

## 1 What Is Work?

‘We all need to work,’ my mother would say in that tone which, while purporting to enunciate an obvious truth that needed no support and would brook no argument, actually contained a threat.

However, she seemed to be right. My maternal grandfather operated a loom in a textile mill in West Philadelphia; my paternal grandfather had been a baker, and then he worked on the railway. In the 1940s one of my paternal uncles married a woman who inherited a farm in southern Indiana, which they worked (eventually together with their five children). In the 1940s the farm was not completely self-sufficient, because the family could not live solely on what they produced themselves; they produced mostly for sale in the market, however, yields and prices were such as to allow my uncle and his family to live from selling what they produced without taking other employment. Increasingly, however, during the 1960s, the economic situation changed, so that in addition to his work on the farm my uncle needed to find a job as an industrial cleaner in a pharmaceutical plant in town. As time went on, the work in town became more and more important. My father was a mechanic at the Fairless Works of US Steel in Eastern Pennsylvania; his job was to repair the diesel locomotives and overhead magnetic cranes that were used to transport ore, iron, and steel from one part of the steel mill to another.

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My grandmother spent all day cleaning the house, washing clothing, and cooking, and my mother worked as a typist, filing clerk, stenographer, and secretary in various companies that bought and sold things. I myself had a series of summer jobs in the steel mill during the 1960s, and also worked for one summer as a ‘freight-agent’ (*Frachtagent*) in the Rhein/Main Airport in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Between starting permanent full-time employment in 1971 and my retirement in 2014, I spent my entire working life teaching, examining, producing reports and evaluations, and writing books and articles. We use the same general word, ‘work’, for all these activities, despite their manifest differences. Is it reasonable for us to do this? What is this activity we call ‘work’? I would like to begin by discussing some of the sorts of things we spontaneously say (and think) about work and some of the things we contrast it with, such as relaxation, leisure, play, idleness, unemployment, vacation/holiday, and retirement.

Our conception of work is modelled, in the first instance, on industrial labour of the kind my father and grandfather did. We tend to think of work as a clear, simple, self-evident concept with which anyone will be familiar, but if one thinks about the things people tend to say about work, they suggest that it is more complicated, and that people at least partly see that. For instance, I can clearly recall three rather different kinds of things my father used repeatedly to say about work, which suggested at the very least that the concept as he used it had an interesting internal articulation or referred to different dimensions of human action, although he himself may not have been

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absolutely clear about this. Once a day he would eat a very heavy meal, and he would often remark that he needed to eat a lot of nourishing food to ‘keep my strength up for work’. So work was an activity that required exertion; it was different from idleness (for which one did not have to keep one’s strength up), and what it required was not easy. Often, after eating, just before his shift started, he would announce while leaving the house that he ‘had to go to work now’, sometimes adding to this that he needed ‘to go and earn a living’. This suggested, first, that ‘work’ was something distinct from the rest of life, involving, in his case, going off to a separate area, the steel mill, which was a large space surrounded by metal-mesh fences, patrolled by a private security force, and comprising several large buildings connected by roads and lengths of railway track. Going there was not a choice or something he necessarily wanted to do; it was a matter of necessity: he ‘had’ to go. The third thing he would say was in a way the most striking: in the case of any behaviour he considered to be overly fussy and fastidious, the presentation of excuses, appeal to personal preferences or attitudes, or instances of excessively complex ratiocination, he would remark that ‘we work on a production basis here’. This last remark was derived, I discovered, from what his foreman at the steel mill used to say to all the men in his section. What it meant was that no amount of reasoning, talk, or moral scruples really had any standing when it came to work; only the quality (and especially quantity) of the finished product counted. Work was something concerned with what was ‘out there’ in the real world, visible to all, countable and assessable, not a

