

**‘AN ETHICAL ARGUMENT FOR REPLACING HUMANS WITH MACHINES IN  
MEANINGLESS WORKPLACES’**

**Bridget Kelly**

**130 5928**

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**Declaration**

**I declare that his research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts, Applied Ethics for Professionals, in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.**

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**BRIDGET KELLY**

**16<sup>th</sup> day of March 2020.**

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## **SECTION I: INTRODUCTION**

Work plays a key role in our lives from both a time and a value perspective, such that it is implausible to believe that being with or without work does not affect our lives and our well-being. Are all types of work equal? Do all types of work affect us in the same way? In the Greek myth of Sisyphus, the gods believed that there was nothing more dreadful than futile, meaningless work, so to punish Sisyphus for crimes he had committed, they condemned him for the rest of his life to push a rock to the top of a mountain, only to have it roll back down again. From then onwards, Sisyphus's life, his 'whole being is directed at accomplishing nothing' (Camus, 1955, p. 108). Sisyphus does not surrender to his plight; his unhappiness is removed at the point when he finally accepts his fate. Does his subjugation to a life of meaningless work reflect a loss of all hope, and thus acceptance of meaninglessness, or does it reflect a realisation that human dignity lies in the acceptance that all human life is fundamentally meaningless, and in spite of this, choosing not to end it all but to carry on? The latter reflects the thinking of Camus and other existentialists, who believe that genuine human freedom consists in our ability to imbue meaning that we create ourselves, into something as meaningless as Sisyphus's plight.

I do not agree that we have to accept a life filled with meaningless work. In my research report, I claim that there is an ethical argument for replacing humans with machines in meaningless workplaces. My argument may seem like a truism, since showing that something meaningful contributes in a positive fashion to something, and something meaningless contributes to the same something in a negative fashion, seems obvious. I do not believe my argument is that frivolous. I analyse some theories of well-being for characteristics that may lend support to my argument in an effort to find sufficient force to argue that meaningless work is damaging to the well-being of humans. And that if we value our well-being and the well-being of others, then we ought do as much as we can to remove this type of work, even if it requires paternalistic action to achieve this. Thus, if I am able to show that my argument, despite being a truism, has support from within the philosophical theories of well-being and the research on meaningful work, and that connecting meaningful work with well-being moves the discussion about machines and their role in the workplace forward, I will be content.

To understand how work, and more specifically, how different types of work affect whether our lives are good or bad for us, I need to understand how work contributes to our well-being.

The philosophical theories of well-being I consider are: Hedonism, Desire Fulfillment, Objective List, and the Perfectionist theories, each of which seeks to account for the factors that determine an individual's well-being. Work can be accounted for as a prudential good in all of these theories, except for Hedonism. If work contributes positively to well-being, is it only a specific kind of work that makes this contribution? I differentiate between meaningful and meaningless work in order to answer this question.

One challenge to my argument is that both 'meaningful' and 'meaningless' work are subjective concepts, and therefore the term 'meaningful' for one individual does not necessarily mean 'meaningful' for another, and in the same vein, 'meaningless' for one individual does not mean 'meaningless' for another. This comes as no surprise since the concept of 'meaning' has been a focus of philosophers, psychologists, and other academics for many years. Notwithstanding this, my view is that not having an absolute definition of meaningless work does not detract from my argument. I need only show that meaningless work, however defined, negatively impacts well-being, which validates that there is an ethical argument for replacing humans with machines in these workplaces. Another challenge is that the act of removing the right for individuals to choose the type of work they want to do, is paternalistic. I counter this with the argument that the state is entrusted to make decisions on behalf of, and in the interests of its citizens, and a decision to move meaningless work to machines ought to be one of these because of its negative impact on overall well-being. I argue that such an intervention is similar in nature to the state regulating the wearing of safety belts, and therefore it should be acceptable. I do not mean to suggest that there is a similarity in the wearing of safety belts and not having to do meaningless work; the similarity is in the actual paternalistic act of implementing such regulations. Further, I claim that the benefits of a limited amount of paternalism far outweighs its negative aspects. States are increasingly focused on national well-being as an objective, which serves to emphasize the attention that policy goals such as creating more meaningful work may receive. Since meaningless work does not contribute to well-being, I claim that there is an ethical argument for replacing humans with machines when the workplace is meaningless.

My research paper is structured as follows:

In Section II, I review what well-being is, and how the concepts of well-being and prudential value relate to one another. I consider how some of the theories of well-being account for the things which contribute positively to a good life, and more specifically, whether work is one

of these. The theories reviewed are: Hedonism, Desire Fulfillment Theory (hereafter known as DFT), Objective List Theory (hereafter known as OLT), and the Perfectionist theories of well-being.

In Section III, I attempt to arrive at a definition of meaningful work through firstly reviewing some of the philosophical theory on the subject, and secondly, I consider three approaches to objectively meaningful work from Veltman (2016), Bowie (1998) and Vogt (2005). I derive a set of characteristics of meaningful work from those that are common to these three approaches. I argue that meaningful work does contribute positively to well-being under DFT, OLT and the Objective Goods Perfectionist theory of well-being.

Section IV looks at meaningless work and considers some of the philosophical opinion on this. I review some examples of meaningless work and question whether these types of work are indeed meaningless to all individuals. This leads to a discussion on meaningless work being a subjective construct, specifically prevalent when evaluating the different opinions on what types of work are meaningless or not. I include a discussion on paternalism, since the objection that my argument is paternalistic in nature poses a strong threat to my research report.

In Section V, I review what types of work machines are good at and what types of work humans are good at. Some of the anxiety around the proliferation of machines in the workplace is misplaced, since machines are currently not able to do all of the work that humans are good at. I look at some of the capabilities that make humans unique in the workplace; machines are not yet able to replicate all of these today.

Section VI, I review my argument and consider whether I have done enough to claim that replacing humans with machines in meaningless workplaces, is ethically admissible. I conclude that the argument appears valid, despite the fact that some of the links and threads on which it is based, may seem tenuous.

## SECTION II: THE PHILOSOPHICAL THEORIES OF WELL-BEING

### WHAT IS WELL-BEING?

Philosophical theories of well-being account for those things in life which are either fundamentally good or fundamentally bad for us. Well-being is ‘the most comprehensive perspective from which to judge a life’ (Raz, 2004, p. 286). Words often used to describe well-being are: ‘in one’s best interests’, ‘flourishing’, ‘for one’s own good’, ‘quality of life’ and so on, and things which impact well-being negatively are described as ‘bad for one’s life’, ‘harmful’ and ‘making one worse off’. Since the terms ‘good’ and ‘good for’ are frequently used in the theories of well-being, I make use of Roger Crisp’s (Crisp, 2017, pp. 4-5) example of two worlds to illustrate the difference between these terms. One world has nothing in it except a beautiful Vermeer painting, and the other has nothing in it except a human being living a good life. Crisp argues that the world with the human being is more valuable than that containing the beautiful painting, because it has something which is ‘good for’ the human being. A ‘good for’ relationship, has subject-relativity in that it implies a special relationship between the two objects (Campbell, 2016, p. 403). Leading a happy life is not the same as leading a life which is good for one. A good life is one of ‘rectitude, propriety, moral good deeds, or integrity and adherence to standards of personal morality’ (Raz, 2004, p. 270), and so on, whereas a happy life is one of ‘contentment, of ambitions and aspirations realized’ (2004, p. 270). A happy life does not require goodness at all. This is not a position which is universally accepted by all ethical theories, or by all theorists. For example, hedonism states that happiness is the only prudential good, and a life without happiness cannot be good at all, and according to Epicurus, a prominent hedonist from the ancient world, ‘pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life’ (Parry, 2014, p. 31).

A further clarification is required to differentiate between a ‘prudentially good’ life (which is a life full of well-being), from all the other possible types of good lives. Campbell lists the following lives which do not have the same value as a prudentially good life: ‘an impersonally good life’, ‘a morally good life’, ‘a spiritually good life’, ‘an aesthetically good life’, ‘a perfectionistically good life’, ‘an admirable life’ and a choiceworthy life (Campbell, 2016, p. 403). When we say something is ‘good for’, the ‘good’ suggests something of value which represents the prudential value (Taylor, 2013, p. 10). ‘Well-being is what someone has if her life is going well for her, whereas something has prudential value for someone if it



contributes to making her life go well' (2013, p. 10). According to Taylor, something has prudential value if it actually has an impact on someone's life (2013, p. 11). An example of prudential value is healthy food. One could say that 'Eating healthy food is good for him'. A more relevant example to my research report is meaningful work. One might say that 'Having meaningful work is good for her'. Both examples reflect something of prudential value which makes a life go better for that person; neither example implies that the individual's life is going well overall.

Parfit states there are a limited number of prudential goods that can improve our lives such as having moral goodness, rational activity, development of one's abilities, having children, being a good parent, seeking knowledge and being aware of true beauty (Parfit, 1984, p. 499 cited in Harsanyi, 1995, p. 323). I am not sure that I agree that the number of prudential goods which are good for us, should be either limited or prescribed as this starts looking like an objective list of goods which ignores the individual's needs. Perhaps it is as Harsanyi suggests; all humans have the same set of basic human desires and these are possibly the same prudential goods that Parfit refers. Harsanyi's list (Parfit, 1984, p. 499 cited in Harsanyi, 1995, p. 323) of basic desires are:

Desire for material comfort and for physical and economic security; for freedom to control our own lives; for having good health; for jobs suitable to our personal abilities and personal interests; for further developing our abilities; for deep personal relations in mutual love; in marriage and in true friendship; for having children and for being a good parent; for knowledge and for beauty in nature and in art; for having access to the ordinary pleasures of human life; for worthwhile accomplishments of some kind; and for making our own behaviour consistent with our basic moral values.

Philosophers and other theorists have explained prudential value in four proposals which I will review in brief below:

(1) Darwall's Rational Care Theory of Welfare (Darwall, 2002, pp. 16-20) states that when we care for a person, we desire his good for its own sake and not as a means to an end; we desire this good for his own sake if he is worthy of it. A person's good is based on what we ought to want for the person for that person's sake. It is not based on what that person values, prefers or wants. Under Rational Care Analysis the scope seems to also allow for the inclusion of plants and animals since they too, arguably experience well-being. Theories of well-being such as OLT and Perfectionist theories would support Rational Care Theory in

that the items which they believe contribute positively to our well-being are objectively arrived at.

(2) Locative Analysis (Campbell 2016, p. 406) states that something is good for a person because it is simply good unconditionally, and it is located in a person's life. The scope of beings that can have well-being under Locative Analysis are those that can have lives which contain both good and bad things (2016, p. 406). It is unclear whether this includes plants and animals. From a normative perspective, facts about good or bad, have implications on everyone (Fletcher, 2012, pp. 2-3).

(3) Positional Analysis (Campbell 2016, p. 407) refers to the desirability of occupying positions in the world, such as being physically attractive, having good health, having intellect, being presented with opportunities and so on, with some positions being more desirable than others. A complete set of properties describes one's overall position at a point in time, and therefore describes the desirability or undesirability of an individual's life. An individual with a high level of well-being has an overall position that another would desire to have. Desirability in this case is subject-neutral since if it is a desirable position to occupy, then it is desirable for anyone to desire this.

(4) Suitability Analysis (Campbell 2016, pp. 407-408) is quite different from the other three proposals. The scope is broad; anything that is well suited to something and serves it well, is within the scope of well-being. From a normative perspective, if something is good for someone, there is no need to do anything about this. An example of suitability analysis is that good food and exercise are good for human beings. I will argue in my research report that meaningful work is also good for human beings.

Well-being and prudential value are 'two sides of the same coin' according to Taylor (Taylor, 2013, p. 12), which means that statements about prudential value can be translated into statements about well-being. He (2013, p. 12) proposes the following:

X has a positive (negative) prudential value for S

is equivalent to

X increases (decreases) S's well-being.

The above statement of relationship between prudential value and well-being is useful because it links the changes in prudential value with the changes in well-being, and it states

that prudential value can be measured through changes in well-being, which is useful where well-being has been adopted as a policy goal. As illustrated by these four proposals there is no single agreed-upon definition of prudential value. Fletcher contrasts Darwall's Rational Care Analysis with Locative Analysis, pointing out that Darwall's proposal includes the notion of 'care' which involves a desire for the agent's well-being whereas Locative Analysis is independent of an understanding what well-being is, making Locative Analysis less susceptible to interpretation (Fletcher, 2012, pp. 7-8).

The fact that there is no single agreed-upon definition of well-being (or prudential value) may result in philosophers, on occasion, 'talking past' each other and sometimes 'conflating' concepts of well-being (Campbell, 2016, p. 409). This is not carelessness on anyone's part, rather it highlights the issues that may result from not having consensus on a definition. It is unlikely that definitions will ever be agreed upon as there is always new research and thinking on these topics, all of which serves to move the discussions forward. Despite this, my research report will have integrity, since a definition of well-being should not affect the substance of my argument. My aim in this section is to establish whether there is a relationship between work and well-being by considering the various theories of well-being and how these relate or could relate to work. With that in mind, I will discuss some of the most commonly discussed and influential theories of well-being: hedonism, desire-fulfilment theory, objective list theory and perfectionism.

## **THEORIES OF WELL-BEING**

Some theories of well-being assess our well-being from our psychological state, for example pleasure and pain under Hedonism, and desire satisfaction under Desire Satisfaction theories. Their focus is on 'what we happen to take pleasure in, to be satisfied by or to want fundamentally, [and that] determines what is good for us' (Tiberius, 2014, p. 3); what we want is defined by each person's psychology. These theories are subjectivist in nature. Other theories, such as Objective List and Perfectionist theories of well-being move away from an individual's psychology towards fulfilling our human nature, as in Eudaimonism (Besser-Jones, 2016, p. 187), and towards the attainment of objective goods, such as respect and recognition under Objective List Theories (Tiberius, 2014, p. 4); these make what comprises a good life an ideal, which may be far from what a person really enjoys or wants for themselves. There is still much discussion on what the ideal theory is, and Tiberius proposes her own approach to address this issue, which is a compromise between these two positions,

and which in her view, explains why well-being is a 'valuable ideal and also why it is a valuable ideal for each of us' (2014, p. 5). She calls her theory the Value Fulfillment Theory of Well-Being. There are other theorists who have made alternative proposals on theories of well-being which I will not be discussing in my research report. I mention Tiberius's alternative theory to illustrate that this area of philosophy is still evolving, and the outcome of my research report may be influenced by the theories of well-being that I examine, some of which may not be perfect, fully matured or agreed upon by all.

