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# Work and Non-Work

On Work and Meaning

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For me, philosophy is a process in which one tries out one's thoughts together with others. This involves thinking and re-thinking, listening and sharing thoughts. This also involves a continuous need to remind oneself about the difference a specific perspective makes in real life. Philosophy, in this sense, is an on-going and tentative endeavor. My thesis is a product of this shared process of philosophy, and it certainly has a strong character of a tentative attempt to come to grips with questions and concerns. The shortcomings are my own, but it is from the spirit of sharing thoughts that my friends and colleagues have stood for, that this book has grown out. First, I would like to thank my supervisors Martin Gustafsson and Lars Hertzberg. Martin's lucid and very constructive comments have helped me in making my at times unruly project more feasible. He has been very open to different ways of doing philosophy and has provided me with important encouragement and concrete forms of advice about how to add focus to the text. Lars has been my teacher since I enrolled at the Department of Philosophy way back in 2000. His attentive and clear-sighted way of doing philosophy has meant very much to me and has had a huge impact on what I take philosophy to be. As a supervisor, he has stood by me even when the project has been modified along the way and I am very grateful for his insightful comments.

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## Introduction

In Ermanno Olmi's film *Il posto* (1961) a young man, Domenico, looks for a job in a big bureaucratic organization. The story is set in postwar Milan. We know nothing about this organization except that it is huge and that it contains many departments. Reluctantly, the boy attends an aptitude test with several others. The test comprises a math examination and an absurd interview. Domenico talks to a girl who also takes the test. He confides to her that his father has told him that this job is not well paid but that it is a secure job one has for life. His parents stress the urgency of getting a job. For economic reasons, getting an education isn't an option. He is just another kid who goes to town to work. Domenico is hired, but not as a clerk. There is no spot for him at the moment. For a while, he spends idle days as a messenger together with a bored man who browses through the mail. When the young man is finally assigned a task, his colleague bitterly tells him not to hurry, 'let them wait'. Time is suspended in meaningless moments of waiting, enforced inactivity. One of the clerks passes away, and a spot is finally opened. The young man enters the clerks' office and sits down at a desk in the rear. His colleagues, whom we have seen earlier in states of agony and boredom, are upset: the young man sat down at the best table, the table reserved for senior employees. The kid has to move. The last scenes of the film substantiate what we have seen throughout: the organization makes young people old. Older employees have grown into the job to such an extent that they invest themselves in petty fights about the best desk to sit at. We hear the intense rattling sound of a mimeograph. The young man gazes hopelessly into a lamp, a lamp which is said to be straining on the eyes. He has finally attained his secure spot, he is finally about to grow up. The

general atmosphere of the film is not that of cynical disclosure. What we see is rather a familiar story about growing up and getting by. The film shows people submitting to enforced idleness and petty competition but we also see sparks of life. Rather than making a claim about what life must always be, *Il posto* poses a question: is this what life should and must be?

*Il posto* is set in a time of economic changes, a time in which wage labor enters into people's lives as the only source of subsistence. Italians migrated within the country to get a job. The film presents the young man's wide-eyed fascination with urban life. The story also explores the connection between work and adulthood, a process requiring a lot of adaptation, mimicking even. We see the young boy's helplessness within the gigantic organization, but not even the more experienced workers seem to thrive there. Olmi's point appears to be that this is not an environment in which anyone can live well. The last images of *Il posto* presents the world of work as a world of anxieties comprising its own forms of infantile outbursts. We see the clerks scrambling to reach the front row of the drab office: the ultimate success. The mind-numbing work is portrayed as the fate not only of this young, unfortunate man, but also of many people whose only choice is to accept a job, any job. The corporation in the film is a sterile, eerie place. The people there learn to cope with their colleagues and their boring jobs – they learn to demand very little of life. The film illustrates the existential hazards of normalizing wage labor as the core of people's lives, and this point is, I think, more important now than ever. What does it mean that we all must work? Which implications does it have to think about one's life as a process of 'getting by'? In this thesis I will explore tensions in our relations to work that can be seen in a society in which work has an extremely important place but where the role of work is simultaneously surrounded by ambiguities, disagreement and controversies.



## Work and clichés

What is work? This may seem like a metaphysical question with a marginal bearing on contemporary debates and political struggles. I disagree. In many present debates work figures as an unremarkable and quotidian concept. Work is treated as a societal and economic asset the importance of which most political parties recognize: *of course* everyone wants to land a job they like and have aptitude for, *of course* society needs work (and tax incomes), and *of course* companies need to be supported by sound economic policies so that they can offer as many jobs as possible to the citizens in, say, Finland. In spite of, or perhaps *because of*, challenging economic times work is often considered a basically unproblematic issue: everybody needs a job, now more than ever. In some ways, the present economic crisis has strengthened the tendency to portray work as a common load we all have to bear as good citizens, while the task of politicians is to create policies that preserve and create new jobs and prepare the way for entrepreneurship. This view of work is frequently presented as the fundament of responsible politics: the economic crisis has put us in a precarious situation and this makes it all the more important to stick together and roll up our sleeves as a small and struggling nation of highly educated, working people (to paraphrase the rhetoric as it appears in Finland at present). To continue with such heavily circulated ideas about work: the best would be full employment; one of the most challenging things for a young person is to find a job; we value hard work; it is vital to rest now and then so that one can work diligently later on; one sometimes has to sacrifice oneself for a job opportunity; few things are as valuable as a secure job.

Even though work stands at the fore of political consciousness, it is as if questions about what work means in

our lives tend to remain untouched when this level of ostensible common sense is maintained. I would go as far as to say that what characterizes many political discourses about work today is a form of obsession with work but also an eerie sense in which work is present *and* absent in these discussions about employment, global structures and well-being at work. By it being 'absent' I mean that questions about work are treated in such a way that they end up being what can be seen as clichés so that many problems in our relations to wage labor and the labor market remain untouched and even swept under the rug. Even so, it is a real challenge to expose this way of talking *as* clichés or to judge whether such ways of speaking really *can* be said to be questionable forms of common sense that obfuscate problems. As the sociologist P.D. Anthony writes in his book about ideologies of work: the meaning of work has not received much attention, "Perhaps it is because work is so general and commonplace that we believe it to be a matter of common sense and general agreement; our assumptions about it are so basic that we do not even recognize them as assumptions" (1977, 4).

The following dichotomy indicates how an appearance of consensus is upheld. Either, work is analyzed from a perspective of economic efficiency. How should the welfare state be restructured when a large portion of the population is about to retire? How could employment relations become more flexible? How can the incentives for firms to employ people be increased? *Or*, work is dealt with from an individual, psychological or preferential perspective. One example of the latter tendency is the debate about the so called 'work-family balance', where the goal is a sustainable individual solution to the problem of conflicting demands. Another example of this perspective is the idea that the individual is to optimize hir employability by making the right life choices: getting an education that matches the

demand of the labor market, taking care not to become pregnant at the wrong moment, being 'presentable' at all times etc.<sup>1</sup> This dichotomy between work as an economic asset and work as an individual concern seems to have the function of *eliminating* or *concealing* work-related controversies. The contention that 'we all need a job to support us' appears frequently in such contexts. Throughout the thesis, I will give examples of discussions about work that do not fit into a neat dichotomy consisting of either the societal perspective of efficiency or the individual's preferential relation to hir job.

Questioning this dichotomy goes hand in hand with one of the most important strands in the thesis. It is typical of many political debates about work that the concept of work slides between what I will *moralization* and *neutralization*.

Work is *neutralized* when it is described as a commodity, labor power, in terms of supply and demand on the labor market or in terms of an economic asset. Such neutralization appears in policy proposals about an optimal reorganization of the labor market that keeps work intact as a frictionless piece in the societal machinery, for example so that unions make no unreasonable demands. Neutralization is also all-present in the political aim of job creation: all jobs are commensurable in the sense that they provide an income for the employees, the companies extract profits from them and they generate tax incomes for the state. Neutralization – *normalization* and *naturalization* – here means that tensions and controversies are eliminated or obscured. In other words, I talk about neutralization to show how political, ethical and existential dimensions of the world of work are displaced or decentralized.

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<sup>1</sup> Instead of using obnoxious expressions like 'he and she', 'his and her' I use the gender-neutral pronoun *s/he*, *hir* and *hirsself* in example and other cases in which 'he and she' are typically used.

By *moralization*, I mean the elevation of the value of all work and the idea that work *as such* is good and praiseworthy, 'society needs working adults'. *Wage labor as such* contributes to societal wealth and *all* work (work in a much looser sense) is a source of personal self-realization, autonomy and societal social integration. This view surfaces in activation programs for the unemployed, in which the idea is that all forms of wage labor (or forms of work that resemble wage labor) spur independence and health. Such moralization can also be detected in the insistence that work is the main way in which we contribute to society. However, the term moralization should be used with caution considering that one of the aims of the thesis is to re-introduce ethical questions about the purposes work serves. By 'moralization', I mean a quasi-moral language that more or less *excludes* ethical arguments.

Neutralization and moralization are not opposites. Often, they go hand in hand, or exist in a complex internal relation that mollifies, takes the edge off, debates about work and displaces the specific purposes and circumstances of working activities.

