for example governments inserting job quality clauses into public procurement contracts (Findlay et al. 2017), or some negative points scheme that tracks the quality of work being offered (Barry 1973: 165). Moving to the vertical division of labour and the contributive aspect of work, potential policies range from those that aim to correct the inherent competitive disadvantages faced by democratically organized companies (tax reductions and so forth) (Jacob and Neuhäuser 2018: 941), to more ambitious efforts of institutionalizing a wider level of ‘Economic Democracy’ where the larger firms in a society are owned by society as a whole and controlled democratically by those who work there (Schweickart 2012). Furthermore, efforts to increase the opportunity for meaningful work *outside* of the market (given meaningful work encapsulates more than paid employment) might include government job programs (Rawls 2005: lvii), or perhaps even a guaranteed basic income and its reduction in the material necessity of paid work (Van Parijs 1991).

However, before diving into questions about the efficacy of this or that policy, there is a prior question lurking in the background. *Should* we aim to increase the opportunity for meaningful work? Is meaningful work a constitutive part of a theory of productive justice? The short answer is, I don't know. My argument is not entitled to give an answer here, as it does not speak on the normative weight of meaningful work and any such weight's implications for political philosophy. Focusing on the concept of meaningful work, however, is more than an exercise in semantics. The account implies that present arguments defending the normative weight of the autonomy view of meaningful work are not going to be best placed serving as arguments defending the contributive view—a view which I have argued provides the most convincing account of meaningful work as a concept. This suggests that for those of us who think justice should say something substantial about meaningful work, more work might need to be done.

It is worth mentioning however that given the account of meaningful work defended here is linked to what we take work to be as a distinct activity, an argument in support of its normative weight would potentially avoid the common, and powerful, objection that as the values persons achieve through meaningful work are (or could be) just as easily achieved in nonwork activity, any privileging of the work process would be unjustifiable (Arneson 1990: 1132). If an argument could be made that person-engaging contributions to unassociated others had normative weight, then this gives meaningful work a far less contingent normative foundation.

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