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Meaningful work, nonperfectionism, and reciprocity

Caleb Althorpe,¹ Department of Political Science, Western University, London, ON, Canada

Abstract

Any liberal argument for incorporating meaningful work within a theory of justice inherits a burden of proof to show why it does not fall to the objection that privileging the work process valorizes particular ideas about the good and thereby unfairly privileges some persons over others. Existing liberal defences of meaningful work, which rely on the formative effects of work in contemporary economies, have a limited scope of appeal and do not provide a convincing reply to the objection. The paper offers an alternative reply by arguing that meaningful work, understood as a person-engaging social contribution, is intimately connected through reciprocity to the fundamental political idea of society as a system of cooperation between free and equal participating members. This makes the opportunity to engage in meaningful work a social basis of self-respect.

Keywords: meaningful work; social contribution; self-respect; reciprocity; division of labour

¹ calthorp@uwo.ca

Introduction

In recent years there has been an uptick in theorizing about meaningful work by liberal political theorists and philosophers, and several defences have been offered as to why its promotion can be a legitimate aim of justice (Arnold, 2012; Breen, 2019; Hsieh, 2008; Moriarty, 2009; Roessler, 2012; Yeoman, 2014. For earlier accounts: Attfield, 1984; Esheté, 1974; Schwartz, 1982). Meaningful work is generally seen (with slight variation between writers) as a work process that is person-engaging¹ and, when located within a firm, grants workers some level of democratic involvement. By person-engaging, I mean work that offers scope for self-direction and enables acts of initiative, problem-solving, and skill deployment – it is work which gives agency to those carrying it out. By democratic involvement, I mean work that gives workers a real share in the managerial decisions of the enterprise. Arguments for meaningful work then are concerned with work's content and its organization, and if they go through might push back against the longstanding charge that liberal theories of justice are unsatisfactorily silent on questions of justice in production.

This however is a rather big if, as any argument for incorporating meaningful work within a liberal theory of justice inherits a burden of proof to show why it does not fall to what I call the nonperfectionist objection. The objection is the following: given the reasonable pluralism on conceptions of the good and the priorities accorded to values, ends, and pursuits – a pluralism which extends to questions over what (if anything) is valuable about work – to privilege meaningful work would be to valorize particular ideas about the good and thereby unfairly privilege some persons over others (Arneson, 1987, 1990; Kymlicka, 2002, pp. 72-73, 190-195; Nozick, 1974, pp. 246-250). The nonperfectionist objection arises from the political liberal

variant of liberal theory, which requires conceptions of justice to only be based on reasons all citizens could reasonably accept, despite their disagreement on philosophical, moral, and ethical questions.² After all, the constituent features of meaningful work do not begin to capture the entire set of goods people do or might want to obtain from their work, so treating meaningful work as special would seemingly disrespect the different legitimate choices persons make about what it is about work that is valuable. Arguing along these lines leads Richard Arneson (1987) to the conclusion that: ‘there is no more reason to uphold a special right to the option of meaningful work than to uphold a special right to the option of vacation trips to Bermuda or to any other good that people want, some more than others’ (p. 537; See also pp. 528-529, 1990, p. 1132).

But even ignoring disagreement about the content of work’s value, persons also disagree about its weight. Take Will Kymlicka’s argument against the promotion of unalienated labour (which is applicable here as Kymlicka refers to arguments on meaningful work in making his point). Kymlicka (2002) argues that: ‘while unalienated labour is surely better than alienated labour, these are not the only values involved. I may value unalienated labour, yet value other things even more, such as my leisure. I may prefer playing tennis to unalienated production’ (p. 191; See also Arneson, 1987, pp. 524-527; Nozick, 1974, pp. 248-249). For some people, the cost of unmeaningful work – doing unengaging drudgery where one is ordered about – might be a price worth paying given the priority they give to their nonwork pursuits.

This paper argues the nonperfectionist objection is not fatal, and offers a novel defence that promoting meaningful work can be consistent with the justificatory constraints imposed by political liberalism. The argument proceeds as follows. I first argue current attempts by liberal

theorists to meet the nonperfectionist objection, which focus on meaningful work's connection to all-purpose means given the place of work in contemporary liberal democracies, have a scope of appeal limited to nonideal conditions and they do not provide a convincing reply to the nonperfectionist objection in conditions of full justice. I then offer a recharacterization of what it is about work being person-engaging and offering democratic involvement that is relevant to work being meaningful, by claiming accounts of meaningful work must take work's role as an act of social contribution seriously. This paves the way for the argument in the final sections, where I claim meaningful work is intimately connected through reciprocity to a person's status as a free and equal participating member of society understood as a fair system of social cooperation. I then argue that this connection to a political conception of society results in the opportunity for meaningful work being a social basis of self-respect, and thus something which ought to be of concern to the political liberal. I conclude by commenting on how the opportunity for meaningful work might be weighed against other requirements of justice, and the sorts of institutional changes necessary for its fair realization.