## **Hedonism**

Well-being hedonism claims that pleasure is the highest good and the most important goal of human life. From a hedonist's perspective, happiness is always the end objective; it is the only thing of positive intrinsic value, and its counterpart pain, is the only thing of negative intrinsic value. Both pleasure and pain are non-instrumental. Classic hedonists believe that if  $x$  = happy experiences and  $y$  = unhappy experiences, then in order to live a happy life, the amount of  $x$  in one's life must be greater than the amount of  $y$ . Jeremy Bentham, considered the founder of Utilitarianism, claimed that the right action is always that action which maximises happiness:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. (Bentham & Lafleur, 1948, p. 1)

He calculated the utility of an experience, or the happiness quotient, using two determinants, duration and intensity. The higher the utility, the higher the pleasure. In his view, the right moral act is always that act which provides the greatest pleasure for the greatest number of people. An individual's hedonic level is a measure of the overall balance of pleasure over pain and according to hedonists, a person's well-being is perfectly correlated with their hedonic levels, where an increase in one causes an increase in the other, and vice versa (Fletcher, 2016b, p. 9). Mill added another determinant to classic utilitarian theory called 'quality', arguing that some pleasurable experiences were of a higher quality than others and thus needed to be accounted for differently. Mill used this 'quality of experience' to explain why the unhappy life of a human is preferable to the happy life of a pig. In Mill's view, a good life is filled with more higher quality experiences than lower quality experiences (Mill, as cited in de Lazari-Radek & Singer, 2017, pp. 42-43). This quality measure is challenged by those who ask how the quality of an experience can be assessed objectively when an

experience is surely subjective by nature? Arneson illustrates this with his example of an individual comparing the pleasure derived from eating a peach or eating a pear. The individual's opinion is ignored under Mill's quality measure as a panel of experts decides what the value of each 'pleasure-experience' is (Arneson, 1999, p. 7). This is problematic since conventional judgements may not apply to all individuals uniformly; tastes differ, they are subjective.

The most serious challenge to hedonist theory is that of Robert Nozick's Experience Machine which proves that not all pleasurable experiences increase well-being, thus undermining the very premise on which hedonism is built. Life in the Experience Machine can you give you any experience you desire, which means life could be imagined to be equally as pleasurable or even more pleasurable than life outside the machine. Yet most people hesitate to plug in, and Nozick concludes that '...we want to do certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them' (Nozick, p. 43 cited in Bader & Meadowcroft, 2011, p. 63). It is things other than the quality of the experience which we care about. It is the 'doing' that we desire and not merely the thought of doing this. If we only care about the quality of an experience, then we would not hesitate to plug into the machine. Nozick disproves the principle that pleasure is the only good and concludes that other things must contribute to our well-being (Fletcher, 2016b, p. 16).

### **Desire Fulfilment Theory**

The three main characteristics of Desire Fulfilment Theory (hereafter known as DFT) are that: (1) something is good for you because it satisfies your desires, and (2) these desires are non-instrumental, and (3) one's desire does not have to be fulfilled, nor does one even have to believe that a desire will be fulfilled, for the desire to be good for you (Fletcher, 2016b, pp. 28-29). An example: imagine you really want to get a good result for your exam, just having this desire is good for you, whether you get a good result or not. Arneson suggests that fulfilment of a more important desire is better for you than the fulfilment of a less important desire (Arneson, 1999, p. 16), and the more often that higher ranked desires are fulfilled, the better one's life goes. Another example is: imagine you really want to get a good result for an exam which you have been studying for, at the expense of other leisure activities. A good result will mean that you will qualify for a full-time bursary and you can further your studies. At the same time, you would also like to get positive feedback on the renewal of your secretarial role on the House Committee of the University Residence in which you live.

Satisfaction of the desire to do well in the exam will bring more fulfilment than having the role of secretary re-confirmed by the House Committee, because the former is a higher-ranked desire. Arneson also suggests that under DFT, fulfillment of desires enhances well-being even if the fulfillment of the desire is not capable of being experienced. DFT is ‘not embarrassed by the fact that one’s desires range beyond ... possible experience’ (Arneson, 1999, p. 16). Under DFT well-being is derived from non-instrumental desires other than just pleasure and pain; these theories claim that getting what I want in life is good for me and not getting what I want is bad for me (Fletcher, 2016b, p. 27). One way to assess well-being under DFT is to sum all the instances of desire satisfaction together, and then subtract all the instances of desire non-satisfaction from this, where a positive result indicates a good life on the whole. Another way to assess well-being is simply to hold that a person’s desire for how their own life should be, is what is best for that person (Heathwood, 2016, p. 135). Unlike hedonistic theory, DFT is less vulnerable to Nozick’s experience machine challenge as the emphasis is on whether the world is as the person desires it to be, and not whether the person has had the experience of a specific desire being satisfied. For example, if I desire to be a famous artist, I will not benefit from experiencing this while I am plugged into the Experience Machine; I need to be a famous artist in real life to achieve fulfilment. One of the vulnerabilities of DFT is that not all desires yield well-being despite their producing pleasure, because not all our desires are necessarily good for us, as illustrated in Fletcher’s example of Hilary desiring that life exists elsewhere in the universe (Fletcher, 2016b, p. 34). If it is proven that there is life elsewhere in the universe, then according to the theory, due to the satisfaction of the desire for it, the outcome is good for Hilary’s well-being. However, it seems implausible that the existence of life elsewhere in the universe is good for Hilary since the discovery has no bearing on her life whatsoever (2016b, p. 36). To address this obvious weakness in DFT, the class of basic desires which contribute to well-being could be restricted to prevent an individual from desiring things which are plausibly not good for him. Another suggestion from Arneson (Arneson, 1999, p. 19) is that the individual be prevented from choosing desires which are based on moral considerations, for example, like keeping promises since keeping promises does not make an individual’s life go better. Since the list of possible desires would now be determined objectively means that this theory starts resembling an objectivist theory such as OLT, where what is good for you is subject-neutral. One of DFT’s strengths is that it is subjective, that the things that contribute to a person’s well-being actually matter to that person; they are desired. But Arneson makes the point that if we permitted individuals to make their own choices in terms of desires, we should perhaps

have a method for determining which of these desires are chosen in error (Arneson, 1999, p. 17)? What happens if a diabetic decides that a delicious piece of lemon meringue cake is exactly what he needs to be happy? This is surely a problematic desire? Arneson says that if we ask an individual to separate his desires into those that contribute to well-being and those that do not, we have already pre-determined what fulfills well-being independent of desire fulfillment, which renders this approach circular (1999, p. 17). Another challenge to DFT is that some things may be prudentially good for a person, despite them not desiring these, which is something that the theory does not satisfactorily account for. Further revisions of DFT try to cater to this shortcoming by specifying that desires should be those that an individual would have under ideal circumstances, or the desires they would have if they were rational and had perfect information on the objects of desire. An example of such a revision of DFT is the Informed Desire Theory (1999, p. 21). If desires are good for us, the question is why restrict the desires? The diabetic knows that the lemon meringue is not good for his health, but this does not stop him from desiring this. In this case, the challenge is met by saying that maybe the slice of cake is good in itself for him to satisfy his craving for sugar, but that ‘all things considered’, it is not in his overall best interests. (Heathwood, 2016, p. 139). Some desires, as in the case of Hilary’s in the earlier example, seem to be desires that would not provide fulfilment and are due perhaps to ignorance or naivety (Fletcher, 2016b, pp. 44-45)? One approach to address this objection is to suggest that only basic desires not attributable to ignorance, confusion, or errors of judgment, should be permissible (Arneson, 1999, p. 18). Arneson suggests that this approach does not resolve the issue of a person desiring something for its own sake other than well-being, even after being provided with full information, as with my example of the slice of lemon meringue cake (1999, p. 18) and concludes that ‘there is no viable solution to the problem of non-prudential desire’ (1999, p. 19). Sumner deals with this weakness in DFT by adding two checks: (1) an ‘authenticity requirement’ which requires a person to be authentic about the condition of her life, and (2) an evaluation that her life is autonomous. The values and priorities should be our own, which requires honest reflection and assessment according to Sumner (1996, p. 141-142), and thus DFT supplemented with these two checks, ensures that our well-being reflects what we value as individuals (Tiberius, 2016, p. 179).

### **Objective List Theory**

Unlike DFT, supporters of Objective List Theory (hereafter known as OLT) argue that some non-instrumental things are prudentially good for a person even if that person does not desire

them. This type of theory ‘denies the claim of agent sovereignty, [and] asserts the claim of realism about prudential value... and asserts that there exists a plurality of types of good’ (Arneson, 1999, p. 6). Items which appear on the list of prudentially good things are featured irrespective of the individual’s attitude towards them, and ‘the more that one gets or achieves the listed goods over the course of one’s life, the better for oneself is the life that one has lived’ (1999, p. 9). Examples of the items on an objective list include the following: achievement, friendship, happiness, pleasure, self-respect, virtue, life, knowledge, excellence in play and work, peace, community, and religion. The items on a list are purportedly ‘all and only the things that are good for all humans’ (Fletcher, 2016a, p. 152). OLT makes ‘...a claim that what it is to be intrinsically valuable for a person, to make that person’s life go better for herself, is to be an item that belongs on such a list’ (Arneson, 1999, p. 10), and unlike a subjectivist whose choice of prudential goods may change over time, these items remain the same even if people’s tastes should change. OLT does not deny that an individual’s view may play a role in deciding what is good for her but asserts that an individual’s tastes are not considered in the determination of what items belong on an Objective List (1999, p. 6). Bradley (Bradley, 2009, p. 16, cited in Fletcher, 2016b, p. 56) asks how these lists are compiled and more specifically, why are certain items on the list, and others not? He also asks how does one know that a list is complete? How would the author of a list know conclusively that there are no other things in the universe which may be good for an individual? This kind of challenge is specific to OLT, since a list of things, by nature, will always be susceptible to issues of omission, especially a list that asserts that it is complete. A simple example is a grocery list of healthy food items. No matter what items are listed, there will always be something not mentioned that may be considered to be healthy and thus a contender for the list; an omission legitimises a challenge as to the integrity of an entire list. Work is not mentioned on most lists, which suggests that in general, OLT theorists believe work only provides humans with instrumental value. Working for good causes increases our well-being but this may not be the objective of working for good causes; the ‘self-sacrifice consists the initial abandonment of (part of) what their life was about at the time...out of conviction that that is what they should do’ (Raz, 2004, p. 283). It is not plausible that people only work longer hours to ensure they keep their jobs. Is it possible that they get fulfilment from their jobs? In the Changing Workforce survey (Jacobs and Gerson, 1998, pp. 451-452), workers were asked how many hours per week they worked, and how many hours per week they would like to work. Nearly 50% of workers wished to work less than they did, while nearly 17% indicated they would like to work more. While the Jacobs and Gerson study did



not explore why some workers wished to work more hours, is it possible that these workers experienced an intrinsic benefit from their work? Is it possible that there are elements of satisfaction derived from some types of work? If this is the case, then it must be possible that work has some prudential value. Darwall's Rational Care Analysis states that something with prudential value is good for someone, and if you care about that someone you then have reason to desire this 'something' for that person out of care for him (Darwall 2002, Chs. 1-3, cited in Campbell, 2016, p. 405). Is it possible that work could have prudential value under Darwall's proposal? Work is good for people on many different fronts, but could this 'good' be considered prudentially good? Assuming one cares about someone, is there a situation where one would desire 'work' for this person based on caring for them? I think this is possible and likely. Suitability Analysis, another proposal of prudential value, states that if anything is well suited to something and serves it well, it is within the scope of well-being. Surely I can argue that work which develops an individual's capacities is good for well-being? In a study by Kohn and Schooler (Kohn & Schooler, 1982, pp. 1258, 1265, 1269-1270), two men of similar intellectual capacity perform a job of different substantive complexity. The person in the more complex job was more likely to develop the skill faster than the person in the less challenging job, suggesting that stimulating work develops human capacities more than boring, repetitive work. Other than exercising intellect, work is also an avenue to express the virtues, for example 'dignity, pride, honour, self-respect and autonomy' (Veltman, 2016, p. 30). Work 'shapes human personality and is the most significant factor that affects the development of our self-identity' (Tablan, 2014, p. 291). Pope John Paul II says of work:

It is a good thing for man. It is not only good in the sense that it is useful or something to enjoy; it is also good as being something worthy, that is to say, something that corresponds to man's dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it. (John Paul II, 1981, p. 13)

It is evident that work holds an important place in the life of humans, both spiritually and morally, and it therefore seems improbable, but not impossible, that it does not have prudential value. The absence of work from most OLT lists implies that, according to the theorists, work has no non-instrumental value. As suggested earlier in the grocery list example, doubt as to the completeness of a list casts doubt on the integrity of the entire list. Bradley also questions how OLT measures well-being; hedonists measure the prudential value of pleasure and pain, DFT rates the intensity of desires, yet OLT offers no input *vis a vis* the relative weightings of items on a list (Bradley, 2009, p. 16 cited in Fletcher, 2016b,

pp. 58-59). How can one measure whether one theorist's list is a better measure of well-being than another's? Under OLT, 'there is no attitude that an individual must have toward an element in her life if that element is to qualify as intrinsically augmenting her well-being... To count as such, the goods in an individual's life need not be tinged with enjoyment nor coloured by desire' (Arneson, 1999, p. 44). This echoes Tiberius's sentiment on OLT, that 'the way that the theory defines well-being [for her] might not be something she has any interest in pursuing' (Tiberius, 2014, p. 4). These challenges question the validity of an objective list's ability to encapsulate the things that an individual would consider important for them to enjoy a good life.

In my considering Hedonism, DFT and OLT, I attempt to isolate their individual characteristics for the purpose of making comparisons, an exercise which may be futile since by their very definition these theories may not be mutually exclusive, thus rendering any comparisons between them, questionable (Arneson, 1999, pp. 3-4). For example, Arneson compares an Objective List with only one item, 'happiness', to Hedonism, which, by definition, results in both theories yielding the same result. Should an Objective List consist of only one item, 'desire fulfillment' (a plausible desire for an individual to have), then it would also yield the same result as DFT in terms of well-being. Not only is the overlap an interesting consideration, but Tiberius sums up the one issue she has with these theories of well-being, saying that the more we define well-being in terms of an individual's subjective states, the less ideal it looks, and the less it looks like something of value that an individual should aim for. Yet the more we define well-being in terms of objective states, the less these items look like things that an individual would be concerned with enough to promote or want in their life (Tiberius, 2014, p. 2). Arneson (Arneson, 1999, pp. 29-30) considers the life of a woman who wants to be extremely successful; her desires for success are defined under DFT. Her life turns out to be a failure, but at the same time, she achieves many of the items on an Objective List. Even if her life is a failure as measured by DFT, her life could be a success under OLT, illustrating that a life that is high in prudential value as measured by OLT is possible even if that same life is considered a failure under DFT. Arneson also provides an example to illustrate the opposite, where DFT trumps OLT in terms of a good life, but the OLT 'verdicts are more compelling' according to him. (1999, p. 31). Again these conflicting results, depending on the underlying example used, illustrate the need for more studies to empirically assess a life according to the various theories of well-being. At this point in my report, I am less interested in how each theory overlaps with one another, and more interested

in how each accounts for well-being. One of the obvious differences between these theories is how each one accounts for agent sovereignty which is affirmed by the subjective theories of well-being (in my report, hedonism and DFT) and denied by the objective ones (OLT and the perfectionist theories below) (Arneson, 1999, p. 5).

