

Symposium: Political Philosophy at Work

Meaningful Work: Arguments from Autonomy*

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THE idea of “meaningful work” has attracted relatively little attention during the past decades.¹ Most contemporary social and political theories—not only of the liberal variety—hold it to be either superfluous or impossible to conceptualize something like the value, the meaning, or the normative or evaluative content of work. The liberal version of the argument usually goes that in a context of value pluralism—in liberal democratic societies—it is not up to the state to determine whether or not work should be a central source of value in an individual’s life; rather, individuals should be free to choose their particular source of value and meaning from a range of sources, such as family, relations of love and friendship, religion, sport, artistic pursuits, and so on. Furthermore, the question of what should and what should not count as meaningful work will always be disputed in a liberal democracy.² But not only liberal theories appeal to individual autonomy and value pluralism within modern liberal democracies to argue against a normative theory of meaningful work: theories of recognition employ the same sort of arguments with the same results. Value pluralism and the difficulty to neutrally, uncontestedly conceptualize meaningful work lead to the conviction that a normative theory of the content of work is neither necessary nor feasible.³

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¹Exceptions include Russell Muirhead, *Just Work*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Nien-hê Hsieh, “Survey article: justice in production,” *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 16 (2008), 72–100.

²See David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 9 ff.; Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 188 ff.; John Christman, *Social and Political Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 193 ff.

³Axel Honneth, “Introduction,” in Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social*, ed. C. W. Wright (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. xviii; Axel Honneth,

On both empirical and on normative grounds this general idea seems to be mistaken; what interests me in this article are the reasons why liberal as well as recognition theories are wrong in insisting that no normative theory can be and should be given of the value and meaning of work. As I shall demonstrate in the following, their theoretical confinement to the formal conditions of justice at the workplace is not sufficient; instead, it must be possible to philosophically criticize meaningless work *because* it is meaningless, undignified, frustrating, alienating, and so on, and not only because the conditions and relations pertaining to it are unjust. Furthermore, the injustice of some employment contracts (for example those which are discriminatory) on the one hand, and the meaninglessness of some tasks on the other, are clearly separable in subjective experiences. For this reason, both should be included within normative theory.

Therefore, what is needed is a normative theory of just work, *which includes* a normative theory of meaningful work. Note that my primary concern in this article is to demonstrate that a theory of the justice of work has to encompass meaningful work; the question as to what this precisely implies for the implementation into a theory of justice forms a second step which I shall only point to rather sketchily in the last section. Thus the question whether my arguments entail a right to meaningful work, or whether a theory of justice would have to implement a minimum standard of meaningfulness for every form of work, will only be discussed very briefly. The moderate perfectionism I shall be advocating here solely aims to show *that* meaningful work is a necessary part of a theory of justice, but we will see that this could be achieved by a theory of justice in different ways.

In the following, I shall be concentrating on two paradigms, one liberal and one recognition-theoretic: I shall be discussing Will Kymlicka's liberal theory, on the one hand, and the best known exponent of recognition theory, Axel Honneth, on the other. Thus, Kymlicka and Honneth will stand in the center of the following discussion and other theories, for instance Rawls', will only be discussed when necessary. To choose Honneth as the main exponent of recognition theory hardly needs any further explanation, since his theory is the most comprehensive and the most articulate contemporary theory of recognition. Focusing on Kymlicka as the representative of the liberal paradigm is based on good reasons, too: concerning the meaningfulness of work and its place in a theory of justice, he is the most outspoken of liberal critics. Both Honneth and Kymlicka thus contribute to the mainstream liberal view of foreclosing debates on meaningful work from the context of a theory of justice.

"Redistribution as recognition: a response to Nancy Fraser" and "The point of recognition: a rejoinder to the rejoinder," both in Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 110–97 (esp. pp. 141 ff.) and pp. 237–68 (esp. pp. 238 ff.); Axel Honneth, "Rejoinder," *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, ed. B. van den Brink and D. Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 348–70, esp. 358 ff.

In what follows, I shall outline the positions and the problematic in more detail, thereby first presenting Honneth's and Kymlicka's theories respectively (Section I). In the next two sections I shall present two arguments, both based on the concept of autonomy, against a theory—whether of recognition or liberal—which tries to avoid taking on the issue of meaningful work. These arguments refer, first, to the status of work in liberal democracies in general (Section II); and, second, to the practical identity of subjects, for whom work is part of their lives (Section III). I shall then present in more detail a conception of what precisely meaningful work amounts to and of the relation between meaningful work and autonomy, thereby referring also to a Rawlsian argument (Section IV). In the last section, I shall briefly point out the consequences of a moderately perfectionist position like the one I am defending in this article (Section V).

Let me conclude these introductory remarks with a very brief conceptual clarification: I shall use 'work' and 'autonomy' both in a rather general, uncontested way. 'Work' should be understood simply as 'gained employment,' as it is used in modern (post-) industrial economies, that is, as involving income of some kind, a pattern of working hours, and structured job requirements.⁴ 'Autonomy' should be understood as personal autonomy: being able to reflect about how one wants to live on the basis of reasons, beliefs, motives, and desires which are one's own—not imposed by others for personal or political reasons—and to live one's own life accordingly.

I.

Let us look at the problem in more detail. Neither Kymlicka's liberal nor Honneth's recognition-theoretic approach to the meaning of work seems to be convincing, either in empirical or in normative terms. *Empirically*, because they seem to be incapable of interpreting central experiences social subjects have with and in their work; *normatively* because it remains unclear how they are to lend plausibility to their own normative concepts, especially to the central concept of autonomy. I shall demonstrate that the problems which result from both these approaches are not only problems of external criticism but also of internal theoretic consistency.

In substantiating these arguments, I shall also show that we are not constrained to choose between the following alternatives: *either*—in accordance with the liberal and recognition-theoretic positions—to see the explanation for work-related dignity, meaningfulness, and intrinsic gratification in fair working

⁴See Muirhead, *Just Work*, pp. 4 ff.; Adrian J Walsh, "Meaningful work as a distributive good," *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 32 (1994), 233–50; Andre Gorz, *Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-Based Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997); Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (Oxford: M. Robertson, 1983), chs. 4 and 6. I say more about the conceptual problems in Beate Roessler, "Work, recognition, and emancipation," *Recognition and Power*, ed. van den Brink and Owen, pp. 135–64.

conditions and employment contracts, as well as in equal job opportunities within a just and free society and the concomitant societal recognition that work as achievement provides; *or* to see the only possible basis for this element in a Marxian-style anthropology advocating the need for human self-realization through and in work.⁵