Many writers (Shershow 2005, Paulsen 2010, Weeks 2011) have criticized both of these tendencies, the neutralization and moralization of work. The oscillation them re-emerges in the chapters in connection with specific themes such as an investigation of necessity and work (chapter 1), work as a cog in the societal machinery (chapter 2), the relation between a work ethic of 'hard work' and a work ethic of self-realization (chapter 3), the contrast between work and mere functions (chapter 4), work as labor power (chapter 5) and the fragmentation of work (chapter 6).

By means of encounters with critical texts about work my aim is to shed light on the urge to neutralize or moralize work. What I thus want to do in this thesis is to look at work from a perspective that does *not* take these cultural clichés – 'all forms

of work are important', 'we all want rewarding jobs', 'work is our shared condition' – for granted. In other words, the aim is to *re-politicize* the concept of work. Fundamental questions thereby come to the fore. How are the purposes of work understood? Why is it so tempting to relegate work to the level of compulsion, individual and societal reproduction or a completely individualized project of self-realization? The focus in the present thesis is wage labor (of which salaried work is a form). Paid work dominates the present society, even though the forms differ: most of us have no choice but to make ourselves available to the labor market. The thesis tracks the tensions that this situation engenders. One dimension of wage labor is important to take note of: it is *formally free* in the sense that one is in principle free to choose one's occupation. Employment contracts are built around formal freedom: the employer does not own the employee (deviations, sadly, proliferate). I seek to show that the formal freedom of wage labor need not settle the discussion: we look for good jobs, we delve into careers, we find ourselves in a situation in which we are ready to accept any job, we are worried about the effect the job has on us, we fear that things that need to get done are neglected in the jobs that we are paid to do. Are there ways in which the emphasis of work as 'jobs' *inhibit* ways of thinking about responsibility and complicity? This is one of the main worries I articulate through what I call a moralization and a neutralization of work.

## **A philosophy of tensions**

Several books have been written about the historical development of ideologies of work and about the changes in how work is conceptualized (Applebaum 1992). This thesis will not be a contribution to this genre of writings, even though I will refer to classical accounts of work and even

though conceptions about work will be situated in their historical surroundings. The aim of the thesis is to shed light on contemporary debates about work, but I will at times draw on sources that describe waged work in a historical situation different from our own, because I think these writings provide a fruitful *vocabulary* by means of which present debates about work can be scrutinized. The topic of the thesis is paid work (roughly: in a Western context) and tensions that arise within the world of wage labor. As far as I know, this emphasis is rarely brought to the surface even if it appears in Marxist understandings of work in a society torn by contradictions. I will attempt to show how one of the major inclinations within contemporary critical writings on work is to view wage labor as a coherent and clear-cut phenomenon, and that writers for this reason make problematic statements about what work *has* to be – even what work *will always* be. I do not think that these statements are unintelligible (nor are they mere theoretical mistakes). They often have a political aim. However, it is possible to criticize them if they obfuscate the different roles work plays in human life – something which is important to hold on to in the face of the neutralization of work. For this reason, my approach to these texts could be characterized as *encounters*: I try to read a specific writer as charitably as I can, while at the same time trying to extract the critical potential of the project.

More specifically, I will look at the tensions that stem from neutralizations that turn work into the condition of life, a mere function, labor power or a personal project of self-realization. Such generalized and practically operating images of work can be spotted in the widespread jargon about job creation or preserving jobs. What these jobs consist in is not always specified. Controversies make such neutralization of work – neutralization as a response to critique – very obvious. This is what goes on for instance when critique directed at the

existence of a certain branch of industry (in Finland this has concerned the mining and fur industries) is dismissed by appeals to incomes and job creation. Such controversies indicate dimensions of work - the ethical meaning of work versus work as employment and tax money - that stand in a genuine relation of tension. As those controversies also show, the reduction of work to job creation and sustenance is by no means restricted to the rhetorical level: the activity is reduced to sustenance with regard to *what a job comes to be* when it is arranged so as to maximize productivity, etc. One of the most significant aims of this thesis is to give an account of how hegemonic conceptions of work can be discerned in what work *is* or comes to be in a certain setting. There is a parallel here with what I said about clichés and common sense above. To talk about tensions and clichés should *not* be done in a spirit that assumes that it is immediately clear to everybody what can be seen as a tension or as a cliché. The philosophical work consists in treading carefully by keeping in mind that one aspect of challenging the neutralization and moralization of work is precisely not to be hasty in settling the character of a specific tension. The philosophical work does thus not consist in *establishing* that there are a number of tensions, but rather to open up a *perspective* in which it is important to articulate tensions against the inclination to neutralize and moralize work.

Some philosophers maintain that philosophy is more about elaborating and understanding tensions than presenting overarching models or theories. The philosopher Hanna Fenichel Pitkin clarifies what this means in her book about Hannah Arendt's thinking, a philosopher known for her contradictory philosophy. Towards the end of the book, Pitkin takes a few steps back and reflects more generally on what philosophy is. Appealing to Wittgenstein, she first talks about a perspicuous representation of how we use words and draw

distinctions – how we ordinarily talk in contrast to philosophical attempts to pin down what reality is ‘strictly speaking’. She connects this to dialectical thinking:

By dialectical thinking I mean a way of living with ambiguity and inconsistency that permits intellectual comprehension and mastery without resolving the tensions. [...] The difficulty is to distinguish this necessary and desirable sort of living with contradiction from common confusion and incoherence, thoughtlessness, vacillation, and unwillingness to commit oneself in action (Pitkin 1998, 247-8).

I agree with Pitkin that living with tensions does not necessarily imply philosophical sloppiness, constant vacillation or a readiness to succumb to such tensions. As I interpret Pitkin, she means that tensions are a point of departure and that there is no strict distinction between living with and thinking about tensions. My contention is this: to scrutinize tensions is fruitful because that approach opens up a conceptual space for change and transformation in the sense that an articulation of tensions (for example between work as a commodity and what I will call work as a life situation) calls for lucidity with regard to the specific worry at hand. As I will try to spell out, articulating such worries is most of all to be interpreted as a concern about *the future*. When tensions, rather than a seemingly neutral image of work as the core of life or the central interest of society, appear, the question ‘how are we to live’ arises as a central and acute concern. In the *Republic* Socrates alerted his interlocutors to the – he stresses that it is not trivial – question: how should one live? (*Republic* 352d5-6) Tensions can thus function as a lever by means of which aspects of how we live and think appear. The power of neutralizations is that they make it hard even to recognize something as *thinkable* (cf. Eagleton 2007, 58). In this light, tensions help us scrutinize everyday life. Pitkin expresses a



similar thought, suggesting that theorizing is a form of reconceptualization “questioning the existing framework of assumptions so that new possibilities appear” (1998, 248). This is exactly how I think about my own approach as well and this is what I hope the thesis will achieve, even though it will contain no set of ideals or programs for political policy changes. *What I hope to be doing is instead to open up a field of discussion.* This goes together with another crucial aspect of the thesis – the notion that work can be described as what W.B. Gallie (1956) called an *essentially contested concept*.

My treatment of tensions should *not* be read in a traditional Marxist vein, such that there is, supposedly, a fundamental conflict in capitalism that reigns between labor and capital. There has been an ongoing debate about this conflict and there has been disagreement about whether it gives a false image of work as a clear-cut opposite of capital (cf. Weeks 2011). Nonetheless, the relation between Marxist ideas about contradictions and my own view merits a short comment. Not all Marxists subscribe to the idea that history progresses steadily towards a final end in a determinist fashion, nor do all Marxists claim that the history of capitalism is shaped by one overarching contradiction.<sup>2</sup> The Hegelian legacy in the widest sense that can be traced in many Marxist writings is expressed in the articulation of capitalism as an evolving process of contradictions (cf. Avineri 1968, 84). This is what is often called the dialectical side of Marxist thinking: as David Harvey writes, it takes account of “the unfolding and dynamic relations between elements within a capitalist system” (2010, 11-2). This system is not static, but always moving, changing, expanding. I think this description of capitalism as a dynamic set of evolving relations is very important and this perspective has a central role in this thesis. However, I do not set out to

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion about this, cf. Read 2003, 34.

provide a theoretical analysis of the functioning of the economic system.

To look at these tensions and diverse, but not isolated, roles of work is to remind oneself that wage labor is not a uniform system and that no philosophical claims about what work must be or what it has always been can be made. To evoke these tensions is to counteract the tendency to think about work as a given and natural system, a necessary web of relations around which our lives are structured. This stance reveals the need to articulate what *good or meaningful work* could be. This is not synonymous with looking for an ideal, which would mean that a fixed concept of work would make up my starting point and that the subsequent task would be to distill features of work that 'good work' encompasses. If an ideal of work is settled, it is also be clear that the question about how we are to live is a shared and continuous life concern. Rather, the aim is to get clear about what is *at stake* when people talk about good and meaningful work and *which* concepts of work figure in such discussions.