Attempting to meet the nonperfectionist objection

Several recent liberal defences of meaningful work are based on how meaningful work is connected to all-purpose means given the dominant place of work in contemporary economies. This, so the argument goes, makes the promotion of meaningful work consistent with nonperfectionism as it's not valued because it's connected to a conception of the good, but because it's affiliated with goods persons would want regardless of whatever else they want. For instance, Jeffrey Moriarty (2009, pp. 446ff.) argues the opportunity for meaningful work is a social basis of self-respect given it enables persons to deploy their skills and talents in the

activities they undertake. While Samuel Arnold (2012) argues complex work cultivates the ‘internal resources’ of intelligence and virtuosity, resources which are all-purpose means given they ‘facilitate agency, and thus [are] attractive to citizens in light of their fundamental interest in being able to accomplish whatever ends they happen to have’ (p. 97).³

But it is the combining of work’s connection to all-purpose means with an empirical claim about the effects of work on persons that completes the response to the nonperfectionist objection. As Beate Roessler (2012) puts it in her defence of meaningful work: ‘the work we do, and its organizational form, has an influence on how we live, on who we are, and how we see ourselves’ (p. 82). This is the ‘formative thesis’: given persons are often required to work eight, ten, or even twelve-hour days, the values that are achieved in work (or occluded by it) bleed into the other realms of their lives. Relying on the ‘formative thesis,’ is ubiquitous in defences of meaningful work but also in arguments relating to other nonpecuniary goods affiliated with work (Arnold, 2012, p. 102; Gheaus & Herzog, 2016; Hsieh, 2008, pp. 77-79; Moriarty, 2009, pp. 452-453; Roessler, 2012, pp. 76-85; Schwartz, 1982, pp. 636-639; Shiffrin, 2004, pp. 1666-1667; Yeoman, 2014, pp. 237-240).

Invoking the formative thesis is to reject that the all-purpose means affiliated with meaningful work might be just as readily attainable elsewhere (as argued by Arneson, 1990, p. 1132). This is then why, the argument goes, it is legitimate to promote meaningful work because when work is not meaningful – i.e., when it is uncomplex drudgery where one is ordered about – this affects a person’s ability to engage in other pursuits that might provide all-purpose means, such as the social bases of self-respect, or the internal resources of intelligence and virtuosity.

These arguments reject the equation of the goods affiliated with meaningful work to things like preferences for tropical holiday destinations or proclivities for tennis, as seeing them in this way fails to take seriously work's nonvoluntary nature and its connection to goods relevant to political liberalism.

While the formative thesis is well supported by the evidence,⁴ as an argument defending meaningful work against the nonperfectionist objection its scope of appeal is limited by it being contingent on facts pertaining to the place of work under current economic conditions. The issue for those relying on the formative thesis is that it only seems to cut against those arguments that current economic structures (mostly) reflect the free decisions of persons. As an argument against proponents of the nonperfectionist objection which reject such a claim, it begs the question.

The formative thesis does provide good reasons to reject libertarian arguments claiming current economic structures reflect the free choices of persons given that the employment contract is an exercise in voluntary choice (Nozick, 1974, pp. 248-249; Zwolinski, 2007). These arguments misconstrue the inequalities in bargaining position within a labour market, ignoring that sellers (workers) are in a far subordinate position to the buyers (capitalists) given the constant threat of unemployment. The choice faced by many persons is not between meaningful but low-paying jobs and unmeaningful but high-paying ones. It is between unmeaningful and low-paying work or no work at all (Schweickart, 1993, pp. 229-232).

Under such circumstances the promotion of meaningful work might well indeed be the only way certain all-purpose means can be made available to persons. But this limits the defence of meaningful work to non-ideal conditions. If current economic structures are themselves criticized from the standpoint of nonperfectionism such that justice requires their reordering, then the empirical case about the formative effects of work might fall away, taking any argument for meaningful work with it. Take for instance the view held by Kymlicka:

none of this [the nonperfectionist objection] will justify the existing distribution of meaningful work. I have argued that people should be free to sacrifice the quality of work for other values, like better leisure. Under capitalism, however, those with the best jobs typically also have the best consumption and leisure, while those with poor jobs often get no compensating increase in leisure or consumption. (Kymlicka, 2002, p. 194)

When Kymlicka talks then of persons choosing alienating work for more leisure (2002, pp. 191-192), he is not referring to actual choices made by persons today, but to choices persons might have the opportunity to make in a labour market without bargaining power disadvantages. Thus, Kymlicka is using the same premise behind the nonperfectionist objection against meaningful work to also criticize the current nature of work and its place in society. As examples, Kymlicka objects to the way perceived 'male jobs' are often taken as superior to perceived 'female jobs,' and the exaggerated distinction between mental and manual work. Such arrangements can be criticized because: '[w]e know that people in a position of initial equality would not have chosen these roles' (2002, p. 90).

This opens the door to a wide-ranging critique of the place of work in contemporary liberal democracies, and this presents a problem for using the formative thesis as a reply to the nonperfectionist objection. If we imagine people in an initial position of equality, will the

prevalent place of work under contemporary capitalism be an outcome of freely made choices? Given the pluralism that exists regarding values and ends, this seems unlikely at best. Taking the formative thesis uncritically fails to get at the heart of what is raised by the nonperfectionist objection. While some persons might find the empirical conditions leading to the truth of the formative thesis unproblematic, others, with different ideas of the good, might disagree.

Kymlicka does not elaborate in detail on what economic arrangements might allow persons to make free choices against a fair background, but others do. Taking one example, it is out of a concern with creating a fairer set of choices, and the means to make such choices, that drives Philippe Van Parijs' argument for a basic income. Its implementation, according to Van Parijs (1991, p. 128), would create a fairer set of conditions for persons to choose how they want to carry out their plans of life, plans which diverge, in part, because of differing valuations of the goods affiliated with work. The 'real freedom' a basic income would grant (through, say, the lower barrier to self-employment it would create and its positive effects on work quality through increasing the bargaining position of workers), would provide a fairer starting point for persons to decide exactly how they want to live their lives – whether they value meaningful work a lot, a little, or not at all (for a similar argument see Widerquist, 2013).