Both Honneth and Kymlicka think we are limited to these two alternatives and defend the dominant liberal view that meaningful work should not form part of a liberal theory of justice. Thus, both Kymlicka and Honneth are in theoretical agreement when they restrict themselves to the justice and equality of *working conditions*, and do not consider the *character of work* itself. Let us first have a closer look at Kymlicka's liberal theory. It leaves the content of work to be defined in each case by the individual ethics of the subjects concerned, viewing only working conditions and equal job opportunities as moral and political issues. In this context, alienation is comprehended as an inevitable, albeit unwelcome, factor of modern individualized life and working conditions. Kymlicka states this particularly clearly: "There are many values that may compete with unalienated production, such as 'bodily and mental health, the development of cognitive facilities, of certain character traits and emotional responses, play, sex, friendship, love, art, religion.'" ⁶ Non-alienated work as one value among many therefore deserves no particular moral or political attention. On the contrary: "A prohibition on alienated labour, therefore, would unfairly privilege some people over others." ⁷

In the context of his defense of the neutral state, Kymlicka writes: "Marxian perfectionism is one example for such a policy [i.e. a state policy which tells people what they should do with their lives], for it prohibits people from what it views as a bad choice—i.e. choosing to engage in alienated labour. I argued that this policy is unattractive for it relies on too narrow an account of the good. It identifies our good with a single activity—productive labour—on the grounds that it alone makes us distinctively human." ⁸

Honneth argues along the same lines: the "question of the value of labour itself" and the question of the "ethical relevance of the organisation of labour and the degree to which it provides meaning" are both a "classic motif of social critique going back to Marx." And he goes on to say that it is

a tradition which always took it as given that socially established forms of labour were not only to be judged according to whether their execution is recognised

⁵Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, p. 190. Honneth, "Rejoinder," p. 360; Honneth, "Introduction," pp. xvii ff. Cf. Nicholas H. Smith, "Work and the struggle for recognition," *European Journal of Political Theory*, 8 (2009), 46–60; Muirhead, *Just Work*, p. 25.

⁶Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, p. 193. Cf. Richard J. Arneson, "Meaningful work and market socialism," *Ethics*, 97 (1987), 517–45.

⁷Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, p. 193. Kymlicka deals with the problem of exploitation far more extensively at pp. 177 ff., esp. pp. 184 ff. Cf. Arneson, "Meaningful work," pp. 525 ff.

⁸Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, p. 213.

appropriately, but also according to whether their structure and organisation provide chances for self-realisation. This ethic has been discredited because it appears to presuppose a perfectionism that dictates the pursuits in which people are to find their self-realisation. Instead of leaving subjects free to decide how they wish to pursue their happiness under conditions of autonomy, this perfectionism imposes from above the stipulation that it is only if all members carry out meaningful, non-alienated labour that a society is free and just.⁹

In *The Fragmented World of the Social*, Honneth—distancing himself from his earlier critical-theoretical work—writes that “the criteria of moral assessment cannot be related to the internal character of the work process itself, but rather only to the institutional framework in which it is necessarily embedded.”¹⁰ Thus, in his recognition-theoretical work, Honneth separates moral issues of fairness, equality, remuneration, and contract from a critical conception of the content of work itself. In other words, he separates the question ‘what work do we do?’ from the question ‘under which (institutional) conditions do we do it?’, and finds the answer to the first one irrelevant. Honneth defends this position against his own former approach by stating that the pluralism of values found in modern, liberal democracies, combined with its concomitant individualization of achievement and its place in society, render a precise definition of ‘meaningful work’ not only impossible, but also plainly superfluous.¹¹

He claims that a liberal state must guarantee the reinforcement of a legal principle whereby all subjects have equal opportunities to develop and employ their skills, even if, as Honneth himself states, this does not rule out meaningless and undignified tasks. The criteria for a moral assessment of the institutional framework are provided by a theory of justice. But work does still have value: the value it has as an achievement in a society, since it is only through these achievements that subjects gain (one form of) recognition which is necessary for the development of healthy subjective identities and successful personalities.¹²

⁹Honneth, “Rejoinder,” p. 359.

¹⁰Honneth, “Introduction,” p. xviii. See also Smith, “Work and the struggle for recognition,” pp. 50 ff.; Axel Honneth, “Work and instrumental action: on the normative basis of critical theory” and “Integrity and disrespect: principles of a conception of morality based on a theory of recognition,” both in Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social*, ed. Wright, pp. 15–49 and 247–60. In his most recent contribution to the problem of work, Honneth puts it in a slightly different perspective. There he argues that if we properly reconstruct the historically grown normative assumptions embodied in market economy itself, we can see that—normatively—the value of work is directly linked to the social recognition it receives. Viewed from this historical-normative perspective, only work which is meaningful—complex, self-determined—should get social recognition leading to social esteem. Without being able to go into detail here, I think that his argument is an interesting attempt to conceptualize meaningful work; it is also highly speculative in its Hegelian form of reconstruction and thus, in the end, it seems improbable that it can stand against the arguments raised here. See Honneth, “Work and recognition: a redefinition,” *The Philosophy of Recognition*, ed. H.-C. Schmidt am Busch and C.F. Zürn (Totowa NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), pp. 223–40.

¹¹Honneth, “Introduction,” p. xviii. Cf. Honneth, “Rejoinder,” pp. 359 ff.; Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, pp. 9 ff.

¹²Honneth, “Recognition as redistribution,” pp. 14 ff. See also Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), esp. pp. 92 ff., on the difference between self-esteem (gained through work or achievement) and self-respect (gained through being recognized as a subject of rights).

It is precisely at this point of the critique of the value of work itself that recognition-theory and liberal theory meet: for Honneth's later stance is, interestingly, in agreement with mainstream liberal political philosophy. In their content, quality and character, work and work processes are no longer comprehended as being relevant to or in need of theorization. Kymlicka, like Honneth, disqualifies approaches as "perfectionist" which desire to evaluate work itself and give it a normative status. Their positions are similar in their defense of value pluralism against the threat of Marxian perfectionism. With regard to individual rights and the plethora of existing values, the state can do no more than to guarantee just working conditions and the existence of equal opportunities in education, thereby safeguarding the freedom of subjects to pursue and practice a profession. The subjects, however, must also be guaranteed the freedom *not to have* to view work as the only or the most important source of happiness and fulfilment.

However, the opposition of two alternatives—one Marxist, one liberal—is too simple. We should therefore differentiate the following three possibilities. In between *firstly*, the strong and monistic Marxian perfectionism, and *secondly*, the simple liberal neutrality, we can make out one more conceptually and normatively distinct position. The third option consists in a moderately perfectionist theory which maintains that there are various goods or human potentials to be realized, among them meaningful work. This position goes beyond the Marxian alternative in maintaining a variety of potential goods and thus seeks to reconcile liberal pluralism with the value of meaningful work in society. In the following I shall leave the simple opposition behind, with its two very different and yet equally implausible positions, and plead for the third position, a moderately perfectionist theory which adequately reflects its own normative concepts.

II.

Let me now turn to the discussion of the two arguments mentioned before. The first one concerns the significance and necessity of work in our—liberal, democratic, modern—societies. We should start by noting that in present liberal democracies work cannot be perceived as just one value among many (in addition to art, religion, and so on), for the simple reason that subjects *have to work* in order to earn money. At least in the societies we are familiar with, the majority of the population is not concerned with whether they should work at all, and if so how much. Some may want to work merely for the social recognition and/or for the intrinsic gratification to be found in work, and both reasons are obviously perfectly good reasons.