My discussion about the contested and open-ended nature of the concept of work can be linked to a wider debate in the social sciences about the use of concepts. Some writers have pointed to the difference between the social sciences and the humanities on the one hand, and the natural sciences on the other, by referring to the different role concepts have in these fields. What characterizes the former fields is that their use of concepts is related to and – to some extent – dependent on people's self-understanding. For this reason there can be no such thing as an investigation about democracy without at least some attention to what people mean by democracy and similar words; if there were no such grounding of the concepts used in social sciences, one could wonder what the investigation aspires to describe and what it sets out to understand and make sense of. This perspective is advanced

in the philosopher Peter Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (cf. Winch 2007, 21-2, 44, 83-4).

[Although] the reflective student of society, or of a particular mode of social life, may find it necessary to use concepts which are not taken from the forms of activity which he is investigating, but which are taken rather from the context of his own investigation, still these technical concepts of his will imply a previous understanding of those other concepts which belong to the activities under investigation (2007, 81).

My own impression is that Winch's remarks allow for contestation of the concepts employed in these types of scientific fields, which is not to say that there is no openness in other sciences, just that the stakes are different. Naturally, social scientists as well as people in general, often agree about how concepts are used. However, if one takes to heart Winch's emphasis on the investigation's dependence on people's understanding of what they are doing, contestability could even be said to be a *constitutive* aspect of understanding within such scientific work. As the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre writes:

We do not know how to decide whether a given alleged instance of a phenomenon is to be treated as a counter-example to a proposed generalization or as not an example of the phenomenon at all, because debate remains open about which the central, standard, and paradigmatic instances of the phenomenon are (1973, 2).

There is a further point to make that has to do with my project. MacIntyre goes on to talk about an essential contestability of concepts within the social sciences. Whereas some areas of social life are characterized by a certain level of agreement, other social contexts contain rivaling concepts and rivaling comprehensions. MacIntyre takes political parties as an example: there may be disagreement about what a party is or

should be. This implies that the application of a certain concept in the social sciences is predicated on the drastic changes that concepts go through (1973, 4).

Above, I said that my own project links critical texts about work to contemporary debates. I think MacIntyre is right when he writes that the open-endedness characterizing the conceptual framework of the scientific study of society is related to the conceptual openness of social life itself. He takes the example of ruminating on whether Sinn Fein was a political party in 1910. The answer will depend on how continuity is seen and the answer cannot be disconnected from the debates within and around Sinn Fein. Debates *about* a specific field cannot, in these cases, be completely disconnected from the debates going on *within* that field (1973, 6-7). There is no neutral stance from which social science is conducted. The point is not that contestability is somehow generally desirable, but, rather that it is difficult to imagine the social sciences *without* such dimensions. Furthermore, the recognition of the contestability of a particular concept may enhance the self-consciousness of those contributing to a scientific debate and increase the awareness of what is at *stake* in a debate that goes on in the scientific field.<sup>3</sup> One could even say that contestability is a condition of understanding in the social sciences. For this reason there is no constant need to 'resolve' these contestations by, for example, stipulating a concept (in definition x, Sinn Fein is a party, in definition y, it is not). My own project is to keep these contestations *alive*.

Throughout the thesis, I highlight the dangers of losing the sense of what is at stake in a debate. A point of reference here

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<sup>3</sup> There are no waterproof limits between contestable and non-contestable concepts. By this I don't mean to stir up a conceptual skepticism but rather to point out the normativity that surrounds the uses of concepts within the social sciences. As Garver writes: "Partisans, not theorists, determine whether a conflict involves an essentially contested concept" (1990, 258).

is the social scientist Gavin Kitching's Wittgenstein-inspired reading of Marx in which he goes to some length to stress that advancing a certain view also means that one has a certain idea about *the difference it makes* whether this view is true. In other words, an important question when evaluating a description is to ask what purpose it serves. Knowing that a description serves a certain purpose will influence what one takes to be a true or fruitful description. It makes no clear sense to say that the world could simply be 'described': it makes no sense to imagine that one could describe the world without having the least idea what such descriptions would be used *for* (this point is informed by Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, cf. § 291). Kitching contends that this is not only a way to highlight the political aims of certain ideas, but it is also to reflect on the logical status of a certain description. In this way one gets a clearer grasp of what *kind* of point something is. To take one example that will be relevant later on: when reading Marx it is easy to lose oneself in the details of the argument. Unsurprisingly, interpreters have tried to apply the concept of abstract labor and the labor theory of value as a basis for an empirical account of the development of capitalism, for example whether it can be shown that the exploitation rate keeps growing. The problem with this approach is that it isolates Marx's concepts from the concern *he* addresses, that is, (among other things) the concern about how value is generated and what value *is*. When this is kept in mind, one is no longer equally inclined to treat his concepts as the building blocks for a general empirical theory. As Kitching observes, if one does not read Marx as providing an empirically applicable theory about values, then this will drastically influence what one will take to be a genuine objection to his view (Kitching 1988, 33-5; 94-5, 169). The central question is: what concern is a thinker grappling with?

One of the primary objectives of this thesis is to look at critical accounts of work and how tensions related to work are dealt with within these texts in ways which inadvertently reproduces a neutralization of work that they seek to question (chapter 5 falls outside this pattern). Each chapter focuses on a specific theme and in each chapter I try to articulate which tensions one comes across in a specific discussion about work. What I treasure from the writers I discuss is the political urgency to rethink work they all pronounce. This goes against the grain of a tendency to moralize and neutralize work, even though many of them end up with their own versions of moralization or neutralization. As I have said, my attention is directed at the tensions within the critical literature on work and within political debates about work. The focus is steered towards our own relations to work: our fears, hopes and struggles. I explore several descriptions of how work-related existential problems are enmeshed and entangled with structural dimensions. I suggest that if we want to get a clearer grasp of fears and hopes within the world of work, trying to catch sight of and articulate tensions offers both a way to recognize people's activity and resistance while at the same time acknowledging the relational framework of such resistance. My conceptual interest is thus different from attempts to settle an *ontological* or *empirically* useful concept of work – this is in line with what I said about Winch above. The procedure in this thesis is thus very far from the following view: "The delimitation [of 'work'] should be done objectively, that is, independently of everyday conceptualizations of work and the emotions of workers connected with the activities" (Karlsson 2004, 107).

## Tensions versus mere ambiguities

The concept of bank can be used both in talking about the institution of banking and in talking about riverbanks. Here, one could say that there are several uses of the word 'bank' and that the word has meaning only in so far as it is used in a specific context. However, it would be strange to say that the use of the word 'bank' when criticizing greedy Wall Street giants and recalling a beautiful landscape stand in a relation of *tension*. They are simply different uses of a word. However, some words – intention, meaning, thought, will – have generated much philosophical confusion stemming from an inability to take specific uses of the word into account.

When I talk about tensions in our relations to work the main conclusion is not that the word work is used in multiple ways; to talk about employment relations, chores in the household or the responsibilities of a doctor or a plumber. The tensions I highlight – the tension between commodification of work and work as a life situation to mention one example – are not tensions that ultimately concern a *word* or a *concept*. The tensions that the chapters take issue with are, to put it bluntly, tensions in society – tension in our lives. To say that these tensions are primarily located in the concept of work would presuppose that I am assuming that there, somehow, is *one* concept of work, and that it is in this concept that the tensions are located. When I discuss the tension between work as a commodity and a life situation, or the tension within the idea of work as self-realization, it will be apparent that tensions emerge as a way of tentatively trying to characterize the damaging role of a neutralization or a moralization of work. One needs to navigate carefully: it would be wrong to think that 'tensions' is a *mere description*, a mere articulation, but, as I already said, it would be *equally* wrong to assume that society *consists* of a set of underlying tensions. A continuous,

open-ended discussion in the thesis will be what it *means* to talk about tensions.

One may also want to ask whether my aim is to criticize one image of work, and replace it with another, better image of 'work' that would not be surrounded by tensions. A general concept of work would then still be retained, and it would just be filled with a new content. So, would I then like to talk about tensions between *pictures*? Or am I offering a much wider claim about tensions in work *itself*? If the *first* option were true, it would seem as if I am explicating a multitude of meanings. The solution would be to clearly define distinctive uses and to abstain from generalizations. When I criticize generalized theories of work, my project is *not* to reject one generalized image and suggest new, more particularistic images. The reason why generalized accounts trouble me in the first place is that they are manifestations of what I have called a practically operating *neutralization* or *moralization* of work. If, *on the other hand*, I purport to say that tensions reside in *work itself*, then a concept of work would, as I said, already be assumed. Expressed in a rather different way: do tensions reside in how we *think* about work so that the solution is clearer and more context-sensitive thinking, or are they inherent *in* work? My answer is that my aim is to look at the *dynamic* relation between how we think about work and work as institutions, jobs and life patterns. Dynamic, as we will see, indicates that there are things to be said about this relation: ways in which thinking obscures practices in ideological ways of speaking, for example, but also ways in which an ambiguous way of thinking can be said to be intelligible given a certain practice.

One may still want to ask whether I am nonetheless presupposing a unified concept of work, despite the project of attacking theoretical generalizations. Am I not, after all, talking about tensions related to *work*? Mustn't there be some



unity between the chapters, *some* unity that warrants my discussions about tensions? Think about these characterizations: (1) Work as exertion. (2) Work as occupation. (3) Work as labor power. (4) Work as process. (5) Work as task. (6) Work as service. (7) Work as employment. (8) Work as production. (9) Work as product. (10) Work as result. This list is not exhaustive and it cannot be; *no* list can be. Work is conceptually interesting as it is a concept with a tangle of uses immersed in historical situations, political debates and existential situations. In all of these settings, there have been strong inclinations to lay claims on what 'work' *really* means – and it turns out that these claims are just as contextually situated. I will look at the entangled nature of concepts of work and my task is to *re-entangle* uses of 'work'.

