

# 1

## *Meaningful Work*

‘Work’ is a contested concept and so is the notion of ‘meaningful work’. The debate on work is hundreds of years old, while the discussion about meaningful work is recent. The historical discussions about the concept of work show, however, not just conceptual and value-free disagreements about the content and form of work but also, and more fundamentally, disagreements about its meaning for workers and society. Thomas Carlyle introduces the chapter on work in his famous *Past and Present* by claiming that ‘there is a perennial nobleness, and even sacredness in Work’. And he continues (1966:189 [1843]):

Consider how, even in the meanest sorts of Labour, the whole soul of a man is composed into a kind of real harmony, the instant he sets himself to work! Doubt, Desire, Sorrow, Remorse, Indignation, Despair itself, all these like hellhounds lie beleaguering the soul of the poor dayworker, as of every man: but he bends himself with free valour against his task, and all these are stilled, all these sink murmuring far off into their caves. The man is now a man. The blessed glow of Labour in him, is it not as purifying fire, wherein all poison is burnt up, and of sour smoke itself there is made bright blessed flame!

This passionate plea for work promotes the widely shared position that human beings are perfected in work and it is there that we attain well-being. Thus, work, Carlyle claims, is utterly meaningful, with no exception. ‘All work, even cotton-spinning, is noble; work is alone noble’ (p. 147), he says. This position has been challenged and John Stuart Mill (1984:90 [1850]) confronts Carlyle with an adversary perspective on work:

Work, I imagine, is not a good in itself. There is nothing laudable in work for work’s sake. To work voluntarily for a worthy object is laudable; but what constitutes a worthy object? On this matter, the oracle of which your contributor [Thomas Carlyle] is the prophet has never yet been prevailed on

to declare itself. He revolves in an eternal circle round the idea of work, as if turning up the earth, or driving a shuttle or a quill, were ends in themselves, and the ends of human existence.

Work as a goal in itself is an absurd idea, Mill says to Carlyle, concluding that work is in and for itself meaningless. These opposite takes represent two schools of thought that have fuelled the dichotomous, deeply polarised and antagonistic debate about the concept and meaning of work.

On the same side as the conservative, not to say reactionary racist, Carlyle, who looks back to the Middle Ages, we find the revolutionary Karl Marx, who yearns for a new society. And on the same side as the philosopher and political economist Mill, we find another philosopher and political economist, Adam Smith. Snapshots of the most poignant and, indeed, well-known arguments between these two on the concept of work unravel the on-going rivalry between advocates and critics of work. One of Smith's best-known arguments is that work is performed only for egotistical reasons (1979:119 [1776]): 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.' In another context, he talks about the worker in this way (p. 136): 'In his ordinary state of health, strength, and spirits; in the ordinary degree of his skill and dexterity, he must always lay down the same portion of his ease, his liberty, and his happiness.' This instrumental perspective on work paves the way for an understanding of work that disconnects it from its holder, the human being, and refurbishes it as a factor of production that is exchanged on the market, subject to demand and supply dynamics.

Marx disagrees on all fronts. He opposes the commodification of labour, as well as the egotistical motives that are claimed to drive human beings to work (1973:611 [1857–1858]): 'And this is labour for Smith, a curse. "Tranquillity" appears as the adequate state, as identical with "freedom" and "happiness". It seems quite far from Smith's mind that the individual, "in his normal state of health, strength, activity, skill, facility", also needs a normal portion of work, and of the suspension of tranquillity.' Now, of course, Marx emphasises that work is alienated under capitalism, but he claims that work

is partly meaningful even in this context. However, it is not until after the fall of capitalism that work ‘is no longer merely a means of life, but has become life’s principle need’ (1961:263). Work can become meaningful, Marx says to Smith.