The primary motivation, however, is mostly quite simply: people have to work because of the money. But note that it was precisely because of the liberal-democratic ideals of individual autonomy and value-pluralism that a

normative theory of the value of work was criticized in the first place. If we now take into account the fact that people have to work because of the money they earn, the role of individual autonomy becomes precarious. Subjects have to work, whether they want to or not. With regard to the very question of why people work their autonomy does not seem to play a role. The necessity to work is a threat to autonomy which neither Honneth nor Kymlicka adequately addresses.¹³

Let us have a closer look at the sort of necessity involved here; it is conceptualized by liberal theories in different ways and it is worthwhile to briefly indicate the differences between them.

Van Parijs, to start with the exception, defends a theory of justice which does not advocate the necessity of work for everybody. People can live, if they want, on their basic income.¹⁴ He is therefore not confronted with the dilemma between necessity and autonomy: if not everybody necessarily has to work in society, then people are also free not to work under heteronomous or alienated labor conditions. A just basic structure would, for Van Parijs, remove necessity from work; a theory of meaningful work is therefore not really necessary.

But a number of liberal arguments have been raised against his position. Let me briefly mention three. Gutmann and Thompson, for instance, maintain that it is a social duty or social obligation to participate in the economic structure and duties of a society and they emphasize the unjust social relations that would ensue, if some people were to live on the work of others.¹⁵ Even if we imagine the just basic structure to rest on the consent of those working and those living on the basic income, we could still criticize this from the point of view of reciprocal social duties. A second critical argument comes from recognition theory: if the contribution of subjects to their society in the form of work or achievement is necessary for their developing healthy identities, then a basic income for some would foreclose the possibility of their gaining the necessary forms of recognition. Social recognition of work is necessary for subjects' self-esteem and thus for their being able to develop healthy identities.¹⁶ And thirdly, basic income theories have been criticized as standing in opposition to the ethic of the societies we factually live in. This work-ethic is characteristic of our societies; furthermore, empirical findings demonstrate that most people would rather work and thereby contribute to society than get financial compensation.¹⁷

¹³Muirhead, *Just Work*, pp. 15 ff., argues in a similar vein, although basing his argument not on a concept of autonomy but on that of a social duty.

¹⁴Philippe Van Parijs, *Real Freedom for All* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁵See Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 275 ff. Cf. also Muirhead, *Just Work*, p. 18; Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, p. 83. For a critical discussion of the basic income proposal, see the papers in "Basic income? A symposium on Van Parijs," *Analyse und Kritik*, 22 (2000).

¹⁶See Honneth, "Recognition as redistribution," pp. 160 ff.

¹⁷See, for instance, Richard Arneson, "Is work special? Justice and the distribution of employment," *American Political Science Review*, 84 (1990), 1127–47. On the problems for egalitarians confronting this work ethic, esp. pp. 1136 ff.; defending the position that the state should offer a legal guarantee of employment opportunities, pp. 1143 ff.

Let me now look at the question of necessity of work in Kymlicka's theory. He, too, is one of the critics of Van Parijs: for him, work is necessary even in a just basic structure. He does not explicitly link this to the idea of reciprocal just social relations, although people should not be given the chance to live off the work of others; this would be unjust as well as exploitative. Kymlicka seems to argue that even in a just liberal market economy people would have to work because they have to earn their living. As we have already seen, he thereby does not want to exclude alienated work. Even if work is unavoidable in this sense, Kymlicka still sees in work no more than a valuable option, comparable to other options which people might or might not follow. He is therefore directly confronted with the contradiction between the necessity of work and autonomous choice.¹⁸

A different liberal conception of the necessity of work is advocated by, for instance, Rawls, but also by Gutmann and Thompson. They argue from the ideas of justice and equality and regard work as a social duty manifesting reciprocity; as mentioned above, to participate in the economic structure of a society forms a social obligation. Gutmann and Thompson state this point clearly: they maintain that it is not only unfair to surf in Malibu at the expense of others but also that "citizens who decline to work are in effect refusing to participate in a scheme of fair social cooperation that is necessary to sustain any adequate policy of income support. . . . Just democracies cannot be neutral between ways of life that contribute to economic productivity and those that do not."¹⁹ Consequently, work is socially necessary and at the same time socially meaningful. But if this is so, then they seem to be compelled to say something about meaningful work, if only to foreclose the possibility of people being forced—by social duty—to do undignified, meaningless work. I shall come back to this point in a moment.

Honneth's arguments have to be reconstructed somewhat differently: the social obligation to work derives from the demands of social recognition, which in turn is necessary for the development of healthy identities. In this way, work is also necessary for the integration of society as a whole.²⁰ Without the solidarity between those who contribute to the "system of needs" through their achievements, thereby gaining social recognition, social integration would fail. So Honneth, too, argues for the necessity of work and he, too, has to somehow exclude the possibility that subjects are forced to gain recognition for meaningless and undignified work.

With the exception of Van Parijs' theory, the assumption of the necessity of work can be found in different guises in all liberal theories. But let us consider some objections. It could be argued from a liberal point of view that the problem

¹⁸Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, pp. 190 ff., 213 ff.

¹⁹Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, pp. 279 ff.

²⁰See Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, pp. 121 ff., 171 ff. See also Honneth, "Recognition as redistribution," pp. 160 ff.; "Rejoinder," pp. 359 ff. In "Work and recognition: a redefinition," he follows a different argumentation, defending the normative assumption of a necessary link between meaningful work and social recognition; see above, fn. 10.

of meaningful work will be taken care of once the just basic structure has been implemented. In a well-ordered society, people would freely consent to the jobs they have to do, and the market would take care of the sufficient provision of meaningful work. The neutrality of the state could be preserved, since the market itself would provide meaningful jobs and compensate for meaningless work through higher remuneration. People would have all the market-power they need in order to find the jobs they really want to do.²¹ Perfectionist attempts to place more or special value on meaningful work would be superfluous and compromise the neutrality of the state.

Furthermore, one could argue that society could develop in a way that makes work less and less important (due to technological development, for instance). The work-ethic of our existing western societies would fade away and we would generally live in a more leisure-oriented society. Would work still be necessary then?

These objections can be countered in two different ways. For one, the argument that people in the well-ordered society—which includes a clearing market—would be able to satisfy their preferences since the market would take care of meaningless work (those who have to do it get significantly higher salaries) is highly idealized. It assumes, plausibly, different preferences (some would prefer less money and more meaningful work, some the other way round) but, far more importantly, it also assumes real equality of opportunity: everybody enters the market with the same power to negotiate. As we know, this is not well-founded empirically and should make us skeptical about this aspect of a well-ordered society, since people who do the worst jobs usually get the worst salaries. So how should meaningless work be distributed? The state could probably compensate people for doing it through higher remuneration; it could also let people take turns in doing this kind of work. Both solutions would give the state a role conceding the special value of meaningful work, thereby transcending its neutrality and designing economic institutions which prescribe certain forms of the organization of work. I shall come back to this possibility in my last section.