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matter of mere opinion or a part of the drama of anyone's inner sphere. The steel mill even produced pencils bearing the inscription *US Steel: Knowing's not enough!* If even knowing was not enough (compared with demonstrable output), a fortiori, any kind of *attitude* a worker might have to what he or she did was irrelevant. Some of these pencils always found their way into our house. When I myself started work at the steel mill I realised that the motto in that pithy inscription was part of the company's *safety* policy, the idea being that accidents were not the company's responsibility, but were all the result of carelessness on the part of the workers: they 'knew' they should wear their helmets and steel-tipped shoes at all times, but it was hot in a steel mill in Pennsylvania in August and the steel-tipped shoes and helmets were uncomfortable. My father, however, did not interpret the motto on the pencil in this narrow and specific way. He took it to indicate that 'work' was a separate domain governed by its own objective internal standards, and that not even '*knowing*', the paradigm of a serious, well-grounded, but merely mental attitude toward the world, had any special standing in comparison with these imperative standards. Work was the final framework and the model for all of human life. The 'work' referred to in the phrase 'we work on a production basis' was in fact the work of human living in all its forms and varieties. Human life as a whole should be just as free of posturing, fancy reasoning, excessive expression of feelings etc. as work in the steel mill was. One of the reasons my father liked the production ethos of his job was that, as long as he kept the relevant locomotives and cranes

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running, it was nobody's business what he ate, what he thought, what he liked or did not like, what his personal habits were, or what attitude he had toward his work or management. Work was serious, life was serious, and the ethos of steel production was the ideal to which one should aspire in all respects and all domains, if one wished to be a serious person.

I take these three sayings of my father to illustrate three important aspects of our most usual conception of work:

- (a) it is a process that requires expenditure of energy and is strenuous: the product is not produced effortlessly or by magic, but by *human* exertion (in particular the exertion of the individual or a group of individuals who are said to be working)
- (b) it is a necessity of life
- (c) it has an external produced product that can be measured and evaluated independently of anything one might know about the process through which that product came to be or the people who made it (I'll call this for short 'objectivity' in one sense of that highly ambiguous term).

In paradigmatic cases of what we, people in the West at the beginning of the twenty-first century, call 'work' these three elements are all present. Work in the full-blown generally accepted sense will contain all three elements as part of an integrated whole. However, these three strands do not seem always *necessarily* to go together; one can imagine them as being separate and separately

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instantiated. Even in some cases that are familiar to us from our everyday experience this is true, and it certainly is true if one looks at how human activity has been structured historically. If only one or two, but not all three, strands are not co-present in a certain class of cases, it will be a matter of judgement, convention, tradition, historical accident, and individual initiative whether or not we call the activity 'work'. Guide dogs leading the blind in Britain often carry a sign reading 'Guide dog working', or sometimes 'Don't distract me, I'm working'; should the dog be paid for this work? Can a robot exert himself (or herself)? If a visit to a park calms office workers down so that they can return to work reinvigorated, is the park a work place? Could a dog, a robot, or a park join a labour union? We are not forced by the logic of our concepts to answer these questions one way or the other. Concepts are always open-ended. This does not mean that what counts as work is a mere matter of arbitrary decision. It does mean that how far metaphorical extensions will reach and to what extent they will embed themselves in our daily lives and become literally true is unpredictable. That 'the robot works' is literally true might be easily granted given that 'robot' comes from a common Slavic root that means 'work', but is 'guide dog working' a metaphor or not? If not, when did it become literally, rather than metaphorically, true? A wide variety of historical, linguistic, political, social, literary, and other contextual factors and forces is involved in establishing something as a form of work. How these factors will in fact play themselves out in any concrete situation

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in the future is not random, but it is also not strictly predictable.

The three components just mentioned constitute, I submit, the central core of our usual conception of work, but there are some other further aspects that are not quite as essential, but which also play an important if more subordinate role in the way we think about work. My father used the expression 'go (out) to work' completely unselfconsciously. That is, work was

- (d) a distinct and almost self-contained activity, and thus was most appropriately conducted in its own separate space, a factory or garage, or mill (or eventually office) in order that it not be confused with anything else.