This shifts the spotlight to the notion of ‘meaningful’ work. However, concerning meaningful work, we cannot find any equivalence to the debate on the concept of work. Scholars of the field seldom criticise each other’s conceptualisations explicitly (for an exception, see Tyssedal, 2021). Therefore, we do not use the expression ‘X says to Y’, as we do concerning work. Instead, we have to formulate it as ‘X could have said to Y’. Even though there is not much of a debate, researchers disagree about definitions of meaningful (for overviews, see Bailey et al., 2019a; Martela and Pessi, 2018). One of the dividing lines concerns whether meaningful work is to be theorised as a subjective or an objective concept. By ‘objective’ it is usually meant that a phenomenon exists independent of human beings’ awareness, attitudes or emotions, and so on, in relation to it. ‘Subjective’ is the opposite, a phenomenon that exists through people’s perception or evaluation of it. (In Part III, we define the concepts a bit differently.) The psychologists Michael G. Pratt and Blake E. Ashforth (2003:311) state that ‘meaningfulness is necessarily subjective’ and they define meaningful work as ‘that work and/or its context are perceived by its practitioners to be, at minimum, purposeful and significant’. They suggest that there are variations in the way people experience a specific job, but that there are ‘(1) a limited number of meaning archetypes in a given society that individuals draw from, and (2) strong similarities in the processes by which meaningfulness is created’ (emphasis removed). One conclusion is that it is not qualities of work task, job or organisation that lead to perceptions of meaningfulness. Instead, the decisive trigger point for meaningful work is answers to the identity question ‘Who am I?’

Duncan Gallie (2019) studies empirical patterns of the influence of participation in wage labour on meaningful work. His conclusion is:

There is then substantial evidence that participation in decision-making, both at the level of the work task and in wider organisational decisions, is an essential precondition of meaningful work. It allows people to lead work lives that are congruent with values that are widely prevalent in the advanced societies – values of self-determination, self-development, and

competence, and the preservation of health. Further, there is some evidence that it is particularly vital to those who are in positions of disadvantage, such as low-skilled, for whom the exercise of influence through market power (or the threat of it) are highly constrained. (p. 383)

Gallie finds that what is important for meaningful waged work are exactly the kind of variables to which Pratt and Ashforth deny importance. Rather than identity questions, objective phenomena are crucial for meaningful work, Gallie could have said to Pratt and Ashforth.

On the same side as Gallie, we find Richard Arneson. And on the side of Pratt and Ashforth, we find Adrian Madden and Catherine Bailey (2019). Arneson (1987:522; cf. 2009) defines meaningful work as ‘work that is interesting, that calls for intelligence and initiative, and that is attached to a job that gives the worker considerable freedom to decide how the work is to be done and a democratic say over the character of the work process and the policies pursued by the employing enterprise’. These are only objective features. It is not a question of whether workers find the work interesting or creative, or feel like they have democratic say over the work process and organisational policies. It is a question of whether work in fact fulfils these criteria, independent of whether the people performing the jobs experience them in that way or not. Madden and Bailey theorise meaningful work quite differently. To them meaningful work is an experience, a spiritual value that transcends the self (2019:158, emphasis removed): ‘Self-transcendence suggests that the meaningfulness of work lies beyond what task and role signify, such that we might transcend our self-hood, expanding our self-boundaries intersubjectively, enabling us to flourish and realize our potential by gaining insight with and through others into the significance of our work.’ Rather than factual things outside the soul, self-transcendence constructs meaningful work, Madden and Bailey could have said to Arneson.

However, there are also scholars who make a point out of not taking sides in the way we have seen so far. Instead, they stress the importance of the *interaction* between the objective and the subjective for the emergence of meaningful work – elegantly expressed by Susan Wolf (2010:9) as ‘meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness’. One distinction of this kind is between moral conditions and workers’ attitudes (Ciulla, 2020:225):

‘The objective element of meaningful work consists of the moral conditions of the job itself. All employees must be treated with dignity and respect. ... From this principle come others such as honesty, fairness and justice. To seek meaning, one has to feel like a human being.’ And: ‘The subjective elements consist of the outlooks and attitudes that people bring with them into the workplace. Our ability to “light up” meaning comes from personality, life experiences, and the things we value.’ Ciulla sums up her position as follows: ‘Meaningful work, like meaningful life, is morally worthy work undertaken in a morally worthy organisation.’

Ruth Yeoman (2014a, 2014b) shares the normative perspective on meaningful work with Ciulla and articulates how work ought to be structured, governed and experienced in order to be meaningful. Conceptualising people as meaning makers who are capable of flourishing and suffering, Yeoman argues that work needs to be structured and democratically governed in a way that supports workers not only as ‘co-creators of values and meanings’ but also as ‘co-authorities in the realm of values’ (2014a:235, 243). By eclectically combining radical political philosophy approaches, such as Karl Marx’s perspective on the capitalist labour process with the moral philosophy of Susan Wolf, Yeoman suggests that work can be meaningful when its structure, policing and content respects the leit-motifs of autonomy as non-alienation, freedom as non-domination and social recognition as dignified work. Her argumentation offers an important contribution to the meaningful work discourse that prioritises either the subjective or the objective dimensions of work. Yeoman’s position advocates a normative heuristic that captures the subjective experiences of meaningful work in the context of the necessary objective structures. Applying the framework to contemporary work generates a bleak outlook. Here, the vast majority of workplaces appear as devoid of freedom and autonomy. Meaningful work, it seems, is far from the reach of the many. What this perspective calls for, then, is a restructuring of the modern capitalist workplace towards workplace democracy. Thus, the goal is not just the strengthening of the voice of labour within the standard employment arrangement, nor the implementation of work councils and other, albeit important mechanisms. Instead, a radical restructuring of the workplace to implement a democratic regime within organisations means, in Elizabeth Anderson’s (1999:312) words, work that is free

from ‘relations between superior and inferior persons’. Whether the implementation of genuinely democratic structures at work is possible under capitalism, given its internal and external dynamics, which impinge on the structure and policing of work, is a question that remains unanswered for the time being.

There is not a deterministic relation between the structure of work and workers’ experiences of work, that is, the objective and the subjective dimensions of meaningful work, Ciulla and Yeoman could have said to each other – both are needed for meaningful work to be realised. Further, the two scholars would nod in agreement with each other’s critical perspective on modern capitalist workplaces that utilise workers all too often as a factor of production, coming to the assessment that dignity, autonomy and respect are rare goods at work – and so is meaningful work.

In sum, there are grave conceptual contradictions in the literature on meaningful work, although we regard the contributions by Ciulla and Yeoman as the most advanced theorisations. However, a critical chorus of voices (Bailey et al., 2019a; Thompson, 2019; Veltman, 2016) finds that the theoretical and empirical research on meaningful work is not strong enough to further develop the integration of subjective and objective approaches. Thompson (2019:460–461) emphasises the importance of studying how such questions have been handled in the more advanced field of quality of work. Considering that especially the sociology of work, our main field of research, has a significant trajectory in discussing the nature of work through the lens of job quality and job satisfaction, we follow his advice. We thereby concentrate on the conceptual pair of job quality (objective) and job satisfaction (subjective).

### **The Job Satisfaction Paradox as a Theoretical Principle for Meaningful Work**

The concepts of job satisfaction and job quality comprise a field close to the literature on meaningful work. We suggest that we can learn from what is called the job satisfaction paradox, which is an inconsistency in the empirical relation between job quality and job satisfaction. Job quality is defined in objective terms and job satisfaction in subjective terms, and it is expected that higher job quality leads to higher job satisfaction. However, this is not always the

case. People in occupations at the bottom of the quality scale sometimes show a higher degree of job satisfaction than the average or than employees in occupations with a much better job quality. Our exposé of this paradox is intended to throw light upon the importance and the complexity of the subjective versus objective dimension, on which we build a new theory of meaningful and meaningless work in Part III. It also illustrates that the common idea in the literature that meaningful work primarily exists among professional and other skilled occupations can be called into question (cf. Laaser and Bolton, 2022).