Liberal nonperfectionism in ideal conditions then itself might require institutional changes significant enough to alter the conditions which lead to the truth of the formative thesis, given a basic income would radically reduce the necessity and extensiveness of work. Thus, any defence of meaningful work that relies on the formative thesis will have limited scope and be unconvincing (insofar as we want a defence of meaningful work in ideal theory). Relying on the

formative thesis fails to show promoting meaningful work is consistent with liberal neutrality, as the conditions that lead to the formative thesis' truth are themselves criticized as being inconsistent with that same standard.

One objection to this argument is that relying on the formative thesis is justified given the necessity of work in the operation of modern economies (including economies that have implemented a basic income). For now, and for the foreseeable future, people need to work. Even ideal theory can't escape this sociological fact (Roessler, 2012, p. 80). This is certainly true, but the argument doesn't entail a commitment to some claim about the 'end' of work, but the more limited claim that modern liberal democracies are at a stage of economic development such that the prevalence of work that makes the formative thesis true is not a strict economic requirement,⁵ and that a basic income, or a reduction in the length of the working week, are economically feasible (Van Parijs, 1991, pp. 121-125; see also Torry, 2016). For arguments defending meaningful work by way of the formative thesis it is not enough to show work is necessary, they must show that the dominant place of work in society is necessary – doing four hours of unmeaningful work a day is a very different proposition to doing ten or twelve.

Meaningful work and social contribution

To more satisfactorily meet the nonperfectionist objection, an alternative defence of meaningful work needs to be offered. I do this in the subsequent sections. But to clear the way for this argument, I will first recharacterize the grounds of the conditions of meaningful work. I argue work can only be meaningful when its features enable the worker (and others) to regard it as their own contribution to the needs and or wants of others, understood as those things necessary

for a person to carry out their own plan of life. This is what justifies the necessity of meaningful work being both person-engaging and having some kind of democratic involvement. Following most accounts in the literature, the discussion of meaningful work is limited to questions over what makes work itself as a distinct activity meaningful, it intentionally avoids linking meaningful work to debates about meaningfulness in general (abstaining from questions of ‘fundamental meaning’ is also necessary for an account of meaningful work to be acceptable from the standpoint of political liberalism).

Taking the person-engaging condition first, it’s necessary because of the first-person perspective implied by the very idea of work being meaningful (it needs to be meaningful for the person actually doing it). Part of this first-person perspective is that persons derive subjective feelings of meaningfulness from their work. This is captured by the person-engaging condition as not all work will engage persons given their different interests (while I might find gardening person-engaging, others will not). But there is also an objective side to the first-person perspective, which is captured by the person-engaging condition’s insistence that the work needs to depend on a worker’s agency, initiative, and skill. This allows the worker (and others) to see it as ‘their’ work, not because the work is not substitutable (I could hire a different carpenter to get the same table), but because it relies upon a person’s own self-directed planning and execution. This means certain types of work cannot be meaningful work, no matter how the worker feels about it. Specifically, it excludes work that is mundane drudgery as a result of the detailed horizontal division of labour.

Some writers take the person-engaging condition as sufficient for work to be meaningful. For instance in the above arguments of Arnold and Moriarty questions over work's organizational form are irrelevant as the defence of meaningful work depends only on linking work's content, not whether workers contribute to decision-making, to all-purpose means. However, limiting meaningful work to it being person-engaging runs into problems. This is because there are many potentially person-engaging activities outside of work, and so it becomes difficult to separate meaningful work from other potentially meaningful activities (including meaningful leisure) in a nonarbitrary way. Take for instance the work of a professional carpenter and someone doing amateur woodworking for fun. As both these activities can be person-engaging, they could be characterized as being meaningful for the same reasons. But surely the different contexts of the two activities are relevant, suggesting the constituent features of meaningful work need to relate, in some way, to what makes an activity work in the first place. Focusing on work being person-engaging alone won't provide an account of what makes work *itself* meaningful.

What then is the feature of work that separates it from other activities? While I won't attempt to provide an analytical definition of work, I argue there is utility in understanding work as an act of social contribution towards unassociated others. Such an account of work is consistent with political liberalism's nonperfectionism given it finds support across diverse philosophical strands of thought,⁶ and also aligns with the historical genesis of corporations, where it was the potential of positive social contribution that justified the governmental intervention in property rights (e.g. limited liability, corporate personhood) in the first place (Ciepley, 2013). Characterizing work as social contribution captures both the paid and unpaid

activities which ought to be called ‘work.’ It captures the former because of the information-function of the price mechanism. And while some market activity is objectively *not* a social contribution, and counterexamples can be given (e.g., marketing a product that is intentionally defective), the point is not to reduce contributive activity to the market but that market activity can be a useful (albeit imperfect) proxy for activity that meets the needs and or wants of others. I won’t lay them out here, but so long as market activity meets certain conditions (does not harm others or manipulate them, and so on), then it is appropriate to regard it as social contribution. It captures the latter because it is an unpaid activity’s social contribution that makes us want to call it ‘work,’ despite it not being a traditional job. Parenting is work because it is social reproduction, volunteering at food banks is work because it puts food into stomachs. Doing woodworking for fun isn’t work because it does not contribute to the needs and or wants of others in the same kind of way.