He, of course, realised that some people worked from home – the odd craftsman, perhaps, like the various men who had a small business repairing cars in their own garages. Even such people, however, would be generally assumed to have their own work-space. Furthermore, he also realised that some people liked their work, or even could combine certain kinds of work with lightheartedness, but that was an accident, a lucky break for the person who liked doing what had in any case to be done. Levity, jokiness, good humour were almost always in tension with the underlying idea of working. Practical jokes, in particular, in the steel mill were extremely dangerous, a cause of innumerable accidents. Thus

- (e) work was almost invariably distinct from what one might do for fun, for pleasure, or as a joke. It was paradigmatically serious.

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Finally, there was a tacit assumption that ran through everything my father said and thought, which was absolutely fundamental and was really so self-evident that it did not need to be separately expressed:

- (f) work is archetypically activity for which you receive pay in the form of money; it is monetarised.

Again, it was not as if my father forgot that one of his brothers did a lot of work, and hard work, on his farm, for which he certainly did not receive cash from anyone – he was growing things for his own and his family’s consumption. It was just that that was construed as a kind of subsidiary or subordinate phenomenon. Raising crops for one’s own consumption was something to be understood in the final context of paid work, because if you ate what you grew yourself, you didn’t have to buy it. Working for cash, raising crops to sell (and then working as a cleaner), was the main event around which everything else had to be finally grouped and relative to which it had to be construed.

The more seriously one takes (d) and (f), the more housework, characteristically done by women, will be taken to be a marginal phenomenon, because, although it eminently satisfies criteria (a), (b) and (c), it is usually unpaid and usually does not take place as a separate and distinct activity (in the sense intended in (d)).

The three elements of work which I have listed above do not constitute anything like a formal definition of work, nor does one get such a definition if one adds the further three features. Rather they point to, and mark out in a vague and approximate way, a kind of discursive territory within which



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discussion of work is conducted. Before continuing this discussion, though, it would make sense to try to clarify to a slightly greater extent the three main elements in our conception.

### **Exertion**

#### **Physical and Moral Exertion**

To work is to do something strenuous. To call something 'strenuous' means in the first instance that it requires someone to exercise their muscles continuously and intensely, as normal people would do in moving rocks from one place to another all day long, rowing a boat, or threshing grain.

Actually, there seem to be two components to this: first, a strictly physical or technical aspect, but also a second 'moral' aspect. To start with the technical sense, 'work' was used in physics and engineering originally to refer to the amount of weight a given animal can raise to a certain height. One can then extend the concept by applying it not just to how much a whole given animal, such as a horse, can lift how far, but also to how much a particular human muscle group can lift. Eventually the concept of 'work' can be formalised in physics and detached from the idea of an animal moving or lifting something, so that the work which a boiler or engine does can be defined abstractly as the product of force exerted and distance. In any case, what is important is that work can be measured strictly by its external result: the weight moved can be externally measured and the height to which it is raised can also be measured, and between them they determine what the 'work' is. How much work one human being can do is then partly a matter of natural endowment: a horse can in general

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raise a heavier weight than an unaided human can. Partly, however, it is also a matter of nutrition and training. An able-bodied adult who is well nourished and lifts weights regularly will, in general, eventually, be able to lift heavier weights further than a comparable adult who has no training. A human job is strenuous if it requires a certain amount of physical work in this sense of 'work', the strict one employed in engineering.

There is, however, also a second way in which we use the word 'strenuous'. One can call this the 'moral' sense (in the slightly old-fashioned sense of 'moral' which is often used by philosophers). 'Strenuous' here is an adjective designating how much effort I can and do 'force myself to make'. Animals, and particularly humans, can 'try harder' (or, alternatively, 'slack off'). We can try to make them try harder, for instance by whipping them, something that used regularly to be done to animals like horses and to human slaves. How hard I have to try to attain a certain result will be relative to my natural physical and psychological endowments and my state of training. There may be a weight I can lift only with great exertion – by trying very hard – but which a person naturally stronger or in better training than me would lift without any special difficulty. Occasionally we have the experience of a human, A, who is inherently capable of less work than some other human, B, but who nevertheless regularly surpasses B in measurable work. B, for instance, is physically much stronger than A, and he *could, if he really exerted himself*, move a much greater weight of stone a greater distance during his work-shift, but A forces himself to make greater efforts during the shift and actually moves more stone further than B does. One might think of