There is a common distinction between job satisfaction and job quality. Job satisfaction is considered to be a subjective measure, that is, it refers to the employees' emotional response to their perception of a variety of working conditions, while job quality relates to the objective characteristics of work (Brown et al., 2012; Morgan et al., 2013). Since job satisfaction is an affective outcome and not necessarily a reliable predictor of whether working conditions are desirable or not (Rose, 2003), the emphasis is usually put on job quality to reveal employees' working conditions (Gallie, 2007; Olsen, 2006; Sengupta et al., 2009). Nevertheless, measures of job satisfaction are regarded as valuable since they summarise employees' considerations about their work (Rose, 2003). Furthermore, job satisfaction incorporates most aspects that influence employees' perceptions of their work, such as personality, norms, workers' responses to managerial control and job quality (Brown et al., 2012). Employees' job satisfaction thereby provides the general status of their perception of being at work but provides no information about the underlying mechanisms. Consequently, in order to understand employees' perception, studies of the quality of work are recommended (Brown et al., 2012; Rose, 2003).

Job quality is multifaceted and several job quality indices have been developed to define the characteristics of the concept. Despite some differences regarding how to operationalise the construct, there is a consensus that extrinsic and intrinsic rewards are key dimensions to understanding the diversity of attributes of job quality (Handel, 2005; Olsen et al., 2010). Extrinsic rewards mainly relate to aspects of employment and encompass material benefits, for example, wages, forms of employment and opportunities for promotion (Morgan et al., 2013; Rose, 2003; Sengupta et al., 2009). Intrinsic rewards,

on the other hand, are ‘rooted in the nature of work’ (Morgan et al., 2013:805) and include the meaningfulness of the work to employees and autonomy at work (Gallie, 2007). Research indicates that intrinsic job characteristics have a greater impact on employees’ perception of their work and are therefore considered to be the strongest predictor of job satisfaction (Gallie, 2007:4). Furthermore, intrinsic rewards have been found to compensate for poor extrinsic rewards among frontline health-care workers (Morgan et al., 2013). However, intrinsic attributes of job quality among employees are the results of prevailing working conditions, including the social structure of power and employees’ position in organisations as a result of the employer–employee relationship (Harley, 1999; Kalleberg and Reve, 1992). Consequently, employees in a social position without power are less likely to possess autonomy. Organisational preconditions can therefore reinforce the incapacity to gain intrinsic rewards and make it harder to improve the quality of work (Osterman, 2008).

Finally, job satisfaction depends on interpersonal relationships at work, including relations with managers and colleagues, as they provide an opportunity for organisational and social support at work (McGuire, 2007; Moynihan and Pandey, 2008; Olsen et al., 2010; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Especially in service work, employees’ relations with clients are of great importance (Korczynski and Evans, 2013; Korczynski and McDonald, 2009). These relations can, however, result in disparate outcomes for job quality – for example, enhanced job satisfaction as a result of a deeper level of intimacy with clients (Morgan et al., 2013) or job dissatisfaction caused by customer abuse (Korczynski and Evans, 2013). According to Korczynski and Evans (2013), the risk of customer abuse seems predominant in service work below the professional level and increases when facing customers of a higher social status and in organisations with norms of customer sovereignty.

### *Relations between Job Quality and Job Satisfaction*

There is a common picture of a positive linear relation between job quality and job satisfaction; for example, ‘persons who have higher quality jobs have been found consistently to have higher job and life satisfaction’ (Berglund and Esser, 2020:219). This has also led to the suggestion that indices of job satisfaction can be used to measure job quality (Clark, 2011; Souza-Poza and Souza-Poza, 2000; for a critique,



see Brown et al., 2012). It also seems to be quite logical that there should be such an empirical correlation. However, the relationship between job quality and job satisfaction seems to be more complex (Brown et al., 2012). One aspect of it is the job satisfaction paradox: workers in jobs with a very low level of job quality, for example in jobs that require only a low level of skill, provide almost no autonomy or career opportunities and are low paid, still experience high levels of job satisfaction. In sum, there is a ‘disconnection between reported job satisfaction and objective job quality’ (Brown et al., 2012:1008): workers at the low end of the job-quality scale place themselves quite high when it comes to job satisfaction. To our knowledge, the first researcher to notice this paradox in the labour market empirically was Michael Rose (2003) in a study based on the British Household Panel Survey. In his conclusion, he says:

The occupational hierarchies of earnings, prestige and skill, which are apparent in the major group ordering of SOC [the UK Standard Occupational Classification], disappear for the distribution of job satisfaction. Poorly paid child care workers with low negotiable skill have higher overall job satisfaction levels than sales managers enjoying fat bonuses; cleaners with low negotiable skill qualifications are likely to have far higher levels of job satisfaction than the school teachers whose classrooms they tidy up. (p. 526)

The phenomenon has later been found among several occupational groups and types of work in diverse countries, such as French cleaners (Léné, 2019), elderly care in Italy, commercial cleaning in Austria and waste collection in Bulgaria (Sardavar et al., 2017), home care workers in the United States (Stacy, 2005), health-care workers in the same country (Morgan et al., 2013), Mexican call centres (Álvarez-Galván, 2012), London refuse collectors and street cleaners (Simpson et al., 2019), the creative precariat in the Milan fashion industry (Arvidsson et al., 2010), and hotel room attendants in Glasgow, London and Sydney (Knox et al. 2015).

In the literature on the satisfaction paradox, there are a number of explanations for this empirical pattern. They can be overlapping and complementary, but they are also distinct and a single author can refer to more than one at the same time. However, a distinction can be made between two types of explanation of the paradox: inside work and outside work (Rose, 2003).

*Explanations of the Job Satisfaction Paradox  
Located inside Work*

A common explanation for the job satisfaction paradox is that there is a process of subjective adaptation in which workers learn to accept their working conditions (Léné, 2019; Sardavar et al., 2017). They see no changes in their own future (Simpson et al., 2019); instead, they expect to keep doing the same type of work until they retire. This is dubbed ‘Better than nothing’ by Sardavar et al. (2017:18). However, workers may also find satisfaction in that their jobs make it possible for them to provide their children with the basis for a better future than their own. Although they despise ‘educated people’, they want their children to reach that status and their work provides them with the resources to help them do so – ‘Together we get by’ (Sardavar et al., 2017:35). Even though they do not see themselves as being able to leave the working class, they hope their children can make such an exit. Another explanation is that the work in spite of everything has intrinsic rewards that are expressed in worker job satisfaction (Morgan et al., 2013; Stacy, 2005). The most common explanation probably refers to the individual trajectory or work history. Through comparing the present job with earlier ones with even worse job qualities and with unemployment, it appears quite good (Alvarez-Galván, 2012; Walters, 2005; Léné, 2019; Stacy, 2005; Bosmans et al., 2016) – a strategy called ‘Better than before’ (Sardavar et al., 2017:26). This means that the worker has made a previous exit from a bad job or from unemployment, entering an improved situation.

Let us illustrate this general type of explanation with two examples from the literature. Alexandre Léné (2019) reports on a quantitative study of French cleaners with very poor job quality. ‘However’, he says (p. 678), ‘even though we control using a wide variety of factors, the satisfaction level of cleaners is always particularly high’, a result that is statistically significant and robust. His explanation is that the cleaners have adapted to their job situation and adjusted their aspirations downwards. In this process, their earlier work trajectory is important, Léné claims (p. 678): ‘We suggest that the high satisfaction levels of cleaners need to be considered in the light of the chaotic previous professional experience of these employees’ – their present job is ‘better than before’ and ‘better than nothing’, meaning that they have adjusted to the situation.