### **Perfectionist Theories of Well-Being**

Advocates of perfectionism seek to identify the capacities of human nature that should be developed and exercised in order to live a good life. ‘A good or intrinsically desirable human life is one that develops to the maximal possible extent the properties that constitute human nature’ (Arneson, 1999, p. 11). Rawls terms this the ‘Aristotelian Principle’; enjoyment increases as skills improve, and as complexity increases, skills improve to meet this (Rawls, 1971, pp. 424-428). Rawls suggests that perhaps complex activities are more enjoyable because they are novel, and they create space for creativity and innovation. He states that Aristotle acknowledged that (1) many kinds of pleasure result from exercising our capabilities, and (2) the exercise of these capabilities is a human good (1971, p. 426). Virtue stems from the Greek word *aretê*, translated as ‘excellence’ and according to Aristotle, most objects have their own kind of excellence, such as the excellence of a sharp knife (Parry, 2014, p. 2). The excellence of a human being is in exercising their rational ability in accordance with the virtues. Aristotle did not directly refer to a meaningful life when he advocated exercising the virtues, but he did believe that this discipline contributed positively to human flourishing. There are two main streams of perfectionist theory: (1) human nature perfectionism, and (2) objective goods perfectionism (Wall, 2017, p. 2). Human nature perfectionism identifies human good with the development of human nature, and whilst there could be a single type of life that is best for all humans, it could also be argued that different people require different activities to develop human good. Objective goods perfectionism links well-being to the existence of a good, not to human nature.

Aristotle explains good action as (a) doing the right thing under the circumstances and (b) doing this for the right reason (Ross, 1964, p. 194). Well-being is the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue (1964, p. 215), and it is an activity, not a state or disposition (1964, p. 232), with contemplation being the main ingredient of well-being and the highest good (1964, p. 232). Typical goods include ‘physical capacities, rationality (theoretical and practical), autonomy, affective, sensory, social capacities and rational agency’ (Bradford & Keller, 2016, p. 127), with each being intrinsically related to human nature. Other virtues, which if

exercised at the workplace may bring meaning to work are, for example, taking pride in one's work, being disciplined, dependable and industrious. In a similar vein, there are many opportunities to develop and exercise the virtues outside of work, for example in one's communities, but as mentioned by Veltman (Veltman, 2016, pp. 122-123), work itself provides a predominance of opportunities for this activity. Perfectionist theory contrasts with both hedonist theory and DST insofar as something is good for you, not because it is desired nor because it delivers pleasure, but because it contributes to a life of accomplishment for yourself or for others. Both OLT and Perfectionist theories are objectivist in nature; an individual does not decide what should be on list, or what human capacities should be developed; these are already defined. However, unlike OLT, comprehensive justifications are offered for each item on a perfectionist list. Compelling others to improve themselves and develop their capacities is not an easy task, but it is possible to promote conditions that encourage others to realise their perfectionist goods, for example to create healthy workplaces that ensure employees are treated with respect, and given opportunities to be creative and realise their capacities. Possessing specific capacities is not sufficient under this theory of well-being; capacities have to be exercised (Parry, 2014, p. 25), a position supported by Aristotle who did not believe that a person who sleeps his entire life away, could possibly lead a good life. 'A capacity which can never be put to use has no value' (Raz, 2004, p. 289). 'Doing anything well requires virtue or excellence, and therefore living well consists in activities caused by the rational soul in accordance with virtue or excellence' (Kraut, 2018, p. 6). Eudaemonist theories hold that what is good for a person is dependent on what human beings are supposed to do, their end purpose. For Aristotle, our end telos is rational activity in accordance with our virtues (Ross, 1964, p. 215). Martha Nussbaum holds that people who are able to do, and to be what the central human functions of life embody, are flourishing (Nussbaum, 2011, pp. 24-25). She appeals to capabilities that are good for human functioning rather than what pertains to human nature, which differs with Aristotle's view. She argues that people should be given the space and opportunities to become what they want to become, and be what they value, and that people need opportunities to be educated, to move around and enjoy good social relationships (Vogt, 2005, p. 116). She states that her list of capabilities are 'a proposal' (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 36), and that to add something to the list, one needs to justify how the item is 'not merely instrumental but partly constitutive of a worthwhile human life (2011, p. 36). Could meaningful work be added to Nussbaum's list? I have shown that it can contribute to our well-being. It is also valuable since society requires money in exchange for other primary goods such as education, food

and security. Nussbaum believes that society has an obligation to provide conditions that ‘give everyone the capability of choosing to live the good life’ (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 263, as cited in Vogt, 2005, p. 116). Everyone ought to be given the freedom to achieve well-being and that well-being should be understood in the context of people’s capabilities (Robeyns, 2016, p. 1).

The Capability Approach is a framework to assess: (1) individual well-being, (2) social arrangements, and (3) policies aimed at social change in society (Robeyns, 2016, p. 3). In its narrow view, the Capability Approach informs what information should be considered in judging how a person’s life is going or has gone, and in its broader view, it informs on issues other than well-being, such as ‘efficiency, agency, empowerment or procedural fairness’ (2016, pp. 4-5). In this report I am interested in the well-being aspect of this framework. The point of the Capability Approach and the reason why it is relevant to my study on work and well-being, is that it highlights that not all choices are equally available to all human beings, and therefore a holistic approach to assessing well-being should be adopted. For example, a low-skilled woman who lives in a society that provides no support in terms of transport and child grants, is presented with the following choices: (1) hold a menial job which keeps her away from her family for long hours, but gives her the means to feed her children, or (2) stay at home with her children thus ensuring that they are safe and cared for. Superficially it seems as if her life is good since she has an opportunity to work. But the opportunity to work masks the reality of what accepting a job also means in her life; it means choosing to neglect her children. Making a choice between two equally unpalatable options (2016, p. 9) is not really making a choice; it is a subtle form of coercion.

Having an obligation to develop and exercise our capacities goes some way to explain why Nozick’s Experience Machine does not undermine perfectionist theory since the pleasure of an experience for supporters of perfectionism, is not sufficiently ‘good for’ the individual. It is the actual activity or experience which is valued. The life of a perfectionist may not always be considered a good life because there are often sacrifices made in order to excel in a chosen field, for example a classical pianist may (inadvertently) neglect her family to practise for many hours, suggesting that a life filled with accomplishment may be more demanding than a simple life. This makes achieving fulfilment under perfectionism exacting, and it also denies many things which seem worthwhile in life. Kantian ethics are grounded in striving for perfectionism but unlike Aristotelian ethics, are not based on what is ‘good for’ (me) but on ‘what ought I to do’ (Johnson & Cureton, 2018, p. 5). Kant believed we should want our own

happiness instrumentally, and in order to achieve this we should develop our talents and capabilities. Kant's Humanity Formulation of the Categorical Imperative states that we should never act in a way that we treat humanity as a means only but always as an end in itself (2018, p. 22). Respecting the humanity in each person is not about appraising the merits or excellent character traits of a person, nor is it about admiring their achievements, or how they measure up against a certain qualitative benchmark. It is also not of the kind where a person is respected for being supportive and generous, but at the same time, is disrespected for being dishonest (Dillon, 2018, p. 13). It is the type of respect, most often associated with dignity, called recognition respect, and in Kantian philosophy it is the absolute acknowledgement that each human has a distinct moral status which commands that they are treated in specific, inviolable ways. It may be expressed in rights. Each human has a moral right to be respected simply because they are a human (2018, p. 17). This command does not mean we cannot use people's services; it requires that we should never use someone as a mere means, and that all the characteristics which make someone human, (for example his ability to think, create, raise a family, educate his children and have dreams and wishes for them) should be shown the respect that our humanity deserves (Johnson & Cureton, 2018, p. 22).

The Kantian Humanity Formula could be applied in the workplace since workers are employed to complete specific tasks in exchange for money, and in a world where it is necessary to participate in the economy to survive, and where employment opportunities are limited, the balance of power in the relationship between employer and employee, is firmly with the employer. Kant commands that employers may not use workers as a mere means to an end but should respect the dignity in each of them by virtue of their being human, and in so doing, treat each individual as an end in themselves (2018, p. 22). This command is a perfect duty to respect the autonomy of each employee. Despite steady productivity increases in the American workplace in the period measured between 1973 and 2000, wages remained fairly stable, indicating that the benefits of increased productivity were not equally distributed between employer and employees; it is likely that these benefits accumulated to the employer in the most part (<http://www.epi.org/productivity-pay-gap/>). Other than being considered unfair, it is also evidence of not respecting the humanity of each employee. The same could be said of workplaces which expose their employees to dangerous conditions; an employer who does not provide workers with safety gear or adequate breaks from grueling work, is not respecting the humanity of his workers. In the Jacobs and Gerson study, the majority of

Americans feel they work too many hours compared to what would be their ideal (Jacobs & Gerson, 1998, p. 453). It seems that ‘employers are organizing work schedules for reasons other than the needs and preferences of employees and their families’ (1998, p. 455). Jacobs and Gerson point out that jobs are requiring parents to choose between work and family, a ‘tragic choice’, and the hours being worked undermine participation in community (1998, p. 456). Aristotle recognised how important participation in civil society is; he believed that man is a social animal and every community is formed for the sake of some good, with the state representing the ‘supreme and all-embracing community’ that should aim at the supreme good (Ross, 1964, p. 237). ‘He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either beast or god’ (1964, p. 239). Some types of work are depriving us of the opportunity to participate in society, which indirectly impacts our opportunity to lead a good life according to Aristotle. Not everyone supports Perfectionism as an ideal theory of well-being, even though an objector may concede that the perfection of our human nature may be non-instrumentally good for our well-being. ‘If perfecting someone’s life does not make the life better for the one who lives it, the imperative to maximize perfection strikes me as very unconvincing’ (Arneson, 1999, p. 11). In Arneson’s view, Perfectionism takes a ‘...narrow view of human good. The excellences it takes do (sic) be valuable do seem valuable, but it denies value to much that seems worthwhile’ (1999, p. 11). ‘Cheap thrills’ are an example of human activity which in no way contributes to human excellence, but certainly contributes to pleasure and excitement. Arneson says that ‘Such pleasures seem to me to be important sources of enjoyment that significantly enhance many people’s lives in ways for which there is no practical substitute’ (1999, p. 12). There are many such examples of these, for example watching funny videos that serve no purpose other than to make us laugh.

## **WORK AND WELL-BEING**

Having shown that work could be a prudential good when considered against both Darwall’s Rational Care and the Suitability Analysis proposal of prudential value, and having accepted that there is some connection between work and well-being, I will now consider work within the context of each theory of well-being and ascertain how (if at all) each theory could possibly account for work. My intention is to try link work and well-being, even if this link is tenuous.

Hedonism allows for one intrinsically positive good which is pleasure, and one intrinsically negative good, which is pain. This narrow definition of prudential goods effectively rules out the possibility of work contributing non-instrumentally to well-being under hedonism. Work may cause pain or suffering, it may negatively impact one's health or it could even result in pleasure from doing morally good things in the workplace, but these rewards or punishments are generated via the instrumental nature of work. Therefore, there is no valid claim for work as a prudential good under hedonism.

Under DFT, the satisfaction of your desires is good for you, and the frustration of your desires is bad for you. The stronger the desire, the more benefit derived from its satisfaction, and the more detriment derived from its frustration. Since all desires are subjective, it is possible and plausible that work, more specifically, meaningful work, may be desired. Railton states that, under the Informed Desire theory, what is intrinsically valuable for a person must 'consists in what he would want himself to want, or to pursue, were he to contemplate his present situation from a standpoint fully and vividly informed about himself and his circumstances, and entirely free of cognitive error or lapses of instrumental rationality' (Railton, 1986, p. 12). It seems likely that under this version of DFT, an individual would not knowingly opt for work which was not meaningful unless as Railton suggests, it was as a result of a lapse in thinking or judgement. Under the ideal advisor version of the Informed Desire theory, what is intrinsically good for an individual, is that which a person would want if they were completely informed and what a reflective version of that person would want too (Arneson, 1999, p. 21). If the ideal advisor says that I should seek out meaningful work, then doing meaningful work is intrinsically good for me (1999, p. 22). I propose that it is likely that meaningful work could be such an item, given the important role that it plays within our lives. Work provides the means for children to be educated, which in turn determines, to a large part, how their lives will turn out. Tiberius says that 'almost everyone values health, happiness, friendship, family and meaningful work' (Tiberius, 2014, p. 7). In Harsanyi's opinion, work and opportunities to exercise and develop capacities at work, are on his list of basic human desires, which includes *inter alia*: '[...]opportunities] for jobs suitable to our personal abilities...[opportunities] for further developing our abilities...[opportunities] for worthwhile accomplishments' (Harsanyi, 1995, p. 323). These items suggest that work which is commensurate to our capabilities in a workplace which is autonomous and fosters our growth, forms part of a set of basic human desires. He suggests that prudential values are similar for most human beings because we have more or less the



same basic desires, except perhaps for those who have some physical or psychological impediment (1995, p. 323). This being the case, Harsanyi's list of basic desires must, by default be a subset of all prudential goods desired under DFT. Together with Railton and Tiberius's opinions as to what is desirable under DFT, Harsanyi's list of basic human desires adds more force to my claim that meaningful work is a reasonable desire for a person to have under DFT.