The main contention is that people do in fact use the concept of work. It is difficult to deny that work is a central topic in present societal debates. In the specific chapters, I am always writing about the things people *try to say* when they criticize what they call 'work' or when they talk about what 'work' should or could be. What is going on when writers emphasize that this particular activity is *work*, rather than...? Or, that it is *not* work, but rather....? These dialogues with other critical writers are couched within my contention about neutralization and moralization: so one way to assess whether my approach is fruitful is to ask whether my articulations catch sight of political and existential sore points. In the end, it is up to the reader to judge whether they resonate with problems, hopes and fears. There is thus no covert unity, no historically general concept of work that I take as a point of departure. For my own part, I am interested in generalizations of 'work' *as they occur in the course of real and contemporary*

*examples.*<sup>4</sup> As I said, my thesis focuses on *contestations*. The chapters all start from what a particular writer means when s/he criticizes and talks about work. The writers I discuss engage in controversies in which they give their own accounts of the relation between work and society or the meaning work has in human life.

Something similar can be said about what I talk about as tensions. At what level can these tensions be detected? Tensions between *what*? The writers I discuss direct our attention to present controversies about work. What role does necessity have? What is the relation between work and leisure? Can work as a vocation be distinguished from professionalism? What is suppressed when human activities are transformed into labor power, a commodity? The tensions I am talking about are expressed in neutralizations and moralizations of work. Tensions can thus be seen in the relation between neutralizations and moralizations on the one hand and what is glossed over or put to the side on the other hand – moral and political hopes, worries and discontent. From this, it is evident that an attempt to describe tensions must also be a political and ethical project.

## **Work and critique**

A point that will recur is that new aspects and concepts of work keep appearing, but this cannot be reduced to material changes in the form of production – I mean, so that the technical development would somehow force a specific concept of work upon us. My idea is instead that people draw

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<sup>4</sup> Many writers have restricted the concept of work to the world of capitalism (cf. Jappe 2005, 99). One argument is that there is no general word for ‘work’ in, say, Antiquity. What mattered were the specific activities: the priest, the merchant and the cook did not have ‘work’ in common. This is a noteworthy observation.

different conclusions about what a development means and what it is related to. New articulations appear in political controversies where aspects of work are interrogated. This means that conceptual renderings often have a political and moral impact. Throughout the thesis I will give examples of such articulations. One side of this is that such articulations call attention to *shifts* in how work is considered.

I could mention one such example already at this point. Recently, a slew of books have been written on the topic of craft work. In these books, crafts (in a wide sense) are seen as a potential counterweight to the bureaucratization and fragmentation of work. I think what these writers are doing must be seen as a historically specific articulation of craft work, different from for example the arts & crafts movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>5</sup> or medieval concepts of crafts, along with just as historically specific concepts of skills and knowledge. These books try to substantiate what the content of craft work in a wide sense (comprising the professional skills of nurses as well as car mechanics) can be considered to be now, and what kinds of situations call for recognition of the importance of work as a craft (cf. Sennett 2008, Crawford 2010, Tesfaye 2013). This goes together with what I have said about tensions: a clarification of a tension is an articulation, an attempt to characterize change. A central ambition of the thesis is to dispel neutralizing generalizations about work, but an equally important task is to trace what is at stake in the critical texts about work I discuss; what is the problem to which these texts respond? To take but one example, in chapter 5 I try to illuminate what kind of concern

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<sup>5</sup> The arts & crafts movement was a reaction against mass production and new ways of making. Art and the artwork were the main preoccupation in this 19<sup>th</sup> century discussion (For one treatment of the background of this movement, cf. Sennett 2008, 108-112).

Marx addressed with the concept of abstract labor. I situate this concept within a story about commodification: capitalism is a process in which work *turns into* a commodity. The challenge is to elucidate in what sense Marx's concept, for all the historical differences between the situation now and the times in which his writings appeared, opens up a tangible understanding that helps us shed light on present discourses and practices in which work is treated as labor power.

In this sense the concept of work has a lot in common with the concept of economy. The concept of economy is equally contested, and also there, the contestations reveal political *disagreements*. Economy has often been defined as a rule-governed structure where the rules originate from human *rationality itself*. Economy has, in contrast to these idea about universal rationality, also been described as immersed in forms of life, specific ways of organizing life for example in terms of an economy being one *particular* institution or *particular* set of relations (cf. Wolgast 1995). In his thesis the sociologist Patrick Cockburn suggests that new images of economy crop up when economic phenomena are *debated* (2011, 15, 18), which makes it questionable to think that one should always start an investigation with a strict definition. As he writes: when what counts as an economic phenomenon – such as homeless people selling newspapers – is studied, significant disagreements surface. An acknowledgement of such disagreements invites a sense of hope, Cockburn notes. When disagreement is highlighted, so is also the need for *justification* (2011, 6). “[In] every configuration of socio-economic activity there exist relationships of power that can develop into tensions and then cracks in the current order.” (2011, 25) This point can be applied to work and the approach I have chosen, a choice that is a reaction to the apparent consensus about work. To resist such consensus is also to direct one's attention to *dimensions of work that are rarely seen in*

the kind of surrounding where work is taken for granted as employment for the individual and a source of wealth for society (neutralization) or where work is praised as being valuable in itself (moralization).

To philosophize is often, as Wittgenstein writes: “[to] descend into primeval chaos and feel at home there” (Wittgenstein 1980, 65e). It is impossible to decide *beforehand* where one is heading. Pondering on philosophical problems – work, mathematics, love, intentions, thinking, justice, film and religion – requires that one’s attention is directed at the specific character of the question. Every philosophical investigation presupposes renewed attention to philosophy as an activity. So the question remains: what kind of philosophical investigation is *this*? As I said, my project is not meant to present a perspicuous representation of the myriad uses of the concept of work. Instead, my project could tentatively be called a form of *critique of work*. Basically, what I mean by this is an interrogation of that which appears to be self-evident. The critique of this naturalization and normalization of work cannot, as will be clear, be reduced to a critique of ideology. Instead, with Henri Lefebvre and Ernst Bloch I would like to talk about *critique of everyday life* and like these thinkers, I would say that a critique of work always expresses the hope of a better world.

To take one example of critique of work: work is elevated for providing people with a source of self-realization. What does it mean to speak this way? Why is this image so tempting and why does it appear to be so innocent? Normative conceptions revolving around self-realization and meaningfulness abound: we are to lead meaningful lives and as philosophers like Charles Taylor have pointed out, I am to find a life that is completely *my own*. This is a life where originality is connected with an inner searching for what it is to be true to oneself (cf. Taylor 1991). On the other hand, (as

Taylor perhaps does not pay enough attention to) this individualization of work is *ambiguous*, which is evident in the rhetoric of job application that brings up ‘personality’ as something to be *used*, something one *has* and something one *fulfills* – not to forget something one is expected/required to have. The idea of work as self-realization is historically situated and it can be placed within an institutional and normative context of waged work, the labor market, competition, the possibility to make a career change, but also a number of norms surrounding ‘a worthy career’. What role does the ideal of self-realization play in society? What happens when one’s own person starts to appear as something that one can and should use? I will argue that an important aspect of a critique of work is to articulate tensions from a position where existential and structural dimensions intersect, and that this goes against a tendency to detach reflection on work from the life setting in which tensions figure.

A Wittgensteinian legacy is present in the thesis in the sense that I try to keep alive the complex entanglement of language and action. This is important given my interest in the tensions in how ‘work’ appears in rhetorical settings that are operative in various practices. Wittgenstein is sometimes (wrongly, I think) thought to have viewed the ordinary as a self-evident level to which philosophy can always return.<sup>6</sup> The tensions I investigate can be said to be perfectly ‘ordinary’. ‘To work is to realize one’s unique individuality’ is a case in point. One aspect of critique of work is to examine

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<sup>6</sup> Invoking ordinary language cannot be a method. Ordinary language is not absolutely neutral something that philosophy can appeal to in order to dissolve metaphysical castles in the sky. Nor can ordinary language be grasped as a specific type of language use. When philosophers make references to ‘how we talk’, this includes the language of science, politics, religion, engineering or poetry. The good contrast to ordinary language is metaphysics, language that has gone on holiday (Wittgenstein 2009, § 38).

how descriptions *appear* to be self-evident, necessary or natural, while they could *also* be said to express and be immersed in relations of power and dependence. This explains what I take neutralization to be. The hazard of neutralizations is what is distorted or eclipsed. My project does thus *not* consist in reminding the reader that *every* use of 'work' is non-neutral (that would be a rather empty gesture); the aim is rather to give an outline of processes of neutralization – a process which can hardly be derived from individual people's conscious intentions. In other words: the central challenge is to understand how neutralizations operate. In that sense, denaturalization *necessarily* remains inconclusive: my thesis will not try to draw a contrast between appearance and reality. Such contrasts are instead problematized.