But for now, this leaves us with the problem of what to do with the fact that people have to work and that at least some people in a society with a just basic structure would have to do meaningless work. Furthermore, if people have to work (for reasons of social duty, reciprocity, or earning money) then they do not have a normatively feasible claim *not* to have a preference for work—meaningful or meaningless. So work remains special and necessary at least in this sense: we can have preferences for different forms of work, but we cannot have the preference not to work. Again, if we assume that the meaninglessness of some

²¹See Arneson, “Meaningful work.” For a critique of this position see Russell Keat, “Anti-perfectionism, market economies and the right to meaningful work,” *Analyse und Kritik*, 31 (2009), 1–18.

jobs will not be neutralized by the market, we end up with the remaining conflict between necessity, autonomy, and meaningless work.

If, on the other hand, society develops such that work becomes much less important and leisure time available to everybody on a big scale, this would not pose a problem for my argument; for one, the problem of necessary meaningless work would remain, even though on a smaller scale. Secondly, however, any societal and technological development which would reduce the necessity of work and give more space to the autonomous choices of people would only be welcome. My argument does not maintain—nor does it have to—that under all imaginable circumstances work would continue to have the same form of necessity that it has under given societal conditions.

For the time being, however, under non-ideal circumstances, and even under conditions of a just liberal basic structure, work remains necessary and the concern for meaningful work has to be part of a theory of justice. I therefore think it is fair to conclude that for the theories under discussion here, work is unavoidable; the dominant approaches just overlook the necessity to work and the difficulties this generates for a liberal theory of justice. No matter how we understand and reconstruct the respective positions, the result is the same: both recognition and liberal theory state that people have to work, even though the necessity of work may have different reasons. But if this is the case—if, on the one hand, liberal democracies might have a political—and moral—*interest* in their subjects working, and if, on the other hand, subjects *de facto have to* work because they have no other way of acquiring the resources they need in order to live—then it seems rather strange that work itself, as well as the manner in which it is performed, cannot or should not be addressed by political or social theory.

A fortiori, one could say that we are confronted here with a theoretical self-contradiction: for if the theories' claim to "leave subjects free to decide how they wish to pursue their happiness under conditions of autonomy"²² is taken seriously, then prescribing to subjects that they should definitely work and maybe even pursue a particular line of work under admittedly just conditions, yet which in itself is ungratifying, heteronomous, or meaningless, seems to confront the theory with a grave difficulty concerning autonomy. Autonomy is, on the one hand, used as an argument against the (roughly Marxian) idea that work should be counted as a special source of value; and, on the other hand, subjects are forced to work, irrespective of the question of their autonomy. Therefore, if Honneth insists that the "ethical relevance of labour is . . . *exhausted* by the fact that it constitutes a social contribution,"²³ then he, like Kymlicka, seems to shun the issue of the precise relation between the necessity to work and the idea of autonomy.

²²Honneth, "Rejoinder," p. 359.

²³*Ibid.*, my italics.

Thus, I do not think that liberal or recognition theories can stop precisely at the point where the ethical relevance of the content of work itself comes into play. For, to repeat, if these theories are ultimately concerned with the autonomy of the individual, then exempting central life contexts—namely those of work—from this call for autonomy seems implausible. In addition, the theory openly contradicts the empirical findings with regard to how subjects experience their work.²⁴ Subjects usually expect more from their work than that it simply be a way of earning money which is not excessively unpleasant, and of gaining social recognition.

Therefore it is imperative that both Honneth and Kymlicka should give a normative account of the value and content of work. Note that this is not an external point of criticism, but an argument the theories themselves give rise to because of their emphasis on autonomy. It may be supported by external empirical findings, such as those on alienation from work or on unemployment, but the driving force behind the necessity of altering and amending the theory is nevertheless internal, emerging from within the theory itself, and the central weight it puts on the concept of autonomy.

III.

My second argument focuses on the personal or practical identity of the working subject. We spend a great deal of our lives working—and, as I have just tried to show, philosophers tend to defend this in normative terms. Yet what does this mean for the working subject herself? The relevant empirical studies have revealed different ways in which the work we do affects our dealings with ourselves as well as our dealings with others—in fact, all the intersubjective relationships in which we live. Empirical studies also teach us that our concern is not only with the social recognition of achievements, but also with how exactly we spend our days, what we do, how we are occupied.²⁵ I shall come to a more detailed analysis of non-alienated work in the next section; for now, I am primarily concerned with the significance of alienated work from the perspective of the subject and her practical identity.

Let me briefly clarify the concept of practical identity. We play very different roles in our lives—as a woman or a man, a teacher, a friend, a father or a mother, a member of a certain ethnic group, and so on—and we find ourselves

²⁴See, for instance, Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: Norton, 1998); Marie Jahoda, *Employment and Unemployment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 15 ff., 33 ff.; Harry Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital: the Degradation of Work in the 20th Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974). See also Adina Schwartz, "Meaningful work," *Ethics*, 92 (1982), 634–46; Robert E. Lane, *The Market Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 260 ff.; Randy Hodson and Teresa A. Sullivan, *The Social Organization of Work*, 2nd edn. (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995), pp. 93 ff.

²⁵Cf. Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*, pp. 46 ff.; Schwartz, "Meaningful work."

always already in very different social and institutional contexts which have not been voluntarily chosen. But if the autonomy of the subject in all her roles, actions, activities, and contexts is to be possible, the subject still has to be able to describe herself as having a practical identity. In *The Sources of Normativity*, Korsgaard characterizes practical identity as a “description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking.”²⁶ We should think of this description as an achievement in the sense that it does not come to us naturally, but that we have (sometimes) to strive for it, reflect on it; that it has to be formed, shaped by ourselves. Of course, the average person is a jumble of such identities and we usually do not think, or have to think, a lot about an identity binding the different roles or identities together. Even a rough and not very demanding concept of such a practical identity, however, requires at least an implicit endorsement of the roles we inhabit, the relations we live in, and the values we live by.

So it seems fair to assume, in any case, that the 5–8 hours per day which an individual spends at work have a meaning for her as a subject, a significance which probably even exceeds the average 30–50 hours per week actually spent working.²⁷ It is then not implausible to assume that her overall personality is at least in part determined by the type and character of the work she does. Therefore, again, work is special: it is not only instrumental, but also formative—and this is something we cannot only register empirically but might even wish to maintain normatively.²⁸ The formative character of work means that the work we do, and its organizational form, has an influence on how we live, on who we are, and how we see ourselves—and not only because of the different forms of the organization of work, but also simply because of the *work we do*. Work, taken in this sense, also has an effect on how we act towards others—it has, taking all these things together, an effect on our practical identity.²⁹ Note that the formative character of work can be understood in two different ways: in its first sense, it is mostly used as an argument against the negative influences of the division of labor and the ensuing forms of meaningless work; whereas in its

²⁶Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 101.