OLT is able to accommodate meaningful work in the characteristics of the theory, since lists consist of goods which are considered prudentially good for a person, whether these things are desired or not. I showed earlier in my report, that work could be prudentially good for a person. The next question is whether work could be non-instrumental in nature as this is a necessary characteristic of OLT. On the basis that pleasure is not the only intrinsic good, and pain is not the only intrinsic bad, other goods such as knowledge, friendship and faith are worth pursuing, even if these lead to more pain than pleasure. Knowledge is a worthy goal even if there is pain involved; completing a degree requires a great deal of personal sacrifice which is not pleasurable but being awarded the degree may make the pain worth it. Some items which appear on OLT lists include the following: knowledge, play, religion, self-respect, religion, friendship, inner peace, and development of abilities (Fletcher, 2016a, p. 149). Why could work not appear amongst these items? Harsanyi's list of basic human desires includes 'work' in the sense that it is implied in some of his other basic desires, such as 'opportunities to develop our capacities', and 'opportunities for accomplishment' (Harsanyi, 1995, p. 323). It could be argued that with humans spending so much of their adult lives at work, some of their success in accomplishing certain excellences and being acknowledged for this, could come from their efforts in the workplace. Both achievement and accomplishment would be difficult to achieve if the workplace did not enable this. 'Excellence at work' on Murphy's list (2016a, p. 149) could only be achieved if the workplace were supportive of this. It is difficult to imagine how a pianist could perform a great rendition of a concerto on an ill-maintained piano in a concert hall with poor acoustics. Her performance would be negatively affected by her poor 'workplace'. Curiously, 'play' features on some of the lists, yet we spend more time at work than at play (2016a, p. 149). Why would 'work' be omitted and 'play' be included on a list? For me, these two concepts could almost be considered opposite sides of the same coin; when you not working, you are playing. And both activities are important to each other since play provides respite from the work. No-one denies the importance of play for relaxation although for some people, work is

like play because of the level of enjoyment derived from it. OLT has evolved to the point that there are many types of lists: one may stipulate items for all human beings and another may stipulate items aimed at a specific type of person, or even items aimed at an individual (Arneson, 1999, p. 9). Including work as a prudential good under one of these versions of OLT seems possible. In this way, a list could be devised to represent items which are prudentially good for a person who loves to work as much as he loves to play. The list could include, for example: meaningful work, achievement, play, recognition, knowledge, friendship, family and so on. On this basis, I suggest that my claim for meaningful work being a prudential good under OLT is credible and valid.

Perfectionism can plausibly account for work as a prudential good because perfectionism incorporates all the goods that add value in the life of a human being (Wall, 2017, p. 2), and work could certainly be one of these. Ironically, the perfectionist theory of well-being does not insist on perfection, rather it focuses on the development and exercise of the capacities that make up well-being. In fact, just possessing the capacities is not sufficient; they have to be exercised. An important question to answer when considering how work could form part of this theory of well-being is, is our good achieved by the capacities when they are exercised (human nature perfectionism), or by the activities that develop the capacities (objective goods perfectionism), (Bradford & Keller, 2016, p. 127)? In contrast to hedonism and DFT, something is desired under Perfectionism not because it will result in pleasure nor because it is desirable, but because it contributes to the development of human nature. A good life in terms of well-being means that the life goes well for the person leading it. A good life in terms of excellence could mean the same, but this is not necessarily so; it is assessed by considering how the person lives her life and not how she feels about it (Besser-Jones, 2016, p. 189). There are many famous sports people, for example, who candidly lament the sacrifices made in their lives in order to achieve at the highest levels in their respective fields, especially with respect to their having never enjoyed being young, reckless, and slightly irresponsible. They frequently look back with regret. Oftentimes, a good life in terms of excellence requires such sacrifices to be made, and personal well-being may suffer in pursuit of this (Wall, 2017, p. 2). If perfecting one's life does not make the life of the person who lives it, better, then it seems implausible that an individual would subject themselves to such rigour for no reason whatsoever, other than to strive to achieve perfection (Arneson, 1999, p. 11). It seems like a lot of effort for little reward. Perhaps it is the recognition and fame that follows the achievement of excellence, that we are after? Or perhaps we have been taught to

think that this is what we should do as humans; we need to strive to be better all the time, a Kantian duty to continue to develop our talents.

When considering human nature perfectionism and the class of the goods on the list, such as ‘physical capacities, rationality (theoretical and practical), autonomy, affective, sensory, social capacities and rational agency’ (Bradford & Keller, 2016, p. 127), and when considering work as a possible prudential good, I cannot reasonably argue that work has a special relationship to human nature; work is not a characteristic of human nature; it fails the uniqueness test, it is not something distinctly human. One could argue that it is essential for survival since all communities revolve around economic structures and without money, basic physical security is under threat. But this does not make ‘work’ a characteristic that differentiates human beings from all other forms of existence; it does not ‘sit at the same table’ as rationality for example. One could exercise and develop rationality, whether one has work or not. If life was discovered on another planet, we would not ask whether the aliens are able to work to establish whether they are moral agents or beings with some intrinsic worth. We would investigate their ability to rationalise and contemplate. We might observe how they communicate with each other, and whether any other deeply human traits are present which we assume, in the absence of any other facts, distinguish us from other beings.

Unlike human nature perfectionism, objective goods perfectionism has no link to human nature; the existence of the good is what is relevant although it still needs to be justified. Rawls explains objective goods perfectionism as the ‘achievement of human excellence in art, science and culture’ (Rawls, 1971, p. 325). Could work appear on this list if its inclusion is justifiable (Wall, 2017, p. 2)? Surely human excellence in art, science or culture requires human excellence in work since these are all disciplines of work. Could work be a prudential good under this theory? Examples of objective goods are knowledge, friendship, and achievement. The linkage between these goods and characteristic human capacities is justifiable as per the following examples: (1) our physical capacities are manifested through the achievement of sporting prowess, or (2) our capacity for rationality is exercised through the study of ancient Greek philosophers, and (3) our sensory capacity is developed through the study of music. Is meaningful work a manifestation of a capacity of ourselves? Is it plausible to suggest that our capacities of rationality, social bonds and autonomy are manifested in the exercise of meaningful work? I think it is since rationality is exercised through the application of our intellect when provided with challenging tasks. Our social bonds are enhanced through a workplace which empowers employees and respects their

autonomy. On this basis, I would like to suggest that work is a strong candidate for a prudential good under objective goods perfectionism.

## **AUTONOMY AND WELL-BEING**

Human flourishing is closely linked to the human requirement of wanting to be in charge of certain aspects of our lives; interference in personal decisions, by government or any other agent, is a danger to the individual, even if this interference serves to make them happier according to Conly (Conly, 2016, p. 439). Interference is objected to on the basis that (1) choice makes us who we are, and (2) undermining choice reduces our ability to be who we should be. Griffin argues that one should ‘choose one’s own path through life, and it must be real...And having chosen, one must then be able to act’ (Griffin, 2008, p. 25). According to Raz, ‘Autonomy is opposed to a life of coerced choices’ (Raz, 1986, pp. 370-371 as cited in Conly, 2016, p. 440). But not all our desires can be satisfied in life, and importantly, not all desires are equal (Frankfurt, 1971, pp. 12-13), something which we know for ourselves, since desires range from fanciful to intense, and are often fleeting. Frankfurt says that the essential difference between human beings and other species is to be found in the structure of the will, where only human beings are able to have ‘second-order desires’ (1971, p. 3). If we are unable to act on a desire, we become frustrated and then adjust our desire to reflect our circumstances. Often autonomy is raised within the context of government interference in our choices; but according to Conly, a ‘good government will remove only some options (and, of course, will also create other and better options)’ (Conly, 2016, p. 443), and in so doing, it shapes our world. Aristotle believes the state represents the most important and ‘all-embracing community’, that should aim at the supreme good only (Ross, 1964, p. 237). Sunstein says that ‘Whether people have a preference for a commodity, a right, or anything else is in part a function of whether the government has allocated it to them in the first instance’ (Sunstein, 1991, p. 8 as cited in Conly, 2016, p. 443) which infers that one needs to be realistic as citizens about what restrictions are objectionable when in fact, the current set of rights were conferred by the government in the first place.

I include this section on autonomy since an objection to my argument is that removing meaningless work from humans is paternalistic in nature; it complies with Dworkin’s conditions for paternalism in the following way: (1) it endorses interfering with the autonomy of citizens by restricting the types of work they can do, and (2) it does this without the permission of the citizens, and (3) then justifies this on the basis that removing this type of

work will improve the well-being (or maintain it), at its current levels, and is thus in its citizens' best interests (Dworkin, 2019, p. 2). When paternalism impacts autonomy, it also threatens well-being, since autonomy is recognised as a cornerstone of some of the theories of well-being, for example under Kant's Humanity Formulation of the Categorical Imperative (Johnson, 2018, p. 22). Sumner also stresses the importance of autonomy; he believes that people need to form their own assessments of their lives since these values are crucial to who we are and how we then embrace the world (Sumner, 1996, p. 169). Obviously not all government action is bad nor is it intended to have bad consequences. It serves us well to acknowledge that our autonomy is a status which has been conferred on us by government in the first place. However, we cannot rest in this comfort; there are bad governments, and there needs to be checks and balances to prevent or at least question, any government implementing policies which may impinge on the freedom of its citizens. There are enough examples in history of small impositions signalling the start of something perhaps more sinister, like the suppression of human rights. Governments should not be trusted to do the morally right thing; there must be checks to ensure they do as they are mandated to do, and within the rules of the constitution. Sometimes governments implement bad laws, but in general, 'regulations should be geared to making us better off, and if they do this, we will flourish' (Conly, 2016, p. 448). For example, in many countries occupants of a car are required to wear a safety belt. This is a paternalistic action by Government; it infringes on the right of the individual to opt not to wear a safety belt. Government imposes this restriction in order to ensure that people, in general, are safe when they travel on the roads. The restriction of personal freedom is outweighed by the benefit of safer roads and fewer accidents. In a similar vein, removing meaningless work from humans frees workers to do more meaningful work, which translates into increased well-being for the workers as they are more satisfied with their workplaces. In a sense it is somewhat ironic that one of the objections to removing meaningless work from humans, is that it removes their right to choose the type of work they would like to do. I say 'ironic', because in the first place, we have no right to choose whether we want to work or not. Our societies are based on markets which trade goods for money; we offer our services in exchange for this and secure other goods as a result. We have to work to survive. Work is an activity which shapes our entire life and impacts our freedom in a substantial way. According to Conly, the one activity humans enjoy the most, is leisure, and generally, we have no control over this since we have to work, and the hours of work are regulated by government. It seems foolish to argue against doing meaningless work which has been shown to affect our well-being negatively, when there are far bigger issues at stake.

For example, why do we work at all? Why can't we work shorter weeks? Dworkin says that little of who we are is based on the choices we have made. He says that 'We can no more choose *ab initio* than we can jump out of our skins. To insist upon this as a condition is to make autonomy impossible' (Dworkin, 1976, p. 24 as cited in Conly, 2016, p. 445). Perhaps instead of objecting to our autonomy being impacted by a paternalistic government who restricts meaningless work choices, one should rather argue for less working hours and thus more leisure time?

## **MEASURING WELL-BEING**

The science of well-being is supposed to assist governments with which policies and interventions, for example, can be applied to improve the well-being of citizens. There are a number ways in which well-being could be measured, but there are challenges involved because well-being suffers from construct pluralism that is, no single conception of well-being exists (Alexandrova, 2016, pp. 390-392). For example, Hedonism can be measured by experience sampling and happiness questionnaires, using the average affect. Perfectionism can be measured via the Psychological Well-Being Index for Flourishing, and OLT via the Human Development Index which assesses the quality of life. When it comes to National Well-Being, Measures of National Well-Being and the Legatum Prosperity Index can be applied, which assess well-being against the values of a nation (2016, p. 393). In the United Kingdom, following a national survey in 2012 titled, 'What matters to you?', the UK Office for National Statistics arrived at a measure of well-being with both subjective and objective indicators (2016, pp. 393-396). There is no agreement on which of the psychological constructs to use for measuring well-being which is problematic since 'a great deal rides on the choice of construct' (2016, p. 396); policy decisions are made on the back of these results. Income and economic indicators correlate better with eudaemonist theories than with hedonic balance measures. In her example, Alexandrova says depending on the construct selected for measurement, the government policy may be focused on economic growth and not job protection (2016, p. 396) where the intent of the policy was to manage the job losses in an economic downturn. Prudential values from respondents must measure the well-being of the people it represents (so as to avoid the danger of paternalism and oppression) and, they must represent an acceptable level of consensus across all individual well-being. Care must be taken that inappropriate measures of well-being do not result in incorrect policies being designed and administered with unintended consequences, or that measures are not

manipulated to create a scenario which enables government to implement policies which are unpopular, or impact freedom without question.

Bhutan made a commitment to Gross National Happiness as its guiding principle for human development in the early 1970s. During policy formulation, when tensions are observed between economic growth, and happiness and peace, happiness and peace objectives are favoured. Economic growth is seen as a lever to improve the well-being and welfare of the people, and not as an end in itself (<http://www.gnhcentrebhutan.org>). This is an example of a government making policy decisions directly in the interest of its citizens and their welfare. Both France and the United Kingdom are progressing measures of well-being, as scepticism surrounding the relevance of Gross National Product in measuring what really matters, continues to gain support (Alexandrova, 2016, p. 396). The measurement of well-being positions a shift in thinking which is taking place across governments globally. Applying specific policy changes may have incremental positive effects on the well-being of citizens. Happy citizens re-elect officials. The effect of policy changes needs to be measured to ensure that governments policies are achieving the intended objectives. How these new policies are implemented may impact the autonomy of individuals, and governments may be criticized as being paternalistic in their conduct. It is a balancing act between real concern for the well-being of citizens of a nation, the subjective opinions of the affected citizens who may not want their freedoms impacted, and the possible, less obvious motives of governments with other agendas. The fact that these conversations are taking place adds force to my argument that the replacing of humans with machines in meaningless workplaces, is ethically admissible.

## **SUMMARY**

Work is not mentioned specifically in any of the theories of well-being reviewed. It cannot be accounted for under Hedonism as this theory of well-being only allows for pleasure and pain as prudential goods. DFT can account for work; it is something that a person may desire, since something is good for you if it satisfies your desires, and meaningful work could be one of these desires. By the same token, something is bad for you if it does not satisfy your desires, and in the context of my research report, this could be meaningless work. Work can also be accounted for under OLT; it can be considered a prudential objective good. It is however, not mentioned directly on any of the Objective Lists I reviewed, but I believe that my motivation to include this has force. I claim that work can hold its own amongst other

notable goods, such as knowledge, play, self-respect, religion, and friendship which do appear as items on lists. Lastly, the Objective Goods Perfectionism theory of well-being can account for a plausible, fairly strong relationship between work and well-being since meaningful work exercises and develops our rationality, autonomy, and social bonds, these being essential capacities for well-being under this theory.

I would have preferred a more forceful outcome linking work and well-being, but this result still provides a reasonable platform from which to argue that work can contribute to well-being when the agent wishes this as either a desire, or when it appears on an Objective List (whether the individual values it or not), or as a means to achieve excellence. The question I will attempt to answer in the next section is what is meaningful work?



## **SECTION III: WHAT IS MEANINGFUL WORK?**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In Section II, I established that work could be accommodated as a prudential good in at least three of the four theories of well-being that I reviewed, these are: Desire Fulfillment Theory (DFT), Objective List Theory (OLT) and Objective Goods Perfectionism. The ‘work’ referred to is not any type of work; it is meaningful work; work that adds to human flourishing. What exactly is this? Why do some people find their work interesting and challenging, and others find theirs dull and boring? In this Section I will focus on what the philosophers, academics and in some cases, religious leaders understand by the terms ‘work’, ‘meaningful work’ and ‘meaningless work’. What role does work play in our lives? There are many opinions on this, partly because the words ‘meaningful work’ and ‘meaningless work’ mean different things to people; these are constructs which are subjective and pluralistic in nature. To evaluate if there are specific circumstances that make workplaces meaningful, I consider a normative, objective account of meaningful work, and differentiate between the broad definition of work (as an activity which attracts a wage in exchange for the labour), and meaningful work. I use Roessler’s suggestion that the word ‘meaningful’ has two different senses (in this context), which are: (1) autonomy and (2) non-alienation (Roessler, 2012, p. 86), and that these considered together best describe the essential aspects of meaningful work.

### **MEANINGFUL WORK**

Since we spend a large portion of our lives at work, and we are essentially the same person (with the same likes and dislikes, fears and aspirations, hopes and prayers and so on) at home and at the workplace, it seems fair to assume that some, or all of the elements which contribute to a meaningful workplace must surely, in some way, relate to those that ought to form part and parcel of a meaningful life? Harsanyi’s list of basic prudential goods (which contribute to our well-being) includes desire for economic security, autonomy, jobs suitable to our abilities and personal interests, friendship, opportunities for worthwhile accomplishments and so on (Harsanyi, 1995, p. 323). Some of the items Harsanyi mentions, may, I believe, also form part of, or have some relation to meaningful work. For example, a desire for economic security could refer to having job security, autonomy could refer to autonomy in the workplace, and friendships could refer to those relationships developed between work colleagues. According to Roessler, ‘work is socially necessary and at the same

time socially meaningful' (Roessler, 2012, p. 78), which emphasises the importance of ensuring that if people are (in Roessler's words), 'forced' to work to fulfill their social duty, then at least the work should not be 'undignified, [ and] meaningless' (2012, p. 78). Perhaps Roessler's use of the word 'forced' is too strong? Today for many millions of people across the world, being employed is largely about survival. People are often forced to accept any work they can get. Rawls suggests that work is a social duty, but it is also a reciprocal duty, in exchange for the right to participate in an economic structure:

No one needs to be servilely dependent on others and made to choose between monotonous and routine occupations which are deadening to human thought and sensibility. Each can be offered a variety of tasks so that the different elements of his nature find a suitable expression...It is a feature of human sociability that we are but parts of what we might be. (Rawls, 1971, p. 529):

He draws attention to the role that work plays in shaping who we are and goes on to say that we all have different skills, capacities and unique abilities, with which we find expression and meaning in the social context. 'We must look to others to attain the excellences that we must leave aside, or lack altogether' (1971, p. 529), and that the 'division of labor is overcome...by willing and meaningful work within a just social union' (1971, p. 529). Gini (Gini, 2006, p. 127 as cited in Tablan, 2014, p. 293) defines meaningful work as the sum of our internal goods (self-mastery, self-esteem, physical and mental health, the perfection of capabilities and skills), and our external goods (individual and social wealth). According to Gini, 'We create ourselves in our work' (Gini, 2006, p. 127 as cited in Tablan, 2014, p. 293), a concept philosophically rooted in Marxism, where to be human is to produce and imprint ourselves upon something which both transforms the object, and embodies the objectivization of the human spirit (Tablan, 2014, p. 292). In the papal encyclical, 'On Human Work', Pope John Paul II says, 'Work is a good thing for man...because through work man... achieves fulfillment as a human being and in a sense becomes 'more a human being'' (John Paul II, 1981, p. 13). Ciulla states that meaningful work is 'morally worthy work undertaken in a morally worthy organization' (Ciulla, 2000, p. 245).

A definition of meaningful work is difficult since the concept is pluralistic and subjective in nature. One objection to a subjective and relativist approach, is that it provides support for the disrespect of the dignity of humans (Tablan, 2014, p. 291), which I will discuss at a later stage in this report. Another objection is that a subjective account of meaningful work has some fairly weighty implications on employers (and the state) who, assuming there is a duty

on them to provide meaningful work, would have to accommodate individual peculiarities and tastes (which may vary widely), in an attempt to meet employee demands. This is not only impractical; it is not feasible (Bowie, 1998, p. 1083). ‘Subjectively conceived meaningful work is unrealizable’ (Tablan, 2014, p. 292). Employers would fail in their efforts to satisfy all employees and as such, the benefits of meaningful work may be lost. Therefore, to enforce a duty to provide meaningful work on employers (or the state), the requirements for meaningful work must be viable and practical to implement, and it is for this reason that an objective account of meaningful work is required, or another way to describe how one creates a meaningful workplace. Whilst theorists such as Bowie (1998) advocate that employers have a duty to ensure a meaningful workplace out of respect for their humanity, others like Raz believe that this is out of ‘a duty to protect [the employees] ability to forge a good life for themselves’ (Raz, 2004, p. 288). Raz believes that the value of anything provides sufficient reason to both engage with it, and to respect it, but there is no duty to engage. There is, however, a duty to respect. The duty we have to one another is to protect these capacities as rational agents and ensure the conditions are in place, for these to be successfully exercised (2004, p. 289). This duty requires creating the opportunities for the capacities to be exercised which ties into the Perfectionist theory of well-being, Kant’s Duty of Respect, and Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach, where to act as rational agents we need an array of opportunities from which to choose (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 18). Raz suggests that the promotion of optimal conditions for the exercise of the capacity for rational agency is not aimed at the promotion of well-being directly, but rather as part of the duty to respect people, which influences well-being as a result (Raz, 2004, p. 291). ‘The capacity of rational agency is of value only if it can be used in conditions which enable people to make something of their life’ (2004, p. 290), a concept illustrated in Raz’s example of a person trapped in a confined space, provided with water and food, but with no ability to communicate. According to Raz, the trapped person would have fared just as well in his life if he were a slug (2004, p. 290).

Roessler extends her definition of meaningful work (Roessler, 2012, p. 86) with the addition of a third sense, known as Rawls’ Aristotelian Principle (Rawls, 1971, p. 426) which states that:

Other things being equal, humans enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities...and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity...human

beings take more pleasure in doing something as they become more proficient in it... they prefer the one calling on the larger repertoire of more intricate and subtle discriminations.

Roessler's full definition of meaningful work thus includes the concepts of (1) autonomy, (2) non-alienating work, and (3) the exercise of capacities in fulfilling this work, the latter activity having been explored earlier in both Aristotle's teachings and under Perfectionism.

### **THREE APPROACHES TO MEANINGFUL WORK**

I review three approaches to objectively meaningful work proposed by (1) Andrea Veltman in her book titled, 'Meaningful Work' (Veltman, 2016), (2) Norman E. Bowie in his paper titled, 'A Kantian Theory of Meaningful Work' (Bowie, 1998), and (3) Christopher P. Vogt in his paper titled, 'Maximizing Human Potential: Capabilities Theory and the Professional Work Environment' (Vogt, 2005). These approaches are addressed in the following subsections below: Veltman's Four-Dimensional Approach to Meaningful Work, Bowie's Kantian Approach to Meaningful Work, and Vogt's Capability Framework.

#### **VELTMAN'S FOUR-DIMENSIONAL APPROACH**

Veltman proposes a four-dimensional approach to objectively meaningful work which includes: (1) developing and exercising the capabilities, and (2) supporting the virtues, and (3) providing some purpose, and (4) integrating with a worker's life (Veltman, 2016, p. 117). As a measure of meaningful work, all four dimensions should be considered in conjunction with each other (2016, p. 117). As detailed in Section II, an item on an Objective List must be: (1) prudentially good, and (2) non-instrumental in nature. Veltman's four dimensions resemble an Objective List for meaningful work with the prudential goods being, diligence, excellence at work, knowledge, recognition, esteem, virtue, social connections, and work purpose. This is a plausible parallel to a key theory of well-being and underscores my earlier suggestion that some of the elements of meaningful work may be a subset of the elements that make up a meaningful life. Veltman's four dimensions of meaningful work are considered below:

##### **(1) Developing Capabilities**

A meaningful workplace should offer opportunities to develop the capabilities of individuals insofar as this attracts recognition and esteem, according to Veltman (Veltman, 2016, p. 117). Respect for persons requires that opportunities be made available to exercise these capabilities (Raz, 2004, p. 289). I cannot prove that enjoying a meaningful workplace leads to

a meaningful life, but it seems plausible that not working in a meaningful workplace may affect an individual's ability to lead a meaningful life. For example, long working hours result in exhaustion and an inability to relax, and enjoy leisure time, which contributes negatively to well-being. Aristotle requires that our distinctively human features of rational thought and social bonds be developed and exercised in order to achieve a good life (Stumpf, 171, p. 110), but this activity without acknowledgement is not sufficient (Veltman, 2016, p. 120). Rawls believes that having a plan for life is a key contributor to our sense of worth, which includes being acknowledged and appreciated by those around us; a plan should challenge our capabilities or it will 'lack a certain attraction' (Rawls, 1971, p. 440). A person is affirmed of his sense of worth when 'his abilities are both realized and organized in ways of suitable complexity and refinement' (1971, p. 440), and in this sense, Tablan's comment that meaningful work 'depends in a certain measure to our value system and priorities', is relevant (Tablan, 2014, p. 294). According to Nussbaum's Capability Approach, the freedom to achieve well-being is a primary good. This freedom should be understood in terms of the capabilities that people have, and the real opportunities presented to them, so that they are able to do and to be what they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2016, p. 1). The Capability Approach is based on a framework that facilitates the assessment of well-being and social arrangements, and the design of policies for social change in society (2016, p. 3). This approach differs from the theories of well-being reviewed in this research report, in that it focuses on the ends rather than the means, since it claims that people do not all have the same ability to convert means into opportunities (2016, p. 11). To illustrate this, a job may be available, but a person who cannot get to work because they have no transport, will not be able to take advantage of this opportunity. Both access to transport and an opportunity to work are necessary at the same time; one without the other is worthless to a person who is seeking employment. Human beings wish to have a good life; the development and exercise of capabilities provides the freedom to take advantage of the opportunities presented, according to the Perfectionist concept of human good.

## **(2) Supporting the Virtues**

Veltman (Veltman, 2016, p. 122) says that a meaningful workplace encourages development of the virtues, such as 'honor, dignity, pride, dependability, industriousness, cooperativeness, self-discipline, and self-reliance'. According to Tablan (Tablan, 2014, p. 292), work is not just about using our capacities to achieve something, but also about shaping our personality. Sison, Ferrero, & Guitián state that:

The intrinsic or inherent quality of human dignity not only extends to all human beings, but also to everything human beings do, including work. Human beings are possessors of dignity as *imagines Dei*; similarly, all of them are addressees of the divine command to work...

Dignity is a gift that needs to be developed and work is the means for this. (Sison, Ferrero, & Guitián, 2016, p. 518)

Kant believes dignity cannot be traded, exchanged, or replaced because it epitomises the supreme value of humans (Johnson & Cureton, 2018, p. 22). Due to this inherent distinctive trait, no human being should be treated differently because of social rank, accomplishments, or their moral virtues; even the morally worst individuals should be treated as an end in themselves (Dillon, 2018, p. 23). Examples of some types of work which do not support the expression or development of the virtues include dishonest work, illegal work, work that requires a person to be mean or cruel, or work that is simply degrading. Some work affords more honor than others, such as a scientist recognised for groundbreaking work in a specific field. Similarly, skilled work seems to be more valued than unskilled work, although both are absolutely essential for society to function (Veltman, 2016, p. 123), and both can be meaningful depending on the workplace.

### **(3) Having Purpose**

The third aspect of Veltman's framework focuses on work being purposeful (2016, pp. 124-135). Purpose is a subjective concept; I may find purpose in something that others do not. Raz, a supporter of the subjectivist theories of well-being, says that whether a person's life has meaning or not, also depends on whether they themselves find meaning in it, and that finding life meaningful is not sufficient to actually make it meaningful (Raz, 2004, p. 280). Subjectivists believe that an individual's well-being is dependent on what she cares about, her own concerns (Hall & Tiberius, 2016, p. 178). Sometimes the responsibility of providing for a family is sufficient reason to work. 'Maintenance of the family...is not merely an incidental good we derive from work...it gives workers a profound purpose for their hard work' (Tablan, 2014, p. 297). Roessler claims that work plays a larger role in our lives; an individual's 'overall personality is at least in part determined by the type and character of the work...work is special: it is not only instrumental, but also formative' (Roessler, 2012, p. 82). According to Marxism, to be human is not just being born with a rational nature; 'human nature is a product of human activity, not heredity' (Engels, 1972, p. 261 as cited in Tablan, 2014, p. 292), and since work takes up such a large part of our daily activity, its contribution to human nature is not to be under-estimated. Tablan expands on the Marxist concepts by stating that,

‘To be human means to work, to produce something’, and that it is in work that humans come to perfection (Tablan, 2014, p. 292). As man produces objects, he gives them life, he brings them to consciousness. ‘Work is man’s species activity, i.e., it is not only an act of man but also his self-activity’ (2014, p. 292). The employer plays a role in creating or destroying purpose in the workplace; when we ‘fail to see the efforts of cashiers, housekeepers, or bus drivers as acts of the person that have intrinsic worth or excellence, independent of the (sic) their economic or social valuation’, then workers become alienated (2014, p. 300). When we treat workers as a means of production, this results in technology dominating the person (John Paul II, 1981, p. 8). Businesses should be purposeful in their vision and aim to produce goods and services that contribute to human progress, because workers value being part of something socially useful (Tablan, 2014, p. 297). Objectively purposeful work may be enduring, such as a family business which provides for future generations or it can be fleeting, such as an artist who carves a beautiful statue from ice that slowly melts away (Veltman, 2016, p. 125).

#### **(4) Integration of Values**

Veltman suggests that a meaningful workplace should reflect a value or purpose that employees can identify with (2016, pp. 131-135), underscoring that work forms part of a bigger narrative in our lives; ‘It structures our time and imposes a rhythm on our lives. It gets us organised into various kinds of communities and social groups’ (Ciulla, 2000, p. 27). If work is able to positively re-enforce issues that are close to an employee’s heart, it can create meaning and engender a sense of belonging in the workplace which then resonates into the larger community.

In a well-ordered society...there are a variety of communities and associations, and the members of each have their own ideals appropriately matched to their aspirations and talents...What is necessary is that there should be for each person at least one community of shared interests to which he belongs and where he finds his endeavors confirmed (Rawls, 1971, pp. 441-442).