The implication of this, along with my emphasis on the relation between the existential and the structural is that many images of work cannot be reduced to distortions of how we *really* or *truly* think and live. Think about the following contention in which work appears as a mere means: 'We work in order to make a living, but it is for leisure we *live*.' This remark does not only reflect a misunderstanding or a skewed image – it forms a part of what work, economy, businesses have been transformed *into*. One can easily think of societal practices expressing the idea that freedom is the absence of work. An entire recreation industry is built around the image that we need to take a break from work to spend some precious hours in the kingdom of freedom, just to, a few days later, step back into land of necessity. But *friction* between how we think and live remains nonetheless. When I talk about work as a way for me to earn enough money to go on holiday, somebody may ask me if I truly stand behind this, day in and day out. And if I do stand behind it, what is it like to live this way and to think this way about my job? So – even if these neutralizations are operative, tensions exist. To sum up: in this

way, critique of work in the sense I have in mind offers no unambiguous route from a supposed level of distortions and metaphysical castles in the sky to the Ordinary.

## Overview

Necessity and freedom are two concepts that are both intimately associated with work. Deep tensions are uncovered when one looks at what thinkers have said about the relation between them. In the *first* chapter, I discuss necessity and work in relation to Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*. Arendt considers necessity to be a realm that threatens to colonize other spheres of human life, and the political life in particular. Necessity, for her, represents sheer life functions. Even though her investigation has critical potential, the concept of necessity is steeped in confusion. I argue that thinking about wage labor in connection with necessity cannot be done without looking at a specific historical situation. It turns out that to a great extent she grapples with her own time, and that her concepts of labor and work do not always succeed in making clear what exactly her worries amount to, what *kind* of societal affliction she is trying to dissect when she formulates a critique of expanding necessity. My reading is influenced by Hanna Pitkin and her investigation of Arendt's line of social critique. The chapter contains an overview of Arendt's concepts of labor, work and action. My own critical remarks about Arendt's approach lead up to themes in the rest of the thesis: wage labor as an integral aspect of (capitalist) society, all too convincing forms of common sense and generalized moralization that makes it hard to connect work to its purposes and the world in which it is situated.

In the *second* chapter, the concepts of work and freedom resurface, now in dialogue with Herbert Marcuse and André Gorz, who both analyze the possibility of freedom from a



society revolving around work shaped by capitalism. Even though freedom is lauded as the primary virtue of contemporary society, Marcuse and Gorz are convinced that this is a very one-sided image. They seek to stake out an alternative and this is done by articulating what makes the present system of wage labor destructive and what freedom from it would mean. At best, their analyses encourage attention to the changing roles of wage labor and leisure in our lives. However, their ideas are at times presented in a way that prevents the reader from seeing their political driving force. Generalizations cloud the political critique while also threatening to engender a much too simple view of work that fails to address the mixed reality of present-day wage labor. One such generalization concerns functionality. I will reflect on why it seems untenable for Marcuse and Gorz to argue that the fundamental problem of contemporary waged work is that it reduces work to functionality. Conceptions of division of labor, homogenization and specialization are discussed, and so, once again, is the societal dimension of work: both Gorz and Marcuse argue that work is a part of a gigantic societal machinery. What are the philosophical and political relevance of the perspectives of Marcuse and Gorz? I try to illustrate what I see as the political core of their discussion about work, society and freedom by reflecting on various hopes and fears related to the proposition of a general income.

The relation between work and life is the theme of chapters *three* and *four*. A common view in recent writings is that work – emotional work, immaterial work, precarious work – to an increasing extent colonizes our lives by becoming a seemingly boundless activity and that this risks making us unable to think about what is meaningful and worthy beyond work and productivity. These writers follow in the steps of Marcuse and Gorz in so far as they scrutinize the ways tendencies in the world of work are hazardous to fundamental aspects of our

lives, while also trying to look beyond that system of work. Kathi Weeks' recent book *The Problem with Work* (2011) receives special attention in chapter *three*. Weeks highlights the ambiguities and contradictions hidden within the seemingly self-evident role of work as the basis of societal wealth and as a source of creativity for the individual. I enter into a critical dialogue with her view on what she calls 'the work ethic', a tenuous but fragile form of dedication to work fraught with tensions. The question that runs through the chapter is: what does it mean to talk about a 'work ethic', what *sort* of challenge do writers like Weeks strive to pose? I will give an outline of Weeks' project, but I will also look at what her critical conception of waged work and life risks *overlooking*. I argue that her argument does not leave room for asking what the existential pull of what she calls the work ethic consists in.

In the *fourth* chapter, I scrutinize the relation between work and life from a perspective rarely focused on among authors who set out to deconstruct suspect forms of dedication to work. I argue that it is possible to talk about good work without falling into the ambiguities of the work ethic which Weeks so aptly dissects. I draw on the philosopher Raimond Gaita's conception of vocation, while distancing myself from some of its other uses. The concept of a vocation is employed as a tool in my exploration of how we talk about meaningful work and commitment. Through a discussion about Simone Weil, I argue against the idea that one can say, in general, that the nature of some occupations is such that they can be vocations in the sense that they contain a form of deepening, while some other occupations cannot contain such deepening. A point that recurs in the thesis (cf. chapter 1 and 2): jobs can be *reduced* into mere functions; jobs can be de-skilled and routinized, but to see why these occupations have this character requires an intricate account of a transformation of

work into functions or execution, and the suppression of good possibilities. The discussion hinges on how an occupation is described. The chapter concludes with remarks related to the stakes involved in talking about and disagreeing about good work. My contention is that a generalized account of work will lose sight of these stakes.

In the *fifth* chapter I continue to reflect on transformations of work. I discuss the morally and politically charged circumstances around work transformed *into* labor power, a commodity that is first of all a specific form of *relation*. One aim of the chapter is to show how work in the shape of labor power is a seemingly neutral resource and that this threatens to make what I call work as a life situation inconspicuous and that this is connected with a *depoliticization* of work – that is, yet another form of neutralization in which political controversies are glossed over. When work turns into labor power, it is possible to disengage it from purposes and the concrete life activity that jobs after all consist in. The neutralization of work in the form of labor power is analyzed by means of Marx’s concept of abstract labor: when work is transformed into labor power it is at the same time abstracted. The problem is not abstraction as such, but rather the way the language and praxis of labor power make work appear as a neutral resource, while existential and political dimensions of work are suppressed. I am *not* saying that the problem is that *concrete work* has been made invisible and that the task is to return to such concrete work. Instead, one of my aims is to show how the abstraction of work is a relation that changes how we perceive work. For this reason, it is crucial to take account of controversies and struggles about work. I provide an example of this taken from the Swedish debate about tax deductions for domestic service work. I have chosen this example because it concerns both what I have called the neutralization and the moralization of work.

I continue the examination of work as labor power in the *sixth* chapter, now attending to a more existential dimension. In his well-known books on work, the sociologist Richard Sennett has analyzed how commitment and care are undermined in what he calls ‘the new capitalism’, a condition of insecure jobs and idealization of flexibility. According to Sennett, this situation elicits a fear of obsolescence; people worry about not being needed, about being out of the loop. I suggest that for all the good observations, his argument is compromised by a nostalgic yearning for past stability along with a preoccupation with charting trends that leads to confusion concerning what kind of troubling predicament Sennett sets out to portray. His lucid questions - which I appreciate more than the answers and analyses he offers - incite an open-ended inquiry about work and the fear of obsolescence. I turn to a discussion about how this fear could be interpreted, how it is to be framed. What does it mean to think clearly about work when we have no choice but to position ourselves on the labor market, in its competitive relations and structures?

## **A note on vocabulary**

As this Introduction has made clear, the aim of the thesis is to take note of different *uses* of ‘work’, and often this is done so as to go against a tendency to neutralize work. My strategy is to talk about waged and salaried work, work as employment or work as a job, as – simply – *work*. The aspect of waged or paid work will be emphasized. I will thus talk about ‘work’ whenever I refer to working activities that could be described as an economic process, a contractual relation or a specific type of task or effort. In the chapters, a variety of concepts appear as I seek to bring out specific aspects of work. Some linguistic flexibility is thus required.

Even in my discussion of Arendt's perspective, I express my own hesitation about the concept of labor, one of the reasons being that 'labor' is often used to point to a distilled image of the working activity. That this hunch (labor is a distilled concept of work) has some resonance with how the concepts are employed by other writers is exemplified in a footnote of the *Capital* in which Engels adds a remark to Marx's text. Engels comments on the English terminology: "Labor which creates use-values and is qualitatively determined is called 'work' as opposed to 'labor'; labor which creates value and is only measured quantitatively is called 'labor', as opposed to 'work'" (1990, 138n). I don't mean to treat Engels' definition as the true one, just that one often finds similar ones. My own choice, however, is to talk about 'work' also when the working activity has been, or is, under threat of being reduced in various ways. The reason why will be the explained in chapter 5, where I also elaborate on Marx's concept of abstract labor. In that chapter, I will point out the dangers of a conception of work and the importance of keeping in mind that even though it may be reduced into a force of production or an economic asset, the aspect of work as a life situation unavoidably remains. To sum up, it can be said that the concepts of work and labor are used in different and sometimes contradictory ways. At times 'work' and 'labor' are treated as completely interchangeable. My intention is thus not to make a normative distinction between 'work' and 'labor', as has sometimes been done by authors critical of reduction of the working activity. Some writers use 'work' when they talk about an activity that involves creativity and 'labor' when they refer to 'heavy, onerous activity' and for some of these, work is the ideal while labor is the degradation of work (cf. Arendt 1998, Standing 1999, 3-4).