Given the features of meaningful work need to relate to what makes an activity work in the first place, this suggests those aspects of work related to its social contribution are relevant to what makes it meaningful. First of all, activities that contribute greatly to others are potentially more meaningful than those which do not (Veltman, 2016, pp. 124-131). Contrast here the work of a teacher to an office worker filing reports nobody is going to read. Even if both kinds of work are equally person-engaging (the reports are complex and require initiative), surely the teacher here has more meaningful work.

However the first-person perspective means that questions about a work process’ social contribution itself will not be the only way social contribution is important to work being

meaningful. What is also relevant is the extent to which a worker understands and is confident in how their work is actually contributing to meeting the needs and wants of others. This seems especially pertinent for work undertaken in firms (especially firms that are large and complex), given the social division of labour contained within them can mean an individual's contribution can often be rather opaque (compare a data analyst in a large bank to a self-employed painter). This condition of meaningful work then, might be sensitive to the extent management practices exist which inform workers about how their work forms part of the contribution made by the firm more generally (for exploration of some of these practices see Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006; Polodny et al., 2005, pp. 25-29; Rosso et al., 2010, p. 101). Another factor might be whether management demonstrates a good track record of responding to and anticipating the needs and wants of consumers. If they have, then directives will likely be seen by workers not just as the whims of management but as rational responses to market demand. This ought to give workers confidence their work is productive given successful market activity can (often) be a useful proxy for contributive activity.

But focusing on workers understanding how their work activity contributes is not sufficient to capture the importance of social contribution from the first-person perspective. What will also count is how work's structure *involves* (or fails to involve) workers in the aspects of the work process pertaining to its contribution. These are those aspects related to the external considerations of a firm, such as its overarching goals and ends, the markets it participates in, and the way it responds to consumer demand (for a useful typology of the range of issues within a firm over which control or involvement may be exercised, see Bernstein, 1976, p. 493). This is what makes some level of democratic involvement an aspect of what makes work (occurring in a

firm) meaningful, and reflects the objective side of the first-person perspective of meaningful work (a side also reflected in the person-engaging condition). What makes democratic involvement in the externally-oriented decisions of a firm necessary is the way it aligns the work process of individual workers with the activity of work as social contribution. When a work process fails to involve a worker in these questions it disconnects them from the very thing that makes their activity work in the first place.⁷ As such, it becomes difficult for the individual's work activity to be regarded as meaningful *work*. And while this democratic involvement will likely increase workers' feelings that they are doing useful and contributive work (Rothschild-Witt & Witt, 1986; Soffia et al., 2021, pp. 18-20), the point here is not just about epistemic consequences, but about how involvement in decisions traditionally left to management connects workers' day-to-day activity more objectively to the social consequences of a firm's economic activity and the way it impacts and effects the lives of others. Of course, there are different ways to afford workers democratic involvement in firms' externally-oriented decisions, ranging from more moderate proposals such as management actively consulting or partnering with workers, to more radical calls for worker control within full-fledged workplace democracy (with other possibilities in between, like worker representatives on boards or workers having veto power over certain decisions). The account of meaningful work defended here does not prescribe as necessary one kind of democratic involvement over another,⁸ but it does require the involvement gives workers actual power and influence – it cannot be mere tokenism.

This account of meaningful work, which is grounded in it having features such that the worker (and others) can regard the work activity as 'their' own social contribution to others, opens the door to a different kind of response to the nonperfectionist objection than that offered

by relying on the formative thesis. This is because if the goods affiliated with meaningful work are connected to social contribution, and social contribution is what separates work from nonwork activities, then meaningful work's normative weight will have a firmer basis. Even if, motivated by concerns of nonperfectionism, the empirical conditions leading to the truth of the formative thesis were undermined (say by instituting a basic income), the link between meaningful work and social contribution would still hold. What remains to be shown then is that the activity of contributing to unassociated others in the way enabled by the features of meaningful work (person-engaging and a degree of democratic involvement), should be an activity that matters for the liberal.

Reciprocity and self-respect

The remaining sections of the paper provide an alternative reply to the nonperfectionist objection. The key claim is that there's a strong connection, through reciprocity, between meaningful work and the conception (taken as axiomatic in much liberal theorizing) of society as a system of cooperation between participating members. This connection ties meaningful work to the all-purpose means of self-respect.

The argument has the following structure:

- a. The reciprocity underlying the idea of society as a system of social cooperation between free and equal participating members, is partly constituted by the mutual interdependencies between the skills and talents of persons
- b. Given (a), a social basis of persons' self-respect is that, even in ideal conditions, there is opportunity to make social contributions expressive of this reciprocity

- c. Social contributions through meaningful work, understood in terms defended in the preceding section (person-engaging and which give the worker some kind of democratic involvement), are best expressive of this reciprocity
- d. Combining (b) and (c), a social basis of persons' self-respect, even in ideal conditions, is that there is opportunity to undertake meaningful work.

This section focuses on the first two propositions, while the subsequent section turns to the latter two.

The idea of society as a system of cooperation between free and equal participating members is, for John Rawls, the 'fundamental organizing idea of justice as fairness' from which a host of other fundamental ideas, and eventually the principles of justice, are constructed. Within this conception of society reciprocity plays an important part, as the fair terms of cooperation – characterized by a conception of political justice – specify and express the idea of reciprocity.⁹ This feature separates a system of cooperation from other systems of social coordination, by ensuring benefits and burdens are allocated fairly (Rawls, 2005, pp. 15-17, 2001, pp. 24-25).