#### **BOWIE’S KANTIAN APPROACH**

An alternative account of objectively meaningful work is proposed by Norman E Bowie (1998), and has its foundations firmly seated in Kant’s teachings. His six characteristics of a meaningful workplace are that: (1) it must be free from obstacles and constraints, and (2) it should promote worker autonomy, and (3) it should allow for rational capacities to be

developed, and (4) it should provide a wage that is sufficient for the physical welfare of the worker, and (5) it should encourage the moral development of employees, and (6) it should not be paternalistic as to how a worker wishes to achieve their own happiness (Bowie, 1998, p. 1083). Meaningful work should develop workers' rational capacities including respecting the capacity to reason, to act on principles, to set goals, to honor categorical imperatives, and to reason abstractly (1998, pp. 1085-1087). There are similarities between both Bowie and Veltman's accounts of meaningful work, specifically around autonomy, non-alienation of workers and the provision of opportunities for developing and exercising skills (1998, pp. 1086-1087). Under Kantian philosophy there are a number of duties, these are: (1) perfect duties towards ourselves, and (2) perfect duties towards others, and (3) imperfect duties towards ourselves, and (4) imperfect duties towards others (Johnson & Cureton, 2018, pp. 18-21), with each duty being derived from the Categorical Imperative. Perfect duties must always be done. Imperfect duties should also be done, but multiple attempts are permissible to fulfill these. Kant specifies two imperfect duties (2018, p. 41) namely, the imperfect duty of self-improvement and the imperfect duty to help others. Bowie's model (Bowie, 1998, pp. 1085-1087), as would be expected in a Kantian approach, discusses the duties which are placed on the employer, as summarised below:

1. There is a perfect duty not to coerce employees; employers ought to remove hurdles which impede the employee's autonomy in the workplace (Carter, 2019, p. 3).
2. There is an imperfect duty to provide a workplace where employees are able to control their own destiny (2019, p. 3).
3. There is an imperfect duty of perfection to oneself and to develop one's talents.
4. There is an imperfect duty to promote the happiness of others.
5. There is an imperfect duty to be concerned with the physical welfare of employees and to do nothing that impedes their moral development.
6. There is an imperfect obligation of beneficence and respect to provide a living wage, but not to decide what ought to make a worker happy.

Since leading a good life is the highest good, Tablan believes that there is a duty on employers to ensure that individuals are provided with an opportunity to achieve this in a meaningful workplace (Tablan, 2014, p. 291). The only absolute duty on the employer is to respect worker autonomy.



## **VOGT'S CAPABILITY APPROACH**

Vogt has developed a set of questions, which are designed to assist employers to promote well-being in the workplace (Vogt, 2005, p. 111). His work is based on Nussbaum's Capability Approach, which seeks to understand an individual's well-being by considering 'what she can do, or be, known as her 'capability to function'' (Wolff & Reeve, 2016, p. 451). Good societies (or perhaps, 'good employers'?) should be promoting opportunities upon which people can decide to act or not (Nussbaum, 2011, pp. 18-20). Capabilities are a combination of personal capabilities and the workplace in which we find ourselves (2011, p. 20). Nussbaum says that society may excel at developing internal capabilities, but then fail to provide opportunities where people can exercise these (2011, p. 21). In order to be considered a 'good society', opportunities to develop capabilities and exercise these, should be presented to individuals (2011, p. 25). The Capabilities Approach focuses on the 'protection of areas of freedom so central, that their removal makes a life not worthy of human dignity' (2011, p. 31). For each of Nussbaum's Central Capabilities, Vogt poses a set of questions to establish the 'well-being' of a workplace. For example under the Emotions Capability, Vogt asks employers, 'Does management attempt to structure projects and work assignments in such a way that encourages collaboration?' (Vogt, 2005, p. 120). Vogt does not provide model answers to the questions, and employers may have difficulty in ascertaining whether their responses fall within the minimum thresholds set by Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 24), and as such, they may not know how they are doing *vis a vis* well-being. Vogt acknowledges this, but he maintains that the framework is still conceptually useful if an employer wishes to promote well-being in the workplace (Vogt, 2005, p. 119). Perhaps this approach provides a good place to start; at least employers become aware of what kind of questions are asked during an assessment, and thus which areas of the business may need attention in order to achieve a more meaningful workplace.

## **SUMMARY**

I set out in this section to establish what a meaningful workplace is, because 'if having meaningful work is essential in living a fulfilled and meaningful life...access to work that is meaningful and developmental must be part of the basic package of ethical human rights' (Gini, 1992, p. 67 as cited in Tablan, 2014, p. 292). In trying to establish common ground between Veltman's, Bowie's and Vogt's approaches, I identified some elements which are present in all three approaches, these are: (1) respect and dignity, and (2) developing your

talents, and (3) having autonomy, and (4) being given opportunities, and (5) having a purpose. These are similar to Roessler's three senses on meaningful work, as discussed earlier. As per Aristotle, our lives are not simply good without effort. We need to work at making them good, and within this concept, our flourishing is 'an activity desirable in itself' (Ross, 1964, p. 232). The challenge with trying to narrow down what work is meaningful and what work is not, is that a single definition does not allow room for the fact that human beings are autonomous and wish to exercise their own choice as to what types of work they would like to do, irrespective of whether this work is considered meaningful or meaningless. Tablan recognises this challenge and suggests that if one focuses on the workplace and not the work itself, that is, all the factors of the work environment which are extrinsic to the workers' subjectivity, then it is possible to arrive at a definition of a meaningful workplace which can then enable meaningful work to some extent. In my view, separating meaningful and meaningless work from a meaningful and meaningless workplace, is not possible, as the one influences the other. Meaningless work or a meaningless workplace will affect any positive effects that may arise from either meaningful work or a meaningful workplace. I illustrated this earlier with my example of a world-class pianist playing on a badly tuned piano in a concert hall with poor acoustics. The pianist's output is poor as a direct result of the environment. I provide another example to substantiate my claim; a worker that is constantly undermined by his employer will not feel that his work is appreciated, and will thus feel disrespected, no matter how rewarding the content of his work is; the meaningless workplace in which he is employed, influences his entire outlook on the work he does. What if meaningless work takes place in a meaningful workplace? I think the same logic applies. Assume a worker is doing repetitive work which requires long hours and as a result, he develops arthritis in his hands. This affects the rest of his life; he can no longer spend time on woodworking after-hours, something he found great peace in, because his arthritis has affected his ability to use the precision tools required to cut the wood. It does not matter that his employer praises the work he does, and gives him positive feedback, nor that he is permitted an extra day off each month in recognition of his good work. The meaningless work he does impacts his life negatively, irrespective of the fact that his employer values him. Therefore, I believe that whether the work or the workplace is meaningless, the overall effect is negative on our well-being. I thus use the concepts of work and workplace interchangeably in my report.

Another aspect for discussion is the fact that the concept of 'meaning' is subject-dependent:

Different persons have diverse conceptions of what is a fulfilling occupation depending on their needs, preferences, interests, beliefs, and situatedness, and most often, it is the subject's condition which makes work fulfilling. (Tablan, 2014, p. 294)

Tablan adds that meaningful work depends to some extent on our own value systems and priorities (2014, p. 294). This ties into Raz's position on meaningfulness (Raz, 2004, p. 280), where he states that people who find meaningfulness in their lives do so because they actively seek meaning in it. Finding meaningfulness does not automatically make a life meaningful, but it creates an attitude which is enabling of this. This ties back into an existentialist approach where Sisyphus finds meaning in his meaningless life. Something can only contribute to our well-being if it is central and important in our lives. It is plausible and likely that some people enjoy doing work which is boring and repetitive; perhaps it affords time to be contemplative? It is also evident that some people like doing dangerous work; perhaps they are attracted to the adrenalin rush? And in many cases, there is no choice as to what type of work is preferred since jobs are scarce, and any job is better than no job.

In this Section, I established that there are differing opinions on what meaningful and meaningless work are, and I also established that there are varying opinions on what role work plays in our lives. Suffice to say, that irrespective of the opinion, there is agreement that work plays a significant role in our lives. *Inter alia*, meaningful work provides dignity, income, recognition opportunities, status in the community, growth, contemplative time and so on. Autonomy plays a significant role in meaningful work; this characteristic is impacted by my argument to replace humans with machines when the workplace is meaningless. In the next Section, I consider the types of work that humans should not be doing which according to my report, is classified as meaningless work.

## **SECTION IV: WHAT TYPES OF WORK SHOULD HUMANS NOT BE DOING?**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In Section II, I showed that meaningful work could contribute to well-being since I showed how work could be considered a prudential good. Hedonism, DFT, OLT and the Objective Goods Perfectionist theories of well-being account for the things which are good for our lives. Mostly they account for a number of things which contribute positively to our well-being except for hedonism, which only accounts for pleasure and pain. No type of work is mentioned as good for our lives under any of these theories. Nonetheless, I am able to show that work, and more specifically meaningful work could be considered as a prudential good under DFT, OLT and Objective Goods Perfectionism, I believe it is fair to assume that meaningless work, being its direct opposite would be a prudential bad under these theories. Since meaningless work is not a prudential good, I will claim that human beings should not be doing this type of work since it does not make their lives go better. In this Section I try to arrive at the different types of work which could be considered meaningless based on the opposite characteristics of meaningful work.

### **MEANINGLESS WORK**

Agassi describes meaningless work as work that: offers little challenge, is dull, allows no judgement, provides very few opportunities to develop skills, does not allow workers to identify with the completed products manufactured, and does not encourage communication between employer and employees (Agassi, 1986, p. 273). Schwartz adds that if a worker has no ability to rationally frame, adjust, and pursue their own plans in the workplace, then the worker will perceive the work as meaningless (Schwartz, 1982, p. 638). In meaningless workplaces, workers are not hired to achieve goals or make decisions. They are hired to perform pre-defined, sequenced specific actions (1982, p. 634). Schwartz believes there is something wrong with a society where meaningless work is justified by saying that the workers can use their time outside of work for formulating their plans for their lives (1982, p. 636). She rejects this saying that if autonomy is a primary good then it cannot be treated as a primary good in some situations and not in others; all members of society should be encouraged to pursue 'unified lives' (1982, p. 639). Rawls calls this a 'rational life plan'; it is a coming together of all one's pursuits and dreams (Rawls, 1971, pp. 408-409). The reality is that people end up in different types of work based on their different circumstances. Being

born in a rural village to poor parents, may mean a person has to accept meaningless work (with all its negative attributes), as there are no other choices available. Or being physically disabled may limit the types of work available for example. Arneson says that:

...the prudential disabilities that separate more and less able agents are surely in very considerable part due to accidents of genetic endowment and variously favorable early childhood circumstances that do not lie within the agent's control and for which he cannot be either praiseworthy or blameworthy. (Arneson, 1989, p. 423)

How is meaningless work characterised? Is it correct to consider meaningless work as the negative of meaningful work; are they direct opposites? If this is not the correct way, it is at least *one* way to arrive at a definition of meaningless work, which although it may not be absolutely correct, will suffice for my research report. I have pointed out that an absolute definition of meaningless work is not required for my argument to be valid.

How do the theories of well-being account for meaningless work? Hedonism does not account for work whether it is meaningful or meaningless. DFT states that 'getting what you want is good for you, and not getting what you want is bad for you' (Fletcher, 2016b, p. 27). If a person desires meaningless work, then according to one version of DFT, she may desire this because she is not completely informed about all her choices, and if she was, she would probably not choose meaningless work, she would probably opt for something that would fulfill a desire. It may be argued that some workers consider work as 'an instrument for earning a livelihood and nothing more' (Agassi, 1986, p. 272), and that maybe meaningless work is desirable on these grounds. Both Tablan and Nussbaum reject this claim on the grounds that desiring meaningless work compromises human dignity, something which should never be compromised (Tablan, 2014, p. 297) (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 26). Later in this section, I will discuss that proponents of anti-paternalism would not lend support to reducing the choices of work available for humans since this impacts individual sovereignty which is inviolable according to them. These supporters suggest workers will learn from other 'experiments in living...[and] integrate the insights so gained into their own self-regarding decisionmaking' (Arneson, 1989, p. 417). I am not sure this I agree with this view; circumstances are difficult to change, and often the mind-set, or the lack of resources which characterise these circumstances do not permit a person to believe that they are able to learn from others or change their circumstances and create new meaningful opportunities in life. Sison, Ferrero, & Guitián state that 'The 'image and likeness of God' is found more in the workers than in the external result of their work' (Sison, et al., 2016, p. 516), and as such the

worker is more valuable than anything he produces, and his dignity should never be reduced to a mere resource (2016, p. 517). Tablan says that an individual should not be given the opportunity to choose ‘meaningless work’ since it lacks in dignity. This may sound paternalistic given that the individual’s opinion on the dignity of the work is not considered; surely work is only meaningless if the individual doing the work, deems it so? As discussed above, sometimes the circumstances under which a person was raised dictates how she relates to the world. Perhaps the worker opts for meaningless work since this is the only type of work she knows or she thinks she deserves? Sumner’s autonomy requirement of well-being guards against a self-assessment of well-being that is measured from inaccurate self-reflection, as with Sumner’s example of the ‘dominated housewife’ (Sumner, 1996, p. 170), who through a system of indoctrination has restructured what she wants from her life, and therefore also the values to which she appeals when considering these goals, such that she accepts her subordinated role as being acceptable. According to Sumner, we must develop our own values and concerns with respect to our lives, which is in part formed by reflection, something which may be hampered by the social environment in which we find ourselves (Hall & Tiberius, 2016, p. 179). A weakness of this approach is that well-being becomes dependent on one’s perspective.

I think it is obvious that since items on an Objective List are those prudential goods which, when acquired during the journey of life, make a person’s life go better, meaningless work would not feature as an item on such a list. Even if some individuals found meaningless work satisfactory or fulfilling, it would not qualify as an item on an Objective List since items on a list must be objectively prudential by definition. And since lists cannot be self-created, it is safe to assume that meaningless work could not appear on an Objective List.

Perfectionist theories of well-being say that things which are instrumentally good for human nature are good for their well-being. It is hard to conceive of meaningless work as such a thing. As mentioned earlier in this research report, the achievement of success under this theory of well-being comes at considerable personal cost, such as sacrificing leisure time to practise scales on the piano. Practice aimed at achieving excellence in any field which is purposeful and directed, is not a meaningless activity. Under this theory of well-being, recognition and achievement requires dedication and perserverance. Another view from Agassi relates the example of workers in meaningless work situations exhibiting ‘symptoms of mental stagnation, with low self-esteem, with social passivity and inactivity...a sign of diminished well-being and choice for the individual and a considerable loss for society’

(Agassi, 1986, p. 272). The diminishment of capacities essential to human beings is bad for individuals (Fletcher, 2016b, p. 86), and a workplace which does not offer humans the opportunity to develop or exercise their capacities is bad for well-being. In fact, perfectionism the way Aristotle advocates it, is all about excellence, achievement, and recognition. The excellence of a knife is in its being razor sharp, as it was designed to function (Parry, 2014, p. 2), and the excellence of a human being is reached when we exercise the capacities which make us fully human. If this pursuit of excellence is denied while performing meaningless work, then meaningless work should not be pursued under this theory of well-being. Under the Capability Approach, freedom to achieve well-being, is assessed in terms of what people are able to do, which in turn defines the kind of life they can have. Diminished capabilities would impact the kind of life people are able to lead, in a negative way (Robeyns, 2016, pp. 2-8), and thus meaningless work would not qualify as a good which contributes to our well-being under this approach.