²⁷These numbers differ significantly per country: in the US, employed persons work an average of 7.5 hours per day; in Germany, 5.8. See the websites of the Bureau of Labor Statistics <www.bls.gov/> and of the Statistisches Bundesamt <www.destatis.de/> for recent numbers.

²⁸See for instance Hsieh, “Justice in production,” pp. 76 ff., on the formative character of work; also Smith, “Work and the struggle for recognition,” pp. 49 ff.

²⁹Muirhead, *Just Work*, p. 28. But note that the empirical findings are not straightforward. See for instance Melvin Seeman, “Empirical alienation studies: an overview,” *Theories of Alienation*, ed. F.R. Geyer and D.R. Schweitzer (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), esp. pp. 276 ff.; Hsieh, “Justice in production,” pp. 77 ff. For a different perspective and a richer concept of the formative character of work, see Frederick Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel’s Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 157 ff.

second sense, it is used as an argument defending the participation of subjects in work-relations and defending ideas of meaningful work.³⁰

So the argument presented here has two sides: on the one hand, it is concerned with what are called formative arguments, focusing on the formative influence of work on the working subject's autonomy. On the other hand, it is concerned with the question how the subject is able to integrate the different aspects of her life autonomously in such a way that she can develop and maintain a healthy identity. Both sides hang together: if the formative influence is distorting the subject's autonomy, then she will be less able to (autonomously) develop and maintain a healthy identity.

But let me quote Kymlicka again: "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."³¹ For Kymlicka, then, it is a question of autonomy that one might opt for alienated, meaningless work in order to be able to pursue other interests afterwards, which are more valuable to the subject.

And yet, this argument seems somewhat strange: it allows for the possibility that only a very small amount of meaningful work is available in the society. At least in theory we cannot rule out the possibility that work could be organized in such a way as to maximize alienated work (for reasons of market efficiency, for instance). How would Kymlicka—or, for that matter, Honneth—criticize this? Neither of them could have any objections, at least not provided that people all had equal rights and opportunities to engage in this work. If Honneth argues that the ethical relevance of work is exhausted by its social contribution, then the theory leaves him no room to normatively criticize alienated work and working processes. Since both theories defend the autonomy of persons, however, they would at least have to argue for giving meaningful work a place in the theory of justice and the policies of the state, given autonomy and the formative character of work—no matter how this precisely would have to be conceptualized. I shall come back to this in the last section.³²

From the point of view of the practical identity of the person, the meaning attached to alienated work becomes a particularly pressing issue. It seems naïve to think that we can switch easily between different roles and forget the work and the sort of work we have been doing for hours. In a social context in which work dominates people's lives and plays a central role in identity formation, it is implausible to think that alienated work would have no impact on a person's

³⁰See the classic and often quoted passage in Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), Vi.f. 50 (p. 782).

³¹Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, p. 191.

³²But see Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, p. 217, on the problem of neutrality of the state; and see Honneth's most recent attempt to tackle the problem in "Work and recognition: a redefinition."

self-conception and her relations with others in other spheres of her life, and that she could simply choose, without cost, to undertake alienated work in order to autonomously pursue other interests.

Socio-psychological studies have demonstrated the consequences that futile, alienated work can have for the whole person, including for her health and her intersubjective relationships.³³ The most articulate—post-Marxian—advocate of this line of argument is Adina Schwartz: “In general, when persons devote significant amounts of time to remunerate employment and when they are prevented from acting autonomously while performing their jobs they are . . . caused to lead *less autonomous lives on the whole*.”³⁴ This is true, as she goes on to explain, on both empirical and conceptual grounds. Alienated work, heteronomous work, cannot be comprehended within the life of an individual as just one option among many precisely because the work which we do affects our whole life, its good and bad. To describe the relation between the subject and her work solely or even mostly in instrumental and voluntaristic terms seems to underestimate the role of work as well as the need for a—roughly—unified life.

Thus, *firstly*, it is not so trivial to substantiate the claim that alienated work is easily compatible with the autonomy and practical identity of subjects in a just and free society. Furthermore, if this were the case, it would be unclear how to describe and interpret why subjects are able to experience work as alienated or meaningless.³⁵ And *secondly*, in order to criticize such a claim to meaningful work, recourse to an unrestrainedly (or restrainedly, for that matter) perfectionist or Marxian anthropological approach is not even necessary. Of course, the concept of alienation can have distinctively Marxian connotations; but this is not necessarily so. As the reference to Schwartz shows, translating “alienated” into “heteronomous” successfully makes the same point within a purely liberal framework.

Now Kymlicka could object that this conception of practical identity is far too strong, since there will always be parts of our—autonomously chosen and lived—lives which we value, if at all, in a purely instrumental way because we value something else as the valuable end. I think he is right to a certain extent: if we were living in a society in which everybody could freely choose to spend two hours on well-paid alienated work every day, and play with the children or go to the movies for the rest of the day, this might be true. As it stands, we do not live in such a society, and, as I have pointed out above, it is not likely that such a society is ever to exist.

³³See Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*, pp. 15 ff. See also Christophe Dejours, “Subjectivity, work and action,” *Critical Horizons*, 7 (# 1) (2006), 45–62 and Seeman, “Empirical alienation studies,” pp. 265 ff.

³⁴Schwartz, “Meaningful work,” p. 636, my italics. See also *ibid.*, p. 638 and the literature to which she refers. See also Karl Marx, “Economic and philosophical manuscripts,” *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. D. McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 87 ff.

³⁵See Smith, “Work and the struggle for recognition,” p. 51, referring to empirical findings and to Honneth, “Work and instrumental action.”

However, one should not make the mistake of overestimating the relevance of the practical identity of a person with respect to the self-determinedness of her life. Although it is surely right that subjects do not remain unaffected by alienated work, we will, admittedly, never lead a totally autonomous life and will never have perfectly integrated identities, in which all and every aspects are endorsed as valuable. Persons mostly live, or have to live, in social and institutional contexts which restrict their range of options and choices, which confront them with having to accept traditional roles, and which limit their autonomy. Still one would not want to maintain that these persons cannot exhibit autonomy at all in their lives.

However, this only shows that the concept of autonomy, like that of practical identity or the integrated person, can be realized in different degrees in the various aspects of our lives, in the roles we play. It does not take anything away from the argument that a *critique* of heteronomous or alienated work as a source of structural, pervasive, and nonvoluntary alienation has to be possible as part of a theory of a just and free society. What precisely this means—whether, for instance, a theory of justice should include a right to meaningful work, or whether such a society would have to provide for meaningful work in another way—is a different matter. I shall come back to it in my last section.

IV.

We still have to see how the two arguments outlined in the two previous sections relate to and rely on a conception of meaningful work, and what precisely the connection is between autonomy and meaningful work. Only now, then, do we come directly to the problem which so far has remained in the background, namely the question of whether and how non-alienated work can be described in more precise terms. Let us therefore turn to the meaning of ‘meaningful’ work; I shall not address the question of the role of autonomy with respect to the organization of the workforce and the idea of collective property in the means of production. Although autonomy in these contexts is often discussed in connection with the role of autonomy in meaningful work, I think it is possible to bypass them here and to discuss these issues separately.³⁶

The first question to ask is why subjects find their work gratifying. It seems to be the *work itself* which subjects experience as meaningful.³⁷ This can also be formulated from the opposite perspective, by focusing on unsatisfying and

³⁶Cf. Hsieh, “Justice in production,” pp. 81 ff.; Schwartz, “Meaningful work,” pp. 641 ff. See more generally Allen W. Wood, *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 66 ff.

³⁷But see the list of reasons why people work in Jon Elster, “Self-realization in work and politics: the Marxist conception of the good life,” *Social Philosophy & Policy*, 3 (1986), 97–126 at p. 111, and in Arneson, “Meaningful work,” p. 528 (and his quite broad definition of meaningful work on p. 522.). Cf. also Schwartz, “Meaningful work,” pp. 634 ff., and more generally Eric and Mary Josephson, eds., *Man Alone: Alienation in Modern Society* (New York: Dell, 1962), esp. pp. 86 ff.

frustrating, undignified and meaningless, work or working conditions.³⁸ The attempt is then to determine *ex negativo* the relation between a subject and the work she is doing. Regarding their work, so it is argued, subjects are concerned not only with fair labor relations, but also with the dignity or the meaningfulness of work itself.

Phenomenologically speaking, we are therefore confronted with two very different yet corresponding sorts of experience: work, its quality, can be experienced, on the one hand, as intrinsically gratifying;³⁹ on the other hand, we are familiar with personal reports of disappointment, frustration, exhaustion, and humiliation which despite changes in both work and working conditions have remained remarkably unchanged over the past 30 years.⁴⁰ When these experiences are articulated and interpreted, predicates such as dignified or undignified, meaningful or meaningless, autonomous or heteronomous, alienated or non-alienated, are often used to describe work. It is helpful here to distinguish between two senses of 'meaningful,' which in turn can be assigned to two different traditions: 'meaningful' can be grasped more in the sense of 'autonomous' and more in the sense of 'non-alienated'. Only taken together do they fully constitute the semantic and normative richness of 'meaningful.'

The *first aspect* refers to the idea of autonomy and a quasi-Kantian dignity. In the writings of sociologists of work, countless examples are cited in which subjects describe work and work processes which they have experienced as heteronomous and undignified.⁴¹ Schwartz also refers to empirical studies which have focused on precisely this link between heteronomy and work: if I have no influence on the work process, no chance to intervene or make decisions, and no possibility to determine at least aspects of my work, then I perceive my work as heteronomous and undignified, and in that sense as meaningless.⁴²

So we can discern at least the following elements of autonomy in the relation between the subject and her work: it is work she has chosen freely; she has, furthermore, at least some influence on the arrangements of the work and on the work process; she can use her specific capacities and abilities in the work process; and the work is sufficiently complex, interesting, and demands a certain intelligence in carrying it out.⁴³

³⁸See for instance Jahoda, *Employment and Unemployment*; Honneth, "Redistribution as recognition," pp. 114 ff.; Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Knopf, 1972); Hodson and Sullivan, *The Social Organization of Work*, pp. 93 ff., 116 ff.

³⁹Muirhead, *Just Work*, p. 33.

⁴⁰See Nicholas Smith, "The hermeneutics of work: on Richard Sennett," *Critical Horizons*, 8 (# 2) (2007), pp. 188 ff.; Hodson and Sullivan, *The Social Organization of Work*, pp. 116 ff.

⁴¹See for instance Norman E. Bowie, "A Kantian theory of meaningful work," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 17 (1998), 1083–92.

⁴²Schwartz, "Meaningful work," p. 634. On the link between autonomy, dignity, and alienation see *ibid.*, pp. 635 ff.

⁴³See also Arneson, "Meaningful work," p. 517. On the possibilities of a causal relation between work and autonomy see Hsieh, "Justice in production," pp. 78–9.

Note that all these elements admit of degrees. What is important at the moment is that if one or all elements of this list are lacking in the work of a subject and her relation to it, then she will experience her work as heteronomous and, ultimately, as undignified. It is noteworthy that this experiencing of work as undignified obviously amounts to not feeling respected as an autonomous person.⁴⁴ Again, this indicates that the liberal concept of autonomy can itself directly lead to a criticism of meaningless work and undignified working relations. Accordingly, a free and just society in which the autonomy of subjects is protected and promoted cannot and should not be characterized exclusively by heteronomous work and work arrangements. Neither can this lack of autonomy (from the point of view of the subject) be cushioned by social recognition, although this aspect certainly remains important.⁴⁵

The *second aspect* of ‘meaningful’ or ‘meaningless’ work connects to the idea of alienation; the underlying tradition in this case is (broadly speaking) the Marxian concept of labour.⁴⁶ Famously in his early manuscripts, Marx draws a distinction between four forms of alienation which workers in capitalism have to suffer: firstly, alienation from the product of labour; secondly, alienation from the “productive activity” itself; thirdly, alienation from “species-being,” for humans do not produce in accordance with their truly human powers; and, finally, alienation from other human beings (“alienation of man from man”), since the relation of exchange replaces the satisfaction of mutual need.⁴⁷ The third—objective—form of alienation is central for the strong Marxian notion of alienation, according to which it is in work and only in work that human beings can realize themselves. For liberals, even moderately perfectionist liberals, this form of alienation is implausible from the outset because of the liberal conviction of value pluralism and, even in its moderately perfectionist forms, of its refusing the possibility of strong substantial ideas of the good life. The fourth form concerning the alienation of man from man is certainly more interesting even to liberals, if we consider, for instance, the formative aspects of work. But I shall not go into this any further, since we are here concerned with the link between meaningful work and the autonomy of the subject.

So for our question and in our context, mainly the first two forms of alienation are of interest.⁴⁸ Marx is here referring, firstly, to the worker being alienated from

⁴⁴Cf. Schwartz, “Meaningful work,” p. 636.

⁴⁵Honneth, “Introduction,” pp. xviii ff.; “Redistribution as recognition,” pp. 135 ff. See also Elster, “Self-realization and work,” pp. 111 ff., on the relation between self-realization and self-esteem.

⁴⁶On alienation see Wood, *Karl Marx*, pp. 44 ff. On the Hegelian influence on Marx see Joachim Israel, “Alienation and reification,” *Theories of Alienation*, ed. F.R. Geyer and D.R. Schweitzer (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), pp. 41–58. On the early Marx see Daniel Brudney, *Marx’ Attempt to Leave Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 143–92.

⁴⁷Marx, “Economic and philosophical manuscripts,” pp. 89 ff. See also Karl Marx, “On James Mill,” *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. McLellan, pp. 124–33, esp. p. 132.