## On 'methods'

The historical dimension is impossible to ignore when we talk about work. Can a distinction be upheld between understanding work philosophically and *diagnosing* society? A diagnostic route is common: *tendencies* are charted. Allegedly, work has become more and more feminized, flexible and fragmented. There is much to be praised in this approach: connections that are not always obvious are spelled out. Even so, the point of my thesis is not to survey trends. Of course, empirical material could undoubtedly be an important contribution to the present project. However, even though I take note of empirically grounded research, my interest has another character. The critique is directed against attempts to diagnose the state of the world of work in ways that get ahead of things so that conclusions are drawn in a hasty and generalizing way. I will ask what *kinds* of claims an author is making: is it a conceptual claim or an empirical claim? As I said, I will try to be very explicit about the nature of the commitment of a particular writer. This is in itself a vital aspect of my project – the aim is to express the stakes involved in a particular discussion and to look at the ways in which stakes are forgotten. The task is to articulate the kind of discussion a particular text engages in, rather than to stay true to the strictures of academic disciplines. My approach crosses disciplines in the sense that the authors I go into dialogue with have their homes in sociology, political theory and gender studies. The choice of discussion partners may appear idiosyncratic, but the intention is to gather critical voices into a conversation about our relation to wage labor. I hope that such crisscrossing brings new connections into view and that it will prevent me from falling into the trap of contributing to a debate in which the conceptual frames have already been settled.

# Chapter 1: Arendt on labor, work, and politics

Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence (Arendt 2003, 160).

The illumination of incongruities is not tantamount to the solution of problems arising from a relatively closed conceptual and empirical context. [...] We must let the contradictions stand as what they are, make them understood as contradictions, and grasp what lies beneath them (Arendt 1996, 7).

## 1.1 Introduction

A thinker hard to pin down into familiar political camps, and also a thinker reluctant to label herself according to conventional academic disciplines, methods and themes, Hannah Arendt's ideas pose a refreshing challenge. It is revealing that those who have been influenced by her ideas do not belong to any specific philosophical tradition. If Arendt's philosophy is impossible to situate in a particular political corner, the same goes for her approach to philosophy. She may be most famous for her analysis of bureaucracy and totalitarianism in her book about the Eichmann trial and in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and she is also known for her account of politics in various books and essays. Here I will focus on her social philosophy. More specifically, I will zone in on what she has to say about the world of work and I will suggest that the tensions that her own thinking reveals offer a good lever for questioning clichés about work. The most glaring tension of her thinking is a conceptual one: Arendt can be said to

engage in a critical project, but at the same time she advances generalized concepts. More specifically, this tension is revealed in how she talks about *necessity*.

*The Human Condition*, published in 1958, can be called a philosophical diagnosis of post-war USA (and also Europe to some extent).<sup>7</sup> Arendt reacts against what she sees as a decline of the political, a decline that according to her is expressed in bureaucratization. The analysis takes its departure from a society in which people don't see in what way they are politically responsible. Arendt evokes the image of a society that has shut itself off from politics, a society that for all its frenzied activity is characterized by political inertia. Political institutions have not disappeared, but *the political* has almost vanished. By the 'political' she means a mode of human togetherness: the capacity to act in concert and the capacity to begin. Her book traces what she sees as a reduction of human activity but in doing this, it affirms what she holds to be a capacity that has not been altogether extinguished: the capacity for new beginnings, and the capacity for human togetherness. For Arendt, society is characterized by conformism and the conviction that society is dominated by one single interest: sustenance. Technology and capitalism thrive, but people don't – they withdraw from the possibility of politics, the possibility of plurality and responsibility. Society is construed as a scientific or capitalist striving for endless expansion, while individuals dedicate themselves to personal projects of enhancing private experiences. What Arendt describes seems to be the threat of societal *atrophy*. Our society, Arendt writes, has the potential of freedom (I will go on to say more about what freedom means to her), but this

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<sup>7</sup> She mentions life in the Soviet Union only in passing; there are many hints about how consumer society resembles totalitarian societies, of which she writes in *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).



potential is displaced so that people's relation to the world is characterized by powerlessness. So what has *made* us powerless? By means of genealogical analysis and conceptual investigation, *The Human Condition* seeks to offer an alternative to conformism, bureaucratization and social engineering.

In the book, Arendt formulates her own view of the history of philosophy. *The Human Condition* is an attempt to articulate the complexities of the *vita activa* and the distinction between the contemplative and the active is the one of the most central ones in the book. A deeply rooted philosophical attitude in which contemplation is ranked higher than the active life is questioned. Greek thinkers like Aristotle had a complex view of the active life. For Arendt it is important that Aristotle conceived the active life as part of the good life if and only if it was concerned with politics. The Medieval Christian thinkers are charged with turning the active life into an all-encompassing category pitted against the stillness of the contemplative life: from this period onwards, all distinctions *within* the active life have been blurred even though, as she writes, the hierarchical order has been reversed so that the contemplative is now overshadowed by the active life (1998, 11-17). Modern thinkers have detached themselves from the elevation of contemplation, but their (Marx is her main target) confused understanding of the active life reflects a society without appreciation for the plural forms of human activity. Describing a society that has turned towards conformism, expansion and private satisfaction, she sets out to map what has been lost but also what could be retained. So, when Arendt speaks about loss, she does not speak in absolute terms. The losses are never points of no return; historical *openness* is stressed. In *The Human Condition*, the character of politics is analyzed by means of a phenomenological and

genealogical exposition of life as changing *and* as having certain conditions.

The loss of politics and action is defined as the loss of the public sphere. Human beings now inhabit an in-between zone which Arendt refers to as the *social* and *behavior*. The latter concept is used in contrast with action. This in-between, the social, is comfortable, innovative – but strangely devoid of life, difference and dialogue. The critique of modern capitalist society in *The Human Condition* is a critique both of our lives as what she calls ‘jobholders’ and as consumers: in neither capacity is there room for acting in the sense of grappling with the openness of the future. She concludes that society has transmuted into a *jobholder society* and in this sense she is a forerunner of later critics of work like André Gorz and Herbert Marcuse. The productivity of manufacturing has increased and automation has made many types of work redundant. This bears the promise of freedom, but we have not become free. Rather than our dedicating a lessened portion of our lives to work, what she calls labor is elevated as the core of humanity, the activity that makes us human. Oddly, *at the same time*, a rather unflattering view of jobs as subsistence is upheld in the jobholder society:

Even presidents, kings, and prime ministers think of their offices in terms of a job necessary for the life of society, and among the intellectuals, only solitary individuals are left who consider what they are doing in terms of work and not in terms of making a living. What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse (1998, 5).

Arendt’s diagnosis is that we have reduced ourselves into functionaries of a society geared towards maintenance and expansion. Everything is seen under the same aspect: the ‘necessities’ of the life of society.

This chapter primarily deals with Arendt's distinction between 'labor' and 'work'. Even though that distinction is an aspect of her thinking that has been attacked by many (cf. Benhabib 1996, 130), I haven't found many studies that link her concepts to a wider discussion about the jobholder society. For Arendt, 'labor' is a circular activity attached to the biological process of life, whereas 'work' refers to the manufacture of an object. This unusual distinction is embedded within key *topoi* in Arendt's philosophy. In my reading, the discussion about labor and work in *The Human Condition* is aimed at showing how the political vanishes if necessity colonizes human togetherness: life is colonized by subsistence and expansion.

As we go along, it will be apparent that necessity is an extremely important, yet elusive, concept in the book. Even though I try to read Arendt charitably, there are irresolvable problems with her conception of necessity that cannot simply be explained away by pointing to the non-systematic character of her philosophy. As we will see, the concepts of labor and necessity are closely related. Labor is "connected with the life process in its most elementary, biological sense" (1998, 46), but this is far from being a straightforward conceptual move. I will argue that some of the confusion surrounding her concept of labor stems from her ambivalent ideas about *necessity*. According to Arendt, something is awry when we start to consider our lives under the aspect of sustenance. The human condition, she writes, includes labor, and it will always be like that, but when labor usurps spheres of life to which it does not belong, it emerges as a destructive force. *At best*, Arendt's exploration of labor as necessity could be understood as an attempt to expose the development that has led up to society in totalitarian states and consumerist societies: in this way, her views can be read as a *reaction* to a historical situation in which even society appears to be a process to be upheld. The concept

of process is a central element of Arendt's thinking. Throughout the book, she shows how nature, labor and even action can legitimately be described as a *process*. However, a harmful development has transformed togetherness, science, knowledge and history into processes in a very special sense: 'why' has been replaced with 'how' (1998, 105, 230-2, 296). In other words, people are degraded into taking part in a bureaucratized society in which public affairs have been reduced to technical management. This is seen as a mark of our inability to live with the frailty of human togetherness.