During the course of this research report, I am unable to arrive at a definition of meaningless work that cannot be contested. For example, consider the army, one of the least autonomous work environments in the world; it employs soldiers not to achieve their own goals, nor to make their own decisions (many of the characteristics of meaningless work), yet despite this, many soldiers find their work very meaningful. According to Nussbaum ‘If we were to take [welfare] itself as a goal of public policy, pushing citizens into functioning in a single determinate manner, the liberal pluralist would rightly judge that we were precluding many choices that citizens may make in accordance with their own conceptions of the good’ (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 87 as cited in Dorsey, 2016, p. 422). It is apparent that whenever subjective opinions on the characteristics of meaningful or meaningless work are entertained, a definition of either type of work, becomes elusive. I look to the variable pattern of well-being for answers (Raz, 2004, p. 277), which posits, that whether a person’s life has meaning or not, depends to some extent whether they find meaning in it; existentialists find meaning in life like Sisyphus, irrespective of the chaos. However, that people find their life meaningful, ‘is not sufficient to make it meaningful’ according to Raz (Raz, 2004, p. 280), a concept well-illustrated in Rawl’s example of the mathematician who counts blades of grass (Crisp, 2017, p. 15). Just because someone finds meaning in meaningless work, does not necessarily make the work meaningful. In the case of the grass-counter, it would be reasonable to suggest that removing this type of work and replacing this with something more meaningful, would be better for the individual’s overall welfare. How does this strengthen my argument? In my

view, it means that I do not have to have an absolute definition of meaningless work; if a type of work can be objectively viewed as meaningless and it can be done by machines, then it should be done by machines. Generally meaningless work refers to a type of work with certain attributes. Those who do not find the work meaningless, may be the exception rather than the rule as in the case of the grass-counter. This does not make their opinion worthless; I am simply pointing out that this is not a 'cut and dried' situation. There are anomalies, there are exceptions, and there are inexplicable situations, some of which the theories of well-being cannot explain coherently. There are some workplaces which in general, individuals will agree are meaningless; I offer these as suggestions below:

- Work which lacks in dignity.
- Work where one is treated like a slave.
- Work which is underpaid.
- Work which is dull and offers no stimulation.
- Work which is repetitive and monotonous.
- Work which is unsupervised and not acknowledged.
- Work where employees do not feel valued.
- Work which undermines our rationality (Bowie, 1998, p. 70 as cited in Tablan, 2014, p. 299).
- Work which encourages unhealthy competition amongst employees (Agassi, 1986, p. 272).
- Domestic work and childcare which involves 'menial, repetitious cleaning; ...little social recognition, sense of achievement or intellectual stimulation' (1986, p. 274).
- Work which restricts creativity (Schwartz, 1982, p. 639).
- 'Grueling or dangerous' work (Veltman, 2016, p. 143).
- Work which threatens mental or physical health' (2016, p. 143).
- Criminal or illegal work, such as selling drugs or stealing.
- Work which one is forced to do, such as military conscription.
- 'McJobs' 'low-skilled, low-status, dead-end work' (Fineman, 2012, p. 57).
- Work which is '...boring, stultifying, or nerve-racking work in which a man...is made the servant of a machine' (Tablan, 2014, p. 299).
- Most assembly-line jobs (O'Toole and Lawler, 2006 cited in Tablan, 2014, p. 300).



As mentioned, not everyone considers all of the above types of work meaningless; many mothers do not consider childcare as meaningless work; they often sacrifice their careers to be home to raise their children. However, as I have mentioned previously in my report, an absolute definition of meaningless work is not essential to my argument. If I assume, by way of example, that the above types of work are objectively meaningless, (irrespective of differences in opinion), and objectively meaningless work does not contribute positively to well-being, then in accordance with my argument, I suggest that this work be handed over to machines where possible. Humans can then devote their time to more meaningful work. Not all the meaningless work can be ‘handed over to machines’. For one, one cannot hand over illegal work, such as the selling of drugs to machines, not because machines are unable to dispense drugs, but because it is immoral to perform illegal work even if you are a machine. What other types of work should be removed from this list, and who should decide on this? I believe that any work that is legal and objectively meaningless, and can be done by machines, should be done by machines.

Opinions on work are varied and subjective in nature. Bowie states that ‘it has been difficult to find a justification for any objective normative definition that can be given’ (Bowie, 1998, p. 1083). Roessler states that, ‘what should and what should not count as meaningful work will always be disputed in a liberal democracy’ (Roessler, 2012, p. 71), and by deduction, what should and what should not count as meaningless work will also, always be disputed in a liberal democracy. Meaningless work exists to some extent in all workplaces since machines are not yet capable of doing all types of work. A real challenge to my argument is that of paternalism; an external agent is dictating to an individual what types of work he can or cannot do. Making certain types of work impermissible negatively impacts worker autonomy which is identified as a key component of both well-being in Section II and meaningful work in Section III. Any action which negatively impacts autonomy also negatively impacts well-being according to the philosophical theories of well-being and meaningful work. Is it permissible to remove the right of an individual to choose what type of work they would like to do? Does the removal of this right to decide what type of work to do infringe on the individual’s right to design his own life, something which Rawls sees as very central to our well-being? Would a just society force individuals to disengage from meaningless work if the individuals did not wish to do so, or if they really valued such work (Dorsey, 2016, p. 422)? I suggest that a just society would do this if it meant that the overall welfare of the citizens was increased as a result. I will review paternalism; I need to defend

when it is permissible to impact an individual's autonomy since in my view, there are occasions where limited applications of paternalism far outweigh its negative aspects.

## **PATERNALISM**

Paternalism is defined as 'the interference of a state or an individual with another person, against their will, and defended or motivated by a claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm' (Dworkin, 2019, pp. 1-2). Anti-paternalists embrace the principle that people should be left to do what they want to do as long as what they do does not harm, or threaten to harm anyone else, which Arneson terms the 'Liberty Principle'. They wish to 'prevent people from suffering harm that they have not truly chosen to suffer or to risk suffering' (Feinberg, 1989, p. 119 as cited in Arneson, 1989, p. 424). Under paternalism the individual's conception of their own good is over-ridden by other policy objectives.

X acts paternalistically towards Y by doing Z according to Dworkin (Dworkin, 2019, p. 2), if the following conditions are met:

1. Z interferes with the autonomy of Y
2. X does this without Y's permission
3. X does so because X believes Z will improve (or maintain) the wellbeing of Y

Arneson states that paternalistic practices 'constrain the liberty of some who would be better off in the absence of the restriction and of some who would be better off if the restriction is imposed' (Arneson, 1989, p. 411) and according to Arneson it is a matter of chance as to whom this restriction would favour (1989, p. 411). He believes that anti-paternalism favours the 'haves' in society, where the more able individuals have access to, and make better choices than those less capable agents who would most likely opt for poorer choices which paternalism would have removed (1989, p. 412), and in his view, anti-paternalism cannot be good for society when it makes the 'worse off even worse off' (1989, p. 413). One of the arguments in support of anti-paternalism is that society benefits when 'persons of genius' (1989, p. 416) innovate, unhindered by paternalistic constraints and society benefits as a whole. Since no-one knows who these persons are prior to their work of innovation, 'one must give free space to all' which is impractical and (1989, p. 416) renders this argument impractical. Feinberg in his defence of the anti-paternalism component of the liberty principle (Feinberg, 1989 as cited in Arneson, 1989, pp. 423-424) argues that paternal restrictions proceeding choice made on a non-voluntarily basis, may sometimes be permissible. His definition of a 'substantially non-voluntary action' is one that 'departs too far from the ideal

of a perfectly voluntary choice' (1989, p. 424). He advances this line of thinking saying that choices are 'perfectly voluntary' if: (1) the chooser is competent, or (2) the choice is not made under coercion, or (3) the choice is not made using subtle influence, or (4) the chooser does not choose while being misinformed of his circumstances, or without understanding the other alternatives available, or (5) the chooser is not in a state of temporary distortion due to exhaustion, drugs or other (1989, pp. 423-424). According to Arneson, when an agent makes a '*substantially nonoptimizing choice*' (Arneson, 1989, p. 429), wherein he fails to maximise his own good and also fails to benefit others with his choice, then paternalistic action is justified. For example, a worker chooses a low-paid job which requires long hours in an unhealthy workplace over the option to be reskilled for a better role, which attracts more pay and better working conditions. The worker may refuse on the grounds that he 'likes the work he does'. In this case, since both the worker and his family's welfare are negatively impacted by his decision, Arneson believes that the worker can be influenced to change his mind using paternalistic interventions.

How does the above relate to my argument of replacing humans with machines in meaningless workplaces. Is my argument paternalistic? Applying Dworkin's conditions, it looks that way. Condition three can be difficult to affirm since the intention behind an action may not *just* be in the interests of the workers; the state does not always act out of beneficence. A government controlled by an elite group may not relate to the conditions of life that the worse off members of society have to endure, and if this type of government enacts restrictions, these may not be in the interests of those they are meant to help. By the same token, a government controlled by the majority may not enact paternalistic restrictions in the interests of its minority of more able citizens. Some may argue against paternalism on the basis of these objections, as a hedge against the 'benevolence of the crocodiles' (Arneson, 1989, p. 421); it seems that no matter which option, some segment of society will suffer under paternalism. However, since my argument is anchored in the objective of increasing the well-being of workers' lives, my motive behind removing meaningless work from humans is morally good, and thus condition three is satisfied. According to Roessler, one of the pillars of meaningful work is that the individual should have autonomy over his own life choices (Roessler, 2012, p. 86) including his choice of work. By dictating what types of work a human may or may not do, the state is preventing one from being one's own person, from making one's own choices and living one's own life. How can a decision which impacts the sovereignty of autonomy and thus well-being, be justified on the back of an argument which

purports to promote well-being? The debate on paternalism is not cut and dried. According to Arneson, rejecting paternalism ‘gives to the haves and takes from the have-nots’ (Arneson, 1989, p. 412); more capable agents will fare better under anti-paternalism as they have an unrestricted choice of options from which to choose, and similarly, less capable agents will probably make poor choices which paternalistic action might have removed from the available options (1989, p. 412). A paternalistic policy, as I advocate, would exclude most types of meaningless work from work choices, coercing less skilled workers who may be used to working in meaningless workplaces, to seek out more meaningful work options. Living in a liberal democracy means that at least state interference can be controlled to some degree (Conly, 2016, p. 448). State intervention can expand the options available to citizens; in removing meaningless work, the state can free people to make other choices which are more meaningful (2016, p. 448). Techniques such as nudging individuals in the direction of their own goals through curating and presenting choices which lead to the achievement of these goals are used under Libertarian Paternalism (Dworkin, 2019, p. 12). This ‘leading’ a person to a set of choices, in line with what is good for them, is not considered coercion, and as such, is not strictly paternalistic. This could be a possible way for governments to implement a policy of moving meaningless work to machines without having to be strongly paternalistic.

## **SUMMARY**

Roessler does not see a clear path to removing undignified, meaningless work from society:

I think for the foreseeable future, there will be meaningless and undignified work in a society because the functioning of a society comprises both meaningful and meaningless work and people have to work to earn money to survive. In a well-ordered society, people would freely consent to the jobs they have to do...the market would provide meaningful jobs and compensate for meaningless work. (Roessler, 2012, p. 79)

If we accept that this is the case, and if the principle that all human beings are equal and are deserving of respect, then ‘the conventional answer of distributing degraded work to degraded peoples’ is not acceptable, says Veltman (Veltman, 2016, p. 145). She proposes the sharing of meaningless work (2016, p. 146) to spread this burden. She believes meaningful work cannot be guaranteed for all citizens so that ‘even in well-ordered societies, it is not likely that all people will fully flourish’ (2016, p. 146). Schwartz suggests that workplaces should be more re-designed (Schwartz, 1982, p. 641), to allow team members to learn each

other's tasks and in this way, each person has opportunity for to shape their own life plans (1982, p. 642). Agassi believes in a more democratic workplace where 'fragmented and limited tasks' and 'bureaucratic hierarchies' are replaced with autonomous work teams (Agassi, 1986, p. 271), which is somewhat aligned with the Marxist concept that no-one should be put to work in one area only without being offered the opportunity to move to another. This way everyone is able to achieve self-realisation.

None of the above critics suggest anything similar to my proposal of replacing humans with machines in meaningless workplaces. They discuss redistribution of meaningless work, sharing of meaningless work, job rotation, and the re-design of workplaces to make them more meaningful. My argument, if implemented in a strong paternalistic manner, may realise the benefits of removing meaningless work much sooner than what could be achieved from any of the above suggested changes. The main beneficiary of my argument is human beings; meaningful work is a prudential good and thus contributes positively to well-being. A strong paternalist approach assists the state make decisions with 'limited and imperfect information about the impact the policies...would have on the welfare of individual citizens' (Arneson, 1989, p. 411); any feasible policy must be based on a 'broad, rough classification' (1989, p. 411); subjective nuances cannot be accommodated under state paternalism. Lastly, just because a theory of well-being can show that meaningful work is good for the life of the individual whose life it is, does not mean that this will necessarily be the case. Kagan says that one is only well-off if one takes pleasure in having these things. She says, 'it isn't the fact that I would want them that makes them good for me to have; rather, I want them because I see that it is good for me to have them' (Kagan, 2009, p. 254). Basically much of how we appreciate our lives as individuals is based on how well we are able to respond to the good and bad things that take place. Yes, my argument is paternalistic in nature; I would like to see all meaningless work removed from humans since I believe that humans should only do the types of work which respect and dignify their capacities. The crux of the objection to the paternalistic nature of my argument is hinged on whether one believes personal sovereignty is sacred and should never be violated. Feinberg believes that paternalism action is justified after an agent makes a choice which is substantially non-voluntary in nature (Feinberg, 1986, as cited in Arneson, 1989, p. 423). In summary, paternalism is justified by Feinberg in situations where an agent is forced to make a choice without having his full capacities engaged or full knowledge of the situation. I would like to suggest that an agent is also not given a choice when the options offered represent choices between 'basic needs and

basic moral duties' (Robeyns, 2016, pp. 9-10), where selecting either choice is a tragic one. How does an agent choose between the functionings of 'having self-respect' or 'having a meaningful job'? In whatever choice the agent makes, something significant is sacrificed. How does one choose between caring for a small child or having a healthy life? These are not real choices. Perhaps under such circumstances, Feinberg might also consider supporting some paternalistic action.

I will consider what work machines are good at in the Section V.

## **SECTION V: WHAT TYPES OF WORK ARE MACHINES GOOD AT?**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In this Section, I will review what types of work machines are good at and what types of work humans are good at, in order to ascertain what types of meaningless work can be moved to machines. Since technology continues to advance, my recommendations may only be relevant for a short period of time, but it serves to draw attention to the extent that machines are able to operate effectively in the workplace. In general, humans are able to do most types of work to a certain degree, which is in contrast to machines that are limited by technology constraints, such as the efficiency of silicon conductors, processor capabilities and so on. In general, machines are more efficient than humans in the work they do, since they make significantly fewer errors, they do not need rest time and do not need to be managed. Unlike humans, machines are unaffected by whether a workplace is meaningful or meaningless. In this research report, I claim that an ethical argument exists for replacing humans with machines in meaningless workplaces. To validate this argument, I have shown that meaningful work is a prudential good under some theories of well-being, and since, according to these theories, one of our most important objectives in life is to maximise our well-being, it makes sense not to undertake meaningless work where possible. Since different types of work form part of our daily lives, not doing meaningless work, some of which may be essential in the workplace, would necessitate that this work be moved to machines. I will compare whether the work machines are good at matches any of the characteristics of ‘meaningless’ work as identified in Section IV, where a match would confirm that this type of work could be moved to machines.

According to Brynjolfsson & McAfee:

Rapid and accelerating digitization is likely to bring economic rather than environmental disruption...as computers get more powerful, companies have less need for some kinds of workers. Technological progress is going to leave behind some people...there’s never been a better time to be a worker with special skills or the right education... However, there’s never been a worse time to be a worker with only ‘ordinary’ skills...because computers, robots, and other digital technologies are acquiring these skills and abilities at an extraordinary rate.  
(Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014, p. 11)

Fineman describes the ‘McDonaldization’ of business as a ‘highly efficient way of controlling the methods and the quality and quantity of the work’ by imposing processes

where ‘technology, rules, and tight management are closely harmonized’ (Fineman, 2012, p. 57). Businesses which have become ‘McDonaldized’ share the characteristics of simple, time-controlled tasks which remove worker discretion and meaning, have standardised working hours, use technology wherever feasible and have high staff attrition rates (2012, p. 57). In these environments, employee conversations with customers are often scripted removing any chance for workers to be creative or improvise. Generally a job is vulnerable to ‘McDonaldization’ if it is routine in nature. These characteristics represent the opposite of those identified as being present in objectively meaningful workplaces as per Section IV, meaning that these workplaces are meaningless. During this process of ‘McDonaldization’, some jobs may be lost, but others will be added since machines require a human interface at the end point, for example, a concierge to hand over the final product and conduct the required acceptance procedures, or a remote operator to manage emergencies via a call center. Machines need to receive instructions from someone and they need to be serviced, both of which results in additional skilled jobs. This is what Brynjolfsson and McAfee (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014, pp. 18-19) refer to when they say it has never been a better time for workers with the right type of skills. The converse of this, is that it has never been a worse time for workers with the wrong type of skills, that is, those that are used to doing any type of work that can easily be done by machines.

## **WHAT ARE HUMAN BEINGS GOOD AT?**

According to Levy and Murnane, the human labor market will centre on solving unstructured problems, working with new information, and carrying out non-routine manual tasks (Levy & Murnane, 2013, pp. 15-16). There are two scenarios wherein it is difficult for machines to replace humans, these are work situations: (1) where humans have to adapt their response to an event based on commonsense, prior experience or something that has been shared from someone else’s experience, and (2) which require very quick changes in logic. Machines can only do what they are programmed to do. Both these conditions are dependent on accessing capacities which are distinctively human. Aristotle considered rationality and autonomy amongst those goods which should be exercised in order to achieve excellence and perfection (Bradford & Keller, 2016, p. 127). The types of jobs that will always be done better by humans, are those that engage their distinctively human capacities. For example, jobs that require empathy and social interaction, capacities which machines do not have. These are called the ‘caring jobs’ (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014, p. 7), examples of which are nursing, child minding, caring for the elderly, animal minders, massage therapists and so on. Portions



of these jobs can be done by machines. For example in caring for the elderly, machines monitor vital signs to ensure that the patient has not perhaps fallen over or fainted especially when they are on their own. Having humans perform this type of work is possible except that humans are unable to monitor signals as accurately as a machine; the diligence of a machine in a servile (meaningless) job surpasses that of its human counterparts.

### **WHAT ARE MACHINES GOOD AT?**

A machine can replace a human being when two conditions are satisfied, namely that: (1) all the information needed for a task can be identified in a format that computers can process, and (2) the process can be reduced to a set of rules (Levy & Murnane, 2013, p. 7). Processes which cannot be reduced to a set of rules but fit a pattern can be done by machines; machines can be taught to match patterns. This type of programming will become more prevalent as technology evolves. Machines are excellent at tasks which involve speed and accuracy, but they are not able to process and integrate different kinds of information, like a human mind can (2013, p. 9). They are only able to process information because they interpret the structure imposed on the data. Machines are not able to do the highly skilled work of unstructured tasks, nor are they able to do the low skilled, basic, unstructured tasks, such as moving a table up some stairs. Some of the characteristics of meaningless work identified in Section IV are in line with the types of work machines are able to do, for example, work which is repetitive and monotonous. Machines are good at processes which are pre-definable and repetitive. Machines are not subject to fatigue in the general sense and are able to perform tasks for hours on end without interruption; they do require maintenance at regular intervals. Underpaid work could also be done by machines since machines are not paid although machines are 'loaned' to business on a pay-for-use basis to complete specific tasks, for example farmers may rent specialized equipment when the crops are ready to be harvested. Machines do not require an environment which is autonomous and non-alienating as per Roessler's two senses of meaningful work (Roessler, 2012, p. 86), meaning that work which is unsupervised, unacknowledged, has no opportunities for growth, encourages unhealthy competition, is dangerous, poses health threats, or work that is simply unjust, may be moved to machines. This is by no means an exhaustive list of all the types of meaningless work that could be moved to machines.

## MEANINGLESS WORK AND MACHINES

In Section IV, I identified the characteristics of meaningless work. These include, for example, undignified work, work where one is treated like a slave, underpaid work, work which is dull and offers no stimulation, dull, repetitive, and monotonous work, work that goes unacknowledged and so on. In this Section, I identified the types of work that machines are good at. Looking at the list of meaningless work characteristics in Section IV, I provide a list of my own examples of work that could be moved to machines:

- Any assembly line work.
- Any data capture type work, which can be adapted to a template and process.
- Any routine work like sweeping or vacuuming floors or streets.
- Any dispensing work, for example the dispensing of prescriptions which can be pre-ordered and dispensed via a kiosk.
- Any fulfillment of online orders which a machine can be programmed to pick from warehouse stock, and pack for shipment.
- Any routine administrative work, such as the scheduling of appointments which can be done via a computer application.
- Any sorting work, for instance, sorting products which conform to a specific quality standard, sorting fruit, sorting vegetables, sorting produced goods such as chocolates, biscuits and gadgets.
- Any agricultural work such as picking fruit, watering seedlings and spraying crops.
- Any work which requires accurate, fast, complex comparisons and lookups to be done, for example medical scanning and reference table lookups.
- Any infrastructure checking and fixing, for example, cable laying, cable integrity checking, and detection of faulty cables.
- Integrity checking on cement structures such as bridges or buildings, for example, after earthquakes or other natural disasters.
- Dangerous work, such as mine removals in war zones, chemical hazard cleaning, underground rescue work in the mining industry.
- Even sex work can be done by robots today.

Machines cannot displace the work that humans are good at doing, such as coaching, providing feedback, giving encouragement, assessing situations and recognition of employees. Failure to provide these activities in the workplace, should be addressed through

management interventions. Machines can also not replace humans in the roles which I have described earlier, the ‘care roles’. They can replace them to a certain extent, for example in situations where a machine is simply in a ‘wait state’, waiting for an emergency to be declared, such as a panic button being pressed on a train. It is not necessary to have humans waiting for something to happen. They need not watch a screen all day, machines are better equipped to do this type of job. Humans will still need to be care-givers, child minders, teachers, and nurses at the levels where empathy and social interaction are required. A machine can probably read stories and play games with children, but they cannot love and cuddle a child like a parent can.

A government may decide that instead of going through the contentious process of moving meaningless work to machines, they could simply address the issue of workers’ welfare by setting a minimum wage for all meaningless work. Although there is some correlation between how meaningful a worker finds their work, and how much they are being paid (where the more money the worker receives, the more likely he will find his work meaningful irrespective of the work), this correlation is not strong. This is problematic for me, as workers will be less inclined to move to meaningful work if they are being rewarded to continue doing meaningless work; any nudges in the form of incentives to move to meaningful work, would most likely be weighed up *vis a vis* the revised minimum wage offer. In addition to this, some workers may view money as the ‘meaning-providing’ element of their life and increasing the minimum wage would most likely not only satisfy this type of person but would provide the worker with the evidence and the assurance of having a meaningful life. If you happened to say to such a person that money is not everything, they may argue in a fashion, not unlike a hedonist, that money is an (imperfect) proxy of happiness since most of what they desire in life, can be obtained through money. Having money gives them the life that they believe is good for them. Some are relentless in their obligation to provide for family and future generations, which also drives this need for money. The state is thus faced with a dilemma: to remove meaningless work and be accused of paternalistic behavior, or to increase the minimum wage for meaningless work, and allow workers to continue to do this work knowing full well that this is not a sustainable solution. This is also a moral issue. I have shown that meaningless work has a negative effect on human well-being, and for the state to indirectly endorse this by increasing the minimum wage to keep workers in meaningless work, does not demonstrate either the right values nor does it show that the state cares for its citizens. Setting a minimum wage is a slippery slope; the minimum wage today may not

satisfy recipients tomorrow. Machines may provide a cost-effective option in the face of increasing labour costs, but this is not the reason I advocate for moving meaningless work to machines. I am arguing from a moral standpoint; human beings count, and what counts is their welfare. If their welfare can be improved by removing meaningless work from them, then this seems a good enough motivation in support of my argumentation.

## **SUMMARY**

Agassi states that workers report that jobs are more interesting and challenging after a technology update in the workplace (Agassi, 1986, p. 281), possibly attributable to workers being re-skilled for new jobs, while meaningless work is portioned out to machines. As work becomes more interesting, the employer fulfills his Kantian duty of providing a more meaningful workplace for workers (Bowie, 1998, p. 1). There may come a time where machines are able to do almost all work, and there is little input required from humans. Perhaps this will be ideal in the sense that contemplation is the highest good according to Aristotle, and humans would then have ample time to indulge in this? In this Section, I have shown that there are different types of work which humans are good at and different types of work that machines are good at. Both types of work are generally required in a workplace. Machines could be allocated the work, which in my research, is deemed to be meaningless, and humans can perform the more skilled tasks which exercise and develop their capacities.

## SECTION VI: CONCLUSION

Imagine that on this one occasion, Sisyphus pushes the rock to the top of the hill and for some inexplicable reason, the rock steadies itself and stops, lodged in an impossibly tiny groove, which ordinarily, would heave in relief as it released the weight of the heavy stone gently down the slope. Imagine it holds its position. Sisyphus waits. He anticipates the inevitable sound, which he recalls with absolute clarity, of the stones clattering down the slope, as the large rock gathers momentum and starts its long journey back down the hill. Imagine on this one occasion, there is only silence. The rock holds steady. Sisyphus takes a breath. He watches in amazement, as the rock does not move. He lets out a deep sigh, content with his life. Does Sisyphus feel a different sense of achievement and satisfaction at this moment? Or does he smile quietly, knowing that no matter what the rock's journey is, he has found his own peace; he never accepted a life of meaninglessness, he simply found meaning outside of the chaos of a world he could not control.

For existentialists, Sisyphus's approach is a way to embrace the world we live in. In terms of my research report I believe that given a choice between meaningful and meaningless work, most people would opt for meaningful work. Perhaps Sisyphus might have done so too, had he been given a choice. At the heart of my argument is the notion that human beings truly matter; their welfare is of importance, even if for some it is only about their own welfare. Based on this, things that are good for our well-being, should be pursued and things that are bad for our well-being should be avoided or minimised. My premise is that meaningful work contributes positively to our well-being and meaningless work does not. I establish that the various theories of well-being account for work differently, and in the case of hedonism, not at all. DFT provides good support in this regard; in general, the satisfaction of my desires means that my life is going well for me, and I am better off because of this. It is very plausible that the satisfaction of a desire for meaningful work would improve the life of the person whose life it is, given the significant role that work plays in our lives. Under OLT the claim for meaningful work is less compelling since the items on a list are required to be non-instrumental in nature; meaningful work would therefore have to be desired for its sake only and not for any other extrinsic benefit. Would someone desire a certain type of work because it is meaningful? I argue that if an item such as 'play' can be desired for its own sake, then surely meaningful work could be desired non-instrumentally too? By definition, if an item appears on a list, then it is an item which will make a person's life go better; meaningful work is surely such an item? Finally, under the Objective Goods Perfectionist theory I claim

that our distinctive human capacities are exercised with meaningful work, and therefore, as a result, we achieve recognition and respect.

In terms of my argument therefore, I show that meaningful workplaces contribute positively to the welfare of workers and in contrast, well-being is negatively affected in meaningless workplaces. Where humans are treated as if they do not matter, I argue that it is ethically admissible, to replace them with machines. Humans have been endowed with special capacities such as the ability to rationalise and create social bonds. It is because of these that humans should always be treated with dignity and respect. I believe it is right to recognise the special capacities of humans through the exercise of meaningful work. Is it unethical to replace humans with machines where the workplace does not allow us to become better versions of ourselves? I think not. We ought to do as much as possible to move away from acting like machines; we have been endowed with capacities to do so much more. Unlike Sisyphus we have options and meaningful workplaces present us with an opportunity to locate more meaning in our lives.

The underlying philosophical theories of well-being cannot explain all the nuances of what contributes to our leading a good life, nor can they satisfactorily explain all the choices we make, since human beings are complex creatures who have different wants and needs at different times in their lives. But these theories go a long way to explaining why it is important for us to flourish, and what it takes for us to achieve this. Each theory may advocate something slightly different, but what is indisputable, is that our well-being as a species is critical for humans to thrive. Since on average, we spend more time working than any other activity in our adult lives, I believe that the type of work we do should be optimised for our good. For work to be good for us, it should be meaningful.

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