⁴⁸For a more detailed discussion of the concept see Wood, *Karl Marx*, pp. 44 ff.; Honneth, “Work and instrumental action,” pp. 17 ff., here also on Hegel’s influence on Marx; Hodson and Sullivan, *The Social Organization of Work*, pp. 94 ff.

the product of his work if he has no influence on what the product is and what happens to the product after its production; and, secondly, he is pointing to the alienation from the productive activity that occurs if the worker has no influence on the form of the activity, on the process of production itself. Why is it important to have this influence? Because, as Marx explains, the worker wants to objectify himself in his work—in the product as well as in the productive activity—, that is, he wants to express through and in his work his “individuality und peculiarity.”⁴⁹ The less the worker can express himself in his work, the more alienated he is from it.

Although many commentators still cling to the idea of skilled craftsmanship as the ultimate in gratifying and meaningful work, it seems much more plausible not to reduce the idea of objectification to actual objects being produced (as in pre-industrial times), but rather to interpret it in the sense that the abilities, ideas, aims, and talents of the worker—his “individuality”—can be objectified in interaction with the external world in different, even abstract, forms.⁵⁰ Meaningful or unalienated work can then be interpreted as making it possible for the worker to conceive of himself as having had a self-determined influence on the process of production as well as on the product itself. If that is the case, then the worker participates in the producing activity in such a way that he can see this activity and its product as not totally determined from the outside but as (some form of) expression of his own individuality, his own talents and abilities. Thus, alienated work is alienated because it is work which cannot be seen by the subject as a possible self-realization of his abilities and talents, or as an actualization and externalization of those talents and interests. Meaningless, monotonous work forecloses the possibility for the subject to endorse the work and its value; it cannot be integrated into his life as one (important) value among others; it stays external and purely instrumental.⁵¹

Now we can see how this (roughly Marxian) idea of unalienated work connects to the first, Kantian, aspect of meaningful work: interpreted in this way, the idea of alienation refers to the (expression of the) autonomy of the worker in a way comparable to the first aspect, this time focusing on his being able to realize his talents and abilities, his “individuality,” in the work and the producing activity in a self-determined way. Together, these two aspects can substantiate what is meant when subjects refer to their work as ‘meaningful.’

There is, however, a *third aspect* of the meaning of meaningful work: the broader perspective of why subjects generally find some activities or forms of

⁴⁹Marx, “On James Mill,” p. 132.

⁵⁰See the very elucidating Hans-Christoph Schmidt am Busch, “*Anerkennung*” als Prinzip der kritischen Theorie (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), pp. 69 ff., for an analysis of the concept of objectification in Hegel and Marx, also of the critique of the ideal of craftsmanship. See G. A. Cohen, *History Labour and Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 189 ff., on alienation and the unfreedom of the pre-industrial craftsman.

⁵¹Elster, “Self-realization in work,” p. 102.

work more interesting and satisfying than others. What I have in mind is Rawls' Aristotelian Principle.⁵² Rawls famously writes that:

other things being 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. The intuitive idea here is that human beings take more pleasure in doing something as they become more proficient in it, and of two activities they do equally well, they prefer the one calling on the larger repertoire of more intricate and subtle discriminations.⁵³

Rawls describes this principle explicitly as an anthropological principle of motivation, which we "assume to be true,"⁵⁴ so it might be understood as a principle which could explicate why human beings have an interest in non-alienated work. In his explication of the Aristotelian Principle, however, he does not seem to draw any normative consequences from it. Yet a link between this principle and its possible application to contexts of meaningful work is provided by Rawls himself when he writes that the Aristotelian Principle "bears a certain resemblance to the idealist notion of self-realization."⁵⁵ Interestingly, Rawls also mentions this idea of self-realization in a totally different context: in the context of the arguments for the second part of the second principle of justice, "the liberal principle of fair equality of opportunity."⁵⁶ Here, the principle of self-realization is taken to be an argument for fair equality of opportunity, since taking part in the work-process provides a possibility for "experiencing the realization of self which comes from a *skillful and devoted* exercise of social duties. They [i.e. human beings who would be deprived of this] would be deprived of one of the main forms of human good."⁵⁷ This seems a rather astonishing move in Rawls' argument, since he falls back on a vocabulary which conceives of taking part in societal work as something intrinsically good for human beings.

Now, if it was the sheer and pure "exercise of social duties" which constituted a human good, we would not yet have even a moderate argument for the idea of meaningful work.⁵⁸ But Rawls explicitly talks of the "skillful and devoted" exercise, thereby qualifying the sort of exercise in a rather substantial way. This connects to Rawls' brief reference to meaningful work at the end of *A Theory of Justice*, where he criticizes the division of labor if it makes people "servilely dependent on others and made to choose between monotonous and routine

⁵²Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 424 ff.

⁵³Ibid., p. 426.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 427.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 431.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 83ff.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 84, my italics.

⁵⁸This only leads to an argument which would see work as a social duty and social duties as valuable. See Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, pp. 275 ff. Honneth argues slightly differently, basing his arguments on the social recognition of cooperation. See "Redistribution as recognition," pp. 180 ff.

occupations which are deadening to human thought and sensibility.”⁵⁹ He claims that “each can be offered a variety of tasks,” but that even if we had “meaningful work for all,” the division of labor in the sense of the dependency of people upon each other could ultimately not be overcome—which is, of course, no evil in the “social union of social unions.”⁶⁰ So it seems right to interpret Rawls’ explication of the Aristotelian Principle as an indication that, for him, a theory of meaningful work would be consistent with a general theory of a free and just society. Or stronger, that it would be an adequate enrichment of such a theory.⁶¹ Thus, Rawls’ argument also shows that liberal theories do not necessarily have to refrain from having a conception of meaningful work, as Kymlicka suggests, but that meaningful work can form part of a theory of justice.

So where do we stand? We have explored two interpretations of what meaningful work amounts to, one roughly Kantian and one roughly Marxian, and in addition a supporting principle for making plausible a theory of meaningful work, based on considerations in Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*.

Let me now briefly discuss one possible objection. That subjects experience work and work processes as meaningful cannot be addressed completely independently of the system of values of the society in which the work itself takes place. This is precisely the point that the theory of recognition is keen to emphasize. An individual achievement—or work—meriting and gaining social recognition can be meaningful in subjective terms precisely *because* it is an achievement—or work—which within the prevailing system of values is comprehended as relevant to society.⁶²

On the other hand, we have seen that although the value ascribed to work can differ between individuals—some will find some work more meaningful than others—the arguments raised here make it plausible to assume that there is an objective value or meaning of work along the lines of autonomy, alienation, and dignity. This is supported by Rawls’ Aristotelian Principle. If it carries any weight at all and if we take seriously the empirical findings of why people find work good and meaningful, then it seems fair to say that there is some objective value in this idea of meaningful work.⁶³ The content of meaningful work does not seem reducible to individual, subjectively immensely varying descriptions—as probably Kymlicka would maintain—but surmounts its purely subjective interpretation.

Despite individual as well as historical and cultural variations it is therefore important to note that it does make sense to ascribe normative value to this idea of meaningful work and to conceptualize it in a theory of justice. This does not

⁵⁹Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 529.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 527.