However, as I will go on to show, much of what Arendt says about necessity and labor – her worry about expansion of necessity, for example – seems to lead in other directions than these intelligible historically situated reactions. The questionable point she makes is that *labor is and will always be 'sheer life'*. Sheer life, according to Arendt, does not belong in what she sees as politics and the public realm (1998, 100-1). If labor is politicized, or politics laborized, a distortion has taken place, she claims. Politics should not be controlled by necessity; labor should remain a private concern, not the primary interest of society. When labor and necessity enter the realm of public affairs, human commonality itself seems dangerously displaced – the public sphere is corroded:

Marx predicted correctly, though with an unjustified glee, "the withering away" of the public realm under conditions of unhampered development of the "productive forces of society," and he was equally right, that is, consistent with his conception of man as an *animal laborans*, when he foresaw that "socialized men" would spend their freedom from laboring in those strictly private and essentially worldless activities that we now call "hobbies" (1998, 117-8).

The threat she evokes, socialized man and the expansion of *animal laborans*, can be grasped in the light of her very original

concept of the political as plurality and self-expression, a concept that differs from what many political philosophers would assume it to be: *government*. When read this way, her worries about necessity are plausible.

In what follows I will critically assess Arendt's conceptualization of labor and work in relation to politics. It is important to keep in mind that her main interest in *The Human Condition* is the disappearance of the political. The reason why I start the thesis with a discussion of this book is that I see her explication of labor, work and necessity as symptomatic. An unresolved problem in her thinking is that labor and work are placed outside the realm of politics. Labor is reduced to necessity, which is portrayed as essentially *unchanging*, even though for Arendt the *scope* of necessity undergoes crucial changes. She represents a striking position in maintaining that labor is only a *background structure* and that this background structure can be separated from other aspects of life within human communities, as if labor is not part of the life of the community in any other way than as maintenance. This is what I will mainly criticize. Although it was not Arendt's intention to deliver *definitions* of labor, work and action, a tension in the book, as I see it, is that she (perhaps inadvertently) evokes images of labor as a process that sustains life: necessity. But it is never clear whether necessity, for her, is a *critical* concept by means of which she takes a stand against the *quasi-necessity* invading her own society, or whether necessity is an *ontological* concept that somehow essentially has its given place.

As I said in the Introduction, one aim in the thesis is to showcase examples of patterns of thinking that short-circuit the reflection on the meaning and purposes of wage labor. *The Human Condition* provides us with precisely such an example, while I would at the same time say that the text draws our attention to significant tensions related to the roles of working

activities – I already mentioned the glaring shift between elevating the working activity as the core of humanity and treating it as mere sustenance. Another aim of this chapter is to show why Arendt's exposé of labor/work is symptomatic with respect to the image of necessity as a *burden*. She aptly *questions* a sustenance view of life and society, but her argument trails off into depicting necessity as a burden *in itself*. *Against* Arendt I will suggest that 'necessity' cannot be understood as an autonomous, self-contained sphere of life. As I said, the chapter progresses in accordance with the main concepts in the book: labor, work and action. My exposition of the two other concepts will be tightly anchored to the first, labor. Towards the end of the chapter, in which I reflect on Arendt's presentation of a jobholder society, I open up for questions dealt with in the two following chapters.

## 1.2 Animal laborans, life and nature

The only activity which corresponds strictly to the experience of worldlessness [...] is laboring, where the human body, its activity notwithstanding, is also thrown back upon itself, concentrates upon nothing but its own being alive, and remains imprisoned in its metabolism with nature without ever transcending or freeing itself from the recurring cycle of its own functioning (1998, 115).

Arendt's ambition in *The Human Condition* is huge: she wants to call us back to human existence. The book is a critique of tendencies in modern life that express an alienation from the human condition. She argues that people are preoccupied with the infrastructure of life or with private experiences. She sees this as an alienation from a human world. Of course she is not alone in this sort of envisioning. Adorno, Heidegger and others have ventured into similar forms of Kulturkritik. So, to *what* are people called back, *what is* the human condition, what role does it play in Arendt's philosophy? The human

condition is presented as historical, rather than a fixed state of affairs or a fixed framework. Through this notion the disappearance of the political and the colonization of life by necessity are articulated. Thus, the human condition appears both as a predicament and a possibility, a framework for what life *could* be but also what it *always* will be. Arendt writes about conditioning not as a causal restraint, but as a *dynamic* relation (Arendt 1998, 11). The human condition, then, is not to be translated into *human nature*. The philosophical move Arendt seems to make with this notion is to highlight certain ineluctable dimensions of life. The human condition she describes has action as its core; that is, creating something *new*. This explains why what she calls the human condition does not *settle* any questions about who we are or what is important, but the answer cannot ignore the primary conditions of life. If it does, something has gone awry. Given a certain philosophical tradition's assessment of human life as rationality, from the detached point of view of which there is no grasp of human life as relational, fragile or limited, this is a fruitful approach. However, it turns out that there is more to say about how Arendt perceives the human condition, and this has to do with nature, and it is here I will start my investigation of Arendt's concept of labor, which will be explored aspect by aspect.

Arendt describes three modes of being in the world – labor, work and action. Her view is that the human condition partly transcends nature, but the umbilical cord with nature can never be cut off. Survival and the birth of new generations remind us of our dependence on nature and it is also here that labor enters the story, as this concept for Arendt expresses the inevitable bond with nature that she often labels with the word 'necessity'. Interestingly, this relation has two strikingly different aspects: nature is both vitality (primitive joy) and

compulsion (1998, 120). Clearly, it is not free. Arendt renders labor as *imprisonment* within the body:

The *animal laborans*, driven by the need of its body, does not use this body freely as *homo faber* uses his hands, his primordial tools, which is why Plato suggested that laborers and slaves were not only subject to necessity and incapable of freedom but also unable to rule the “animal” part within them. [...] [He] is imprisoned in the privacy of his own body, caught in the fulfillment of needs in which nobody can share and which nobody can fully communicate (1998, 118-9).

Nature, for Arendt, represents an unconditional way in which we are *bound* or *driven*. In other words, she portrays labor as a *burden*, driven by the compulsion of necessity. This has implications for how she perceives labor, which according to her is a life process. There is no sense in which the burden of labor goes away, even though there are ways to make it easier to carry. Modern life has this potential because of the huge increase in productivity of labor, but we *are* not, and *cannot* be, fully liberated from labor, nature and necessity.

The view of nature as a burden seems to entail the idea that nature should be mastered, overcome and overpowered (1998, 31, cf. O’Brien 1981, 101).<sup>8</sup> Nature is seen as possessing an elusive and disturbing force, an unnerving alliance with necessity and sameness. For Arendt, sameness is a contrast to

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<sup>8</sup> In this passage, and in many others, Arendt elaborates an overview of how one pattern of concepts is displaced by another. Very often, she does this by referring to a specific historical situation that represents a different view of life than the present society. It is, I would say, easy to see where Arendt’s sympathies lay; she is not making a mere historical observation about conceptual change. My reading is based on what I take to be Arendt’s use of historical examples, by means of which she elaborates her own views. I agree with Seyla Benhabib: the reader encounters the challenge to decide on what level one should read her arguments, whether something is to be taken as a conceptual distinction or as a historical observation (1996, 124).



action, plurality and change. This is relevant in a reading of *The Human Condition* because of Arendt's peculiar concept of labor. Labor is connected with fertility which is tied to joyous femininity (1998, 107) and what she sees as *the natural productivity* of labor. There is also a darker side of fertility: it is said to possess a voracious appetite that *threatens* other dimensions of human life – the reality of action and politics (1998, 98, 100). Arendt repeatedly talks about the realm of necessity (labor) as 'devouring' something. It is significant – one of the deeply puzzling aspects of *The Human Condition!* – that very similar language is used when she talks about the expansion of *society* as a sphere with its own tendency to grow and devour the political, a strange process in which the life processes grow *unnaturally*:

The social realm, where the life process has established its own public domain, has let loose an unnatural growth, so to speak, of the natural; and it is against this growth, not merely against society but against a constantly growing social realm, that the private and intimate, on the one hand, and the political (in the narrower sense of the word), on the other, have proved incapable of defending themselves (1998, 47, cf. 45, my emphasis).

The dark side of this perspective on nature – which, as we will see, intersects with Arendt's critique of the social in a most curious way – is thus the rapacious expansiveness, futility and repetitiveness ascribed to it. The urgency of necessity threatens to swallow up what makes human life *more* than day-to-day, laborious toil – what makes life *human*. I will continue to unpack the meaning of Arendt's concept of labor and these dark elements of 'necessity' will then be linked to the wider frame of Arendt's thinking.