The notion of society expressing reciprocal relations is partly constituted by, and presupposes, certain mutual social interdependencies between persons, and the talents and skills which they possess. The fact social relations enable persons to do and achieve more than they could in their absence was taken by Hume (2009, Bk III, pt. II, §2) as one of the circumstances of justice, circumstances which Rawls of course followed. For Rawls, 'social cooperation makes

possible a better life for all' given that 'parties have roughly similar needs and interests, or needs and interests in various ways complementary, so that mutually advantageous cooperation among them is possible' (1971, pp. 126-127). Of course, this is not to say a system of cooperation has no conflicts of interest among its members, but that there is a level of interdependencies between persons such that a just society can be seen as expressing reciprocal relations where each person depends on the work of others to carry out their aims and plans. Now, crucially, the relevant interdependencies here are of a particular sort. Persons do not just depend upon any labour of others (no matter its type), but given the potentialities of each is far greater than what they can hope to realize, they depend upon the *skills* and *talents* of others. It is the 'excellences and individuality' of others that are enjoyed (Rawls, 1971, p. 523, 529).

Taking society as a system of cooperation between free and equal participating members as a 'fundamental idea,' is to claim it would be reasonable for persons to accept regardless of whatever particular conception of the good they hold. And while by itself this conception of society is ubiquitous in various forms of political liberalism, perhaps characterizing a system of cooperation in terms of mutual interdependencies is bringing in a notion of social relations that are unable to meet a nonperfectionist standard (especially if the skills expressive of reciprocity are linked to disputable claims about what constitutes persons' 'excellences and individuality').¹⁰ Indeed, Rawls' most extensive treatment of these mutual interdependencies occurs in discussion of society as a 'social union of social unions' in Part III of *A Theory of Justice*, suggesting the argument might rely on claims Rawls later viewed as inconsistent with nonperfectionism. For instance, seeing society as a system of cooperation in this way might imply its members collectively share substantive goals and commitments – an implication surely at odds with

political liberalism's project of public justification amongst diverse conceptions of the good (Roberts, 2021, pp. 575-577; Skorupski, 2017, pp. 181-186). However, so long as the relevance of persons' developed skills and talents is limited to their enabling of others carrying out their own aims and plan of life, the argument remains on terrain acceptable to the political liberal. Pointing to relations of interdependence is not claiming certain kinds of life are better or more valuable than others, nor that there is a singular end to which cooperation aims. This perhaps explains why even after his 'political turn,' Rawls (2001, pp. 142, 201; 2005, pp. 320-323) never gave up on characterizing society as a social union of social unions (cf. Freeman, 2007, pp. 320-321; Weithman, 2010, p. 295).

The preceding discussion suggests the mutual interdependencies between persons' skills and talents are not just any sort of relation or activity towards which a political conception of justice should be indifferent. Instead, there is something deeply political about them, and this is what ties the act of social contribution to self-respect. A person's opportunity to engage in reciprocal relations, by contributing to others through the development and exercise of their own skills and talents, is connected (at least in a well-ordered society) to their status as a free and equal participating member of society. And insofar as a person's 'self-respect is rooted in [their] self-confidence as a fully cooperating member of society' (Rawls, 2005, p. 318; see also pp. 81-82), their self-respect requires contributing to others in ways expressive of reciprocity. This parallels the way other aspects of a conception of justice support persons' self-respect through serving as a public recognition of their status as free and equal members of society as a system of cooperation (Rawls 2005, pp. 319-320).

As such, the connection between social contribution and the political conception of society implies not only that persons are under an obligation to contribute (through work) in order to fairly respond to the contributions and efforts made by others (Becker, 1980; Brown, 2020; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, pp. 273-306; White, 2003, pp. 49ff.). While I don't deny this point, I want to emphasize that the connection also provides an argument to what persons are entitled – viz., the opportunity to engage in the right sort of social contribution in the first place. Absent such an opportunity, a person's self-respect as a participating member of society as a system of cooperation is understandably threatened. This opportunity then is something that should matter to the political liberal.

Meaningful work and self-respect

Several liberal philosophers move directly from the premise of society as a system of cooperation between free and equal contributing members, to an argument that justice involves certain requirements in the workplace (Anderson, 1999, pp. 321-326; von Platz, 2016). Insofar as this move relies on the formative thesis (i.e., work is the best way to undertake social contribution given its place in, and the nature of, contemporary economies), then it will be unconvincing from the standpoint of political liberalism, for reasons outlined earlier. The defence of meaningful work's normative weight put forward here however differs, as it relies on the *conceptual* overlap between the account of meaningful work defended above, and the nature of social contributions necessary to express the reciprocity underlying a system of cooperation between free and equal persons. This argument, unlike those relying on the formative thesis, will still apply in ideal conditions given it is based not on the place work just so happens to hold in contemporary economies, but is based on the nature of meaningful work itself, a(n) (ideal)

political conception of society, and the nature of the persons who make it up. So long as meeting the needs and wants of others is a justice-relevant activity, then the opportunity persons have to undertake meaningful work (both paid and unpaid) will be fundamentally linked to justice.

Seeing society as a system of social cooperation between free and equal participating members corresponds to seeing citizens participating, in part, through meaningful work, for the following reasons. First, recall that the mutual interdependencies underlying a system of cooperation are of a certain sort, which depend on the deployment of persons' own initiative and skills. This has very clear affinities to the account of meaningful work put forward in this paper, which requires work to offer scope for self-direction and agency, enabling acts of initiative and skill. It is only when a person's work is person-engaging that they will be carrying out social contribution expressive of reciprocity and the complementarity of talents tied to the political conception of society. The reason contribution through drudgery won't suffice as a basis for self-respect is that there is no real talent or agency being expressed, merely hard toil. Second, the account of meaningful work's sensitivity to work's social contribution, and a worker's positioning relative to that contribution, aligns with the emphasis reciprocal relations place on persons actually meeting the needs and wants of others. When a person's work is negligibly contributive, or when features of a workplace fail to make them aware of their contribution or to involve them in the externally-oriented decisions related to contribution, then they are being disconnected from a key aspect of their status as a participating member of society. Person-engaging work alone, while it might have other intrinsic benefits, will not guarantee any connection to a person's role in a system of cooperation. It is therefore the features of meaningful work (person-engaging and involvement in its contributive aspects) taken together

which are required for persons to be secure in their status as free and equal participating members of society. This is why the opportunity for meaningful work (both in its market and non-market varieties) is a social basis of self-respect.

Surprisingly Rawls comes to the same conclusion (without explaining the rationale), as he lists one of the essential prerequisites for the basic structure is having society serve as employer of last resort, as:

lacking ... the opportunity for meaningful work and occupation is not only destructive of citizens' self-respect but of their sense that they are members of society and not simply caught in it. (Rawls, 2005, lvii)

Both Rafeeq Hasan (2015, pp. 490-492) and Jeffrey Moriarty (2009, pp. 449-453), in attempting to reconstruct this claim by Rawls, consider (before rejecting) the possibility that meaningful work could be linked to self-respect given it enables persons to contribute to society. Instead, they argue Rawls must be connecting meaningful work to self-respect through the way person-engaging activity can enable the realization of the Aristotelian Principle, which itself is a prerequisite for self-respect.¹¹ And while I agree that contributions that are mundane forms of drudgery cannot be supportive of self-respect (Moriarty's examples are bolting on tires or painting highway lines), all this shows is that contribution alone is insufficient as a social basis of self-respect, not that it is unnecessary. The defence of meaningful work offered here provides a different interpretation, pinning meaningful work's importance directly to a person's political status as a participating member of society – a connection made particularly explicit by Rawls in the above quote.

At this point we are able to outline how defending the promotion of meaningful work by connecting it to a political conception of society is able to respond to the nonperfectionist objection. The objection of course is very much still live given that even in ideal theory persons are inevitably going to assign different value to the activity of meaningful work. Taking the proverbial example, won't the promotion of meaningful work, as a means to provide the social bases of self-respect, be unfair to people like Malibu surfers who don't care one iota about contributing to others in a person-engaging way? The response here is to emphasize that the claim which grounds the defence of meaningful work offered here, that society is a system of social cooperation partly constituted by mutual interdependencies and a complementarity of talent between persons, is a very different kind of claim to the empirical point on which the formative thesis relies. The formative thesis is not inevitable or unchangeable and alternative policies, like a basic income, could enable persons to attain all-purpose means outside of work. This is why, if the promotion of meaningful work is grounded in the formative thesis, a Malibu surfer's complaint against it is reasonable. They can point to an alternative possible world that allows persons to more freely decide how they want to live their lives.

But the social fact of mutual interdependencies is not a changeable fact in the same sort of way. What alternative world could a surfer point to as a complaint against the fact of reciprocal benefit – a world of self-supporting Robinson Crusoes? Such a complaint would not be reasonable, a surfer is only able to pursue their own plan of life thanks to the skills and talents of others (the board makers, the waterproof camera designers, the persons protecting the sand dunes, and so on). To complain that the opportunity to engage in the sorts of reciprocal relations relied on here is merely one sort of contestable value among others is to be unreasonably

dismissive of the conditions that make justice required in the first place. This is why promoting meaningful work need not treat the Malibu surfer unfairly, as its connection to self-respect is a consequence of a claim that is not unreasonable to expect persons, no matter their particular conception of the good, to accept. Indeed, so long as society's economic institutions are such that there exists an array of meaningful work options for the surfer (I outline what this might involve below), then the value of reciprocity additionally suggests the surfer is doing something unjust by failing to exercise their talents in a way that is contributive.

The argument doesn't deny some persons will have greater overlap than others between their conception of the good and meaningful work, which, by extension, means that some persons will have a greater overlap between their conception of the good and a social basis of self-respect (although this is tempered somewhat by meaningful work not being limited to market activity). But this does not mean the promotion of meaningful work is illegitimate from the standpoint of political liberalism, as any plausible standard of nonperfectionism forgoes attempts to be completely neutral in effect towards the many conceptions of the good held by persons. The argument differs from the claim that because certain organizations of work are favoured by, or necessary for the self-respect of, some persons given their conception of the good, the state should promote them out of concerns of neutrality (Jacob & Neuhäuser, 2018, pp. 939-942; Miller, 1989, pp. 72-97). Rather, what counts is that policies are acceptable to persons as part of a shared political conception of justice, and that they do not rely on any views about the good on which persons reasonably disagree (Larmore, 1996, 125-126; Rawls, 2005, pp. 192-194). What I have argued is that it is reasonable to take as part of that shared conception the idea

of society as partly constituted by reciprocal interdependencies, and that the self-respect of its members is connected to their opportunity to engage in such relations.

Conclusion

The focus throughout this paper has been on whether the promotion of meaningful work can be a legitimate part of a theory of justice that takes nonperfectionism seriously. I have argued it can be. While I cannot engage in an extended discussion on how promoting the opportunity for meaningful work might be ranked against other requirements of justice, if such an opportunity is indeed a social basis of self-respect, then it seems unlikely it would have lexical posteriority. This is because the primary good of self-respect is ‘perhaps the most important primary good,’ (Rawls, 1971, p. 440) and amongst Rawlsians is key in arguments for both the priority of the basic liberties and the priority of the fair equality of opportunity over the difference principle (for the former: Cohen, 2002, pp. 108-111; Rawls, 1971, pp. 544-547, 2005, pp. 318-320; for the latter: Freeman, 2007, pp. 91-94, 134-135; Shiffrin, 2004, pp. 1668-1670). This suggests, at minimum, institutional changes increasing the opportunity for meaningful work might be justified even if there is a trade-off in income.

And while any discussion of specific policies is inevitably tentative and provisional, I will offer some brief comments on what these institutional changes to promote the opportunity for meaningful work might look like. One immediate implication is that such a promotion would require a significant overcoming (or at least blurring) of both the vertical and detailed horizontal divisions of labour. This ensures persons are able to undertake work activity that is both person-engaging and also organized in such a way to connect them more closely to their work being a

social contribution. Bringing about such conditions is obviously demanding, given the nature of work under contemporary capitalism. However, meaningful work encapsulates more than traditional paid employment, so focusing on the content and organization of work within the market will not exhaust the institutional implications of the argument.

Two potential means to increase the opportunity for meaningful work outside of market activity will be mentioned. The first is some sort of state job program or job guarantee which, so long as the jobs have the requisite features, could provide persons the opportunity to engage in person-engaging social contributions. While some writers claim job programs are self-defeating as means to support persons' self-worth by giving them a benefit they were unable to attain for themselves (Moon, 1988, pp. 47-48), this argument is unconvincing once we recognize contributive activity does not perfectly track market demand. A job program would not be giving persons the opportunity to do make-work, but to genuinely meet the needs and or wants of others not captured in market mechanisms.

The second possibility is a basic income which, by removing the necessity of paid work, could increase the opportunity for meaningful work by enabling persons to undertake person-engaging contributive activity that occurs outside the market (it might also increase job quality in the market by giving workers more bargaining power against employers). However, because persons' self-respect is not only a function of the freedoms and opportunities available to them, but also of what the provision of these freedoms and opportunities expresses (Cohen, 1989, pp. 738-739; Rawls, 2005, pp. 318-320), a basic income will only serve as a social basis of self-respect insofar as its implementation is such that it acts as a public expression of each person's

status as a free and equal participating member of society. To achieve this, perhaps its connection to reciprocal relations would be made clear if it was framed as granting persons the opportunity to undertake person-engaging nonmarket participation, or as public recognition of the unpaid contributions persons already make. The benefit of a job guarantee, as well as modifying the conditions of work that occurs in a market, is because of their formalized structure and more obvious connection to work and social contribution, they can naturally serve this recognitional function.

Two objections might be raised in relation to a basic income's necessity as a social basis of self-respect. The first is that a basic income cannot be a requirement of justice because, as I have acknowledged, the value of reciprocity grounds an obligation to contribute, and a basic income opens up the potential for persons free-riding by not contributing in any way at all. Three points can be made in response. First, even if at a principled level we acknowledge that something like a 'participation income' is preferable to universal income (White, 2003, pp. 167-172), pragmatic considerations about efficiency – which are still relevant to theorizing about ideal conditions – might make a basic income preferable all things considered (think of the bureaucratic structure necessary to assess persons' social contributions, especially when these encapsulate more than market activity) (McKinnon, 2003, pp. 155-156). Second, it is not obvious that reciprocity-based arguments related to obligations will necessarily outweigh or invalidate reciprocity-based arguments related to entitlements. This is even if the former are weighty, given that a basic income (insofar as it increases the opportunity to engage in meaningful work) is tied to a weighty reason of its own, the social bases of persons' self-respect. And third, recall that the argument here, by being situated in ideal theory, is applicable to persons who not only are

regarded as free and equal participating members of a system of cooperation, but who *want* to be regarded as such. And so while I won't suggest this makes the concern with free-riding moot, it is fair to assume that citizens will have the requisite motivations to use part of their newly found time and resources in socially contributive ways – scroungers ought to be few and far between.

The second objection grants a basic income might be required to promote persons' opportunity for meaningful work, but claims that given this gives persons sufficient opportunity to move in and out of formal employment and to engage in meaningful work outside of the market, then efforts to increase the opportunity for meaningful work in the market (by blurring the vertical and detailed horizontal division of labour) become unnecessary. If this objection goes through, then the defence of meaningful work offered here (at least in relation to market-facing firms) might only apply in non-ideal conditions where a basic income doesn't exist, which was the same issue faced by arguments relying on the formative thesis. The reply here is to deny that providing opportunities to engage in meaningful work outside the market suffices for a fair provision of meaningful work. The reason for this is the following. Due to both economies of scale and inefficiencies associated with certain market transactions, in many economic sectors the meeting of needs and wants is best achieved when the social division of labour between different occupational roles (this is different from the detailed horizontal division of labour) is internal to individual firms (Anderson, 2017, pp. 64-65; Singer, 2018, pp. 52-72). This means that even if a basic income is implemented some persons, given the nature of the skills and talents they happen to possess, will only be able to undertake person-engaging contribution in the context of a firm. Therefore, efforts focusing on the quality and organization of work within firms will always be imperative to the fair provision of meaningful work.

This paper has argued that promoting meaningful work can be consistent with nonperfectionism and the justificatory constraints imposed by political liberalism. This is because the opportunity for meaningful work – i.e., person-engaging work which, when occurring in a firm, accords workers democratic involvement – is a social basis of self-respect for persons who are (and regard themselves to be) free and equal participating members of society as a system of cooperation. Defending the promotion of meaningful work by uncritically taking for granted the place of work in the nonideal and unjust circumstances of today won't provide an argument that meaningful work matters in conditions of full justice. What can provide such an argument, is recognizing the political value of ensuring not only the benefits of social cooperation are distributed fairly, but also the opportunity to engage in such a system and to produce the benefits on which one's fellow citizens depend.

Notes

1. Some writers talk of meaningful work being complex in place of my term 'person-engaging' (e.g. Moriarty, 2009, p. 448; Roessler, 2012, p. 86). I prefer the latter as it avoids the connotation of meaningful work with 'intellectual' work potentially suggested by the former. The antithesis of meaningful work is not simplicity per se, but monotonous repetition and drudgery with no space for initiative and agency.
2. When I refer to a 'liberal' defence of meaningful work, I will be referring to political liberalism. The liberal defences of meaningful work which are based in a perfectionist concern with autonomy (Roessler, 2012; Schwartz, 1982; Yeoman, 2014) are not the concern of this paper.

3. While Arnold is not ostensibly concerned with ‘meaningful work,’ the features of work he focuses on are much the same as those in defences of meaningful work.
4. Longitudinal studies show the complexity of work has strong effects on intellectual development (Kohn & Schooler, 1978; Spenner, 1988). Work which leaves scope for self-direction also strongly affects persons’ initiative and ambition (Frese et al., 1996; Kornhauser, 1965, pp. 266-270). An example of a qualitative account supportive of the formative thesis is Bloodworth (2018, especially pp. 50-51).
5. For a classic argument that a stationary state economy – where capital accumulation and open-ended growth ceases – would significantly reduce the time persons spend at work, and be not only economically feasible but also normatively desirable, see Mill (1994, Bk IV, Ch. VI). Even in the growth-intensive economies of today there are reasons to think time spent at work could be reduced, given a significant amount of work in contemporary economies might not be productive or contributive at all, at least according to some qualitative accounts (Graeber, 2018), and that state regulation and limitation of working time can be a legitimate response to the collective action problem leading to the ‘rat race’ of overemployment (Jauch 2020).
6. The premise of work as social contribution is behind anti-capitalist anthropologist David Graeber’s (2018, pp. 232-239) claim that there is something deeply oxymoronic about a paid job that contributes nothing of value to anyone. But it is also found in the classical liberal and libertarian use of ‘invisible hand’ reasoning to defend capitalism and reject centralized planning as inefficient at utilizing social functions and meeting needs, such as Hayek (1945).

7. I talk of a worker's disconnect from, rather than alienation from, the outcome of their labour only to avoid the perfectionist commitments the language of alienation might suggest.
8. Yet one consideration will be the extent more radical forms of democratic involvement, like full worker control, might have certain costs and inefficiencies which resultantly decrease the extent workers actually contribute to others (a result relevant to work being meaningful). But for an argument that such inefficiencies are not inherent to the democratic firm, see Bowles & Gintis (1993).
9. For discussion on the connection between the conception of society and reciprocity, see Rawls (1971, pp. 15, 178-179, 2001, pp. 5-6, 9, 49n, 50, 140, 2005, pp. 15-22, 48-54, 299-304). On the different uses of reciprocity by Rawls, see Reidy (2007, pp. 248-249) and Freeman (2007, pp. 374-375).
10. An alternative objection is that characterizing society as a fair system of cooperation between fair and equal contributing members is inegalitarian as it will exclude those who are unable to make contributions due to health conditions or disability (e.g., Nussbaum, 2006, pp. 96-154). But applied to the account defended here this objection has less force. This is because the point is less about the inclusion of contribution per se and more about what gets counted as contribution in the first place. As Nussbaum (2006, p. 113) notes, 'their [persons with disabilities] relative lack of productivity under current conditions is not "natural"; it is the product of discriminatory social arrangements.' And as I have noted, the account of contribution I have defended is not limited to more traditional market contributions but captures a wider set of contributive activities (including things like care). So as my argument will be that persons are wronged insofar as opportunities

for person-engaging contribution are unavailable, it can offer reasons why it is a matter of justice that these discriminatory arrangements are overcome and that opportunities for meaningful work are made available to persons with disabilities.

11. The Aristotelian Principle is that: ‘other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity’ (Rawls, 1971, p. 426).

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Note on contributor

Caleb Althorpe is a PhD candidate in political science at Western University, Canada. His research interests focus on economic justice and the political theory of work, theories of justice

more broadly, political liberalism, and urban political theory. His work has been published in *Social Theory and Practice* (2022) and *Urban Affairs Review* (2021).

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