⁶¹See also *ibid.*, pp. 523 ff.

⁶²Honneth, “The point of recognition,” pp. 248 ff. See also *The Struggle for Recognition*, pp. 121 ff.

⁶³See for instance Arneson, “Meaningful work,” pp. 522 ff.; Hsieh, “Justice in production,” pp. 75 ff.; Walsh, “Meaningful Work,” pp. 233 ff.; Schwartz, “Meaningful Work,” pp. 635 ff.

mean that recognition theory, with its insistence on the *social* recognition of work or achievement, is wrong; what it does mean, though, is that there does not seem to be a necessary link between the value of work as *meaningful* work and the value it gains from its *social* recognition, since on the face of it social recognition cannot by itself make work meaningful.⁶⁴ Both aspects do not exclude each other; but the one cannot be reduced to the other, either. Consider care work, for instance: it can be very meaningful to care for your children, but it does not get the social recognition it deserves. It would be too easy to *identify* social recognition with (the amount of) remuneration, but Honneth himself stresses the clear link between the two.⁶⁵

We can conclude that the idea of meaningful work as outlined above is neither reducible to a purely subjective value nor reducible to its social recognition. To repeat: this does not mean that we have to plead for a Marxist perfectionism, maintaining that the value of meaningful work exceeds all other values and is the only or highest form of human self-realization. Moderate perfectionism is all we need.

V.

Let me summarize my arguments and briefly point out the consequences of my approach to meaningful work for a liberal theory and for the liberal state. The theory advocated here can be described as a moderate form of perfectionism.⁶⁶ I have argued that the liberal state and the liberal theory of justice have to take up concern for the value of meaningful work since work has a central place in the life of the subjects working. *Given that* subjects—by state policy and on the basis of normative considerations—are expected to spend a large part of their time working in society, *then* there is no defense for saying that—alas!—only alienated work is available.

So the state does play a role here and it does have a special responsibility for meaningful work. I have argued for a conditional: *if* people have to work, *then* meaningful work has to be available and its importance has to be adequately understood. In fact, however, I also go one step further: given the liberal democratic—work-centered—societies we live in, work itself represents a value

⁶⁴But see Honneth, “Work and recognition: a redefinition” for his most recent attempt to make such an argument.

⁶⁵See Honneth, “Redistribution or recognition,” pp. 141, 150 ff., 213. The question as to what counts as work in the first place has to be open to critique and re-conceptualization, since what counts as (meaningful) “work” may be normatively questionable and entrench injustice. See Roessler, “Work, recognition, emancipation” for a critique and for a discussion of the differences—and the different arguments for these differences—between domestic work and gained employment. See also Nancy Fraser, “After the family wage: a post-industrial thought experiment,” *Justice Interruptus* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 41–68.

⁶⁶See Joseph Chan, “Legitimacy, unanimity, and perfectionism,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 29 (2000), 5–42, esp. pp. 14 ff. on a (slightly different, but still very helpful) idea of moderate perfectionism; see also pp. 18 ff. on a moderate perfectionist conception of meaningful work.

for subjects which tends to exceed other values in its significance and which therefore needs to play a special role in our notion of a free and just society.⁶⁷

Furthermore, the conditional rests on an idea of social duty or obligation, certainly in Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, so if we take seriously not only the central place of autonomy in liberal and recognition theories, but also their respective arguments for work as a social duty, then meaningful work has to play a special role in the theories of justice and in the liberal society, although, *nota bene*, the just state is not responsible for *all* dimensions of (a good) life, as it would be in a stronger perfectionist view.⁶⁸

What does this mean for the liberal theory of justice? Let me sketch three possibilities for interpreting the role of the state. The weakest suggestion would be the claim that everybody should have equal opportunity for meaningful work in society. Assuming that there is a certain amount of meaningful work, provided by the market, everybody has to have fair equality of opportunity. Note that this position only means that the available meaningful work should be accessible to everybody in a fair way. The amount of meaningful work itself would not be of concern for the theory of justice. Given the arguments advanced in Sections II and III, however, I am very skeptical of whether this position would be sufficiently powerful.

The second position is a stronger one: the theory of justice would include a *right* to meaningful work. In a Rawlsian framework, for instance, meaningful work would be added to the list of primary social goods to be distributed and thus be made equally available to everybody.⁶⁹

The third possibility understands meaningful work as setting a standard for any job in the liberal just society, comparable to a minimum wage.⁷⁰ This is an even stronger position than the second one, which focuses on a right to meaningful work, since we can assume that, under that option, people could trade their right to meaningful work for money. If meaningful work was a standard for any work, every job would have to be performable in such a way that a minimum of self-determination, complexity, and skills would be possible and necessary. Work which could, in principle, not be made meaningful in this sense should rotate. State policies could start, for instance, with public jobs: the state as (at least in most western societies) the biggest employer could stop focusing on external motivation (such as a larger salary or more vacation) and start paying attention to the content and character of work. This would certainly amount to a liberal, just, reasonable state policy given the arguments advanced

⁶⁷See Arneson, "Is work special?" pp. 1127 ff.

⁶⁸For different forms of and problems in perfectionism, see for instance Steven Wall & George Klosko, eds., *Perfectionism and Neutrality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003). See also Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), esp. pp. 369 ff., for a moderate liberal perfectionist position.

⁶⁹Cf. Arneson, "Meaningful work," pp. 523 ff., on the difference between a right and an option to meaningful work.

⁷⁰Cf. Schwartz, "Meaningful work," pp. 641 ff., who seems to be defending this position.

here. On the basis of these arguments, I should attempt to defend this third possibility; but a defense of this approach would require separate arguments which I cannot give here.

The differences between the three possibilities would have to be discussed in detail, in terms of their normative merits as well as in terms of the costs they would generate for the liberal market society. This more detailed discussion would have to proceed on the grounds argued for in this article, that meaningful work has to form part of the liberal theory of justice. So on the one hand, the theory has to be at least moderately perfectionist in the sense outlined; on the other hand, however, no matter precisely how we envisage the status of meaningful work in the liberal theory of justice and in the state, I want to stress, again, that the theory advocated here is not forced to make the claim that work is the only human activity which makes a human being human, as if it were only possible—in a Marxian vein—to say that total salvation lies in work and only in work. A moderately perfectionist liberal—or, for that matter, recognition—theory can maintain that there are different human potentials which need to be realized in order for human beings to enjoy a good autonomous life: other values, such as relationships, children, playing, art, and religion can also lend expression to human potential. Such a moderately and pluralistically perfectionist theory is therefore compatible with liberal theory, as well as with the ambitions of recognition theory; in any case it does not set the theory of the good above the concept of liberal individual rights. Nobody *has to* work just because work amounts to the realization of a human potential. But it does mean that if state policies take into account the fact that subjects living and working within liberal societies are autonomous subjects and that they have to work, then they cannot remain neutral regarding the quality or character of work.