So what does Arendt say about labor, more specifically? Labor is based on the urgency of life itself. It is repetitive and ephemeral and its products are consumed so that its traces

soon vanish (1998, 87). She refers to Marx, whom she, for all her polemical remarks, admires. She quotes the passages in which he talks about labor as life's metabolism. Arendt agrees with this even though she is fiercely critical of what she takes to be Marx's idea that it is *primarily* labor that characterizes a human being as an active being.<sup>9</sup> In the book, Marx figures as the thinker who is guilty of conflating and levelling the work as fabrication and making on the one hand and labor as an endless process on the other hand. She accuses him of basing an image of the human being on both the idea of fabrication and the idea of labor power without distinguishing between these sides. Most of all, Marx epitomizes the tendency to think of human activity and emancipation in terms of labor (cf. Canovan 1995, 72-5). Let us start with the latter aspect. Arendt sees Marx's thinking as an expression of societal changes: the concept of labor that his thinking builds on (according to her) reveals a tendency in modernity. For Arendt Marx is a spokesperson for the voracious life processes and their liberation: history and human life are rendered into hopes about realizing the potential of self-realization through labor. However, beyond his dangerous conflation of labor and work, Marx has realized something important, she claims: he

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<sup>9</sup> Arendt seems to draw on what Marx writes in his early work, especially how he, when elucidating the alienation of the worker, talks about work as a 'vital activity' (Marx 1992a, 328). Arendt may also have read the section in *The German Ideology* in which Marx writes about production and creativity: "As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are therefore coincides with their production, both of what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production" (1970, 42). Even though I agree with Arendt that at times, Marx speaks about human life as coinciding with the productive activity, I would also read such sections in their context. One may stress that Marx sets out to clarify what is problematic about capitalism and the kind of transformation work goes through when it is reduced to a commodity.

revealed the dimension of labor in all its uncontrollable process-like qualities. She writes:

Whatever labor produces is meant to be fed into the human life process almost immediately, and this consumption, regenerating the life process, produces – or, rather, reproduces – new “labor power,” needed for the further sustenance of the body (1998, 99).

Even though this account of labor power is set within a larger narrative about mobile wealth and, as we saw, the rise of the social, the historically specific situation of the labourer who has nothing to sell but his labor on which Marx draws is rendered into a *general* image of labor as a private, bodily activity (1998, 108, 111). In the midst of historical images of expropriation and property, Arendt invokes this elusive and accelerating life process, this power of labor which Marx allegedly celebrated. Despite some significant changes – the content and extension of labor – labor and labor power are described as remaining essentially the same. What she calls the *life process* – a concept very closely connected to necessity – is unchanged by automation, division of labor or, as Margaret Canovan writes, these changes subject our lives to the life processes even more strongly than before (1995, 83). The only signification change is thus that the life process “becomes more deadly”, as it is allowed a greater place in the public realm and even shapes what the public realm *is* (1998, 132).

This is an instance where Arendt’s perspective on necessity can be detected in her more particular remarks, in this case about labor power. I would say that it is this general perspective that gives rise to her understanding of labor as a life process. It can be noted that Arendt’s description of the expansion and deadly force of the life process bears some resemblance to the rather common idea that capitalism is a life-threatening reduction of human existence: this is a claim that Marx makes in his famous “Economic and Philosophic

Manuscripts". Arendt's idiosyncratic emphasis is, however, that this reduction of human life that threatens the capacity of action and politics entails an expansion of the life process. Canovan writes:

The human condition has always left man at the mercy of nature in the sense of being subject to nature's cyclic processes of production and consumption, growth and decay, birth and death; but only in modern times have men released such natural processes from their cyclic repetition and let them loose on trajectories that are not cyclical but unlimited (1995, 84)

One way to assess the image of the life processes is to return to her interpretation of Marx whom she reads as a writer who expresses the reduction of human life into the life process in a dangerous but symptomatic way. What Arendt doesn't pay enough attention to is that most often Marx talks about reproduction of *labor power*, a value-creating resource. He connects the working process with survival but how this specific connection operates varies in accordance with historical situations. In a capitalist society survival, from the point of view of the capitalist, means something to the effect of 'the promise of labor power': a living human being can work, can produce value for the capitalist beyond the costs of wages. Labor power (wage labor) exists only in capitalism. The reproduction of labor power is a condition of economic value. Labor power needs to be reproduced but the process of production would go nowhere if people did not work more than what survival requires. In addition to this, Marx argues that the specific content of reproduction varies according to the historical situation (Marx 1992a, 325; 1990, 341-2, 344-5). What Arendt refers to as "the necessity of subsistence" (1998, 100) is a *historically diverse phenomenon* for Marx, who devoted his thinking to the changes that work undergoes through history. He is aware of the fact that the content of survival and

of working is not the same in Germany during the 19th century as in a village in India in the year 1314. What counts as survival is historically contingent (what is counted as a basic level of subsistence varies) but it can also be said that the *role* survival and subsistence has is equally historically relative. For this reason, it is misleading to assume some primordial 'life process' along with a trans-historical concept of productive labor power.

My own point is that Marx's insight has a bearing on a critical conceptualization of survival and subsistence. To talk about 'work as subsistence' in Finland in 2015 we need to tell a long story about companies, the welfare state, taxes and the labor market and we also need to say something about the kind of services and commodities people perceive as fundamental for their daily lives. This is important to keep in mind for a reason Arendt herself would strongly embrace: there is a risk that we *deceive ourselves about what it means that the present world of work is about subsistence*, or that society itself is a form of subsistence. One form of such alluring ideas is that each worker takes part in a common societal project, the project of subsistence. This image looks away from the different roles the work of a cleaner, a lawyer, a librarian and a builder have. To say that they contribute to a clear-cut level of common societal subsistence is one of the clichés that I mentioned in the Introduction and Arendt *herself* would say that this idea of societal subsistence expresses a fatal development that has put all activities on the same level, which she calls a society of 'jobholders'. Later on, I will say more about how Arendt opens the door for dissecting concepts (like she does with subsistence), only to present a generalized image in the next moment (an idea about trans-historical productive labor power or a primordial life-process that has the strange ability to 'expand').

### 1.3 Labor as a necessity to be kept in its place?

I do not think it is very fruitful to separate what Marx says about excess and the productivity of labor from what he says about the *historical* emergence of labor power. There is no trans-historical meaning of the productive power, the 'surplus', of labor. Rather: in its darkest aspects of a pursuit of efficiency and intensification of work, wage labor is *reduced* to how much people *can* work. As Marx observes, in other economies, 'surplus labor' – as he calls it – beyond what is needed for the worker's own subsistence may exist, but it will be limited to quite specific needs (1992a, 345). The difference between Arendt and Marx is then that the latter talks about a reduction that gives rise to 'labor power' (I will talk about this in chapter 5), while Arendt's concept of labor – the circular, natural and necessary activity – is seemingly posited as a trans-historical category that is dangerous in so far as it expands. Marx has (or seems to have, at least in his earlier writings) an idea about what the working activity could be; it could be something other than a value-creating resource of capitalism or a process over which the worker has no control. He tries to illuminate what labor has been reduced to, and that this reduction reduces the worker's life to a process of maintenance – a point strikingly similar to Arendt's.

[The] laborer regards the maintenance of his individual existence as the *aim* of his activity; his actual labors serve only as a means to this end. He thus activates his life to acquire the means of *life* (1990, 269).

The working activity could play a different role in human life – Marx constantly asserts that the human being is an active being, and that the destructive side of capitalism is also a degradation of *this* primary and necessary aspect of life. Arendt agrees with this in so far as one of her main objectives

in *The Human Condition* seems to be to give an outline of an impoverishment of human activity. As we will see, one of her points in *The Human Condition* is that work – making – has been reduced to labor. If one holds on to this strand, a reading of Arendt could be that she does not at all posit labor as a changeless category, but rather as a state of *reduction*. At this point, one may want to ask whether Arendt has specific activities in mind when she talks about labor: what would an *example* look like? The answer seems to be that very different activities could be instances of ‘labor’ in her sense. What is important is that labor does not produce anything lasting, but only reproduces human life. The labor of the independent farmer, the cleaner and the labor of the industry worker contribute to the same force, the force of life itself. “The human condition of labor is life itself.” (1998, 7) The lack of examples makes Arendt’s text obscure. Even so, I can surely embrace the following point: in this society, even teachers, executives and priests could be considered to be laborers, people ‘making a living’ – this is because of how she thinks about the changing role of labor, which, she seems to say, has now taken on the role of ‘jobholder’, a position which could be *anything*, and a position that thrusts people – even priests, executives and teachers, I assume – a tranquilized state of “sheer automatic functioning” that doesn’t allow for individuality (1998, 126-7, 322).

This manifests an unresolved tension in her thinking. *On the one hand*, Arendt critically dissects the expansion of labor and a reduction of making into labor, necessity and futility. Here, it seems that she talks about an aspect of our lives in the contemporary society: society has been laborized and almost all activities are treated as labor. This would be a critical point that, as I will show, calls for a distinction between necessity and quasi-necessity. In this reading, it would be important for

Arendt to spell out what bearing the following quote has on this distinction:

Of all human activities, only labor, and neither action nor work, is unending, progressing automatically in accordance with life itself and outside the range of willful decision or humanly meaningful purposes (Arendt 1998, 106).

*On the other hand*, unlike Marx, Arendt evokes what seems like a *timeless condition* of labor. She talks about “the essential worldly futility of the life process” and the “devouring character of biological life” that this society *has not removed* (1998, 130-2). She also maintains that no technical or social re-organization of labor – “neither the enormous increase in fertility nor the socialization of the process” – changes the fundamental fact that labor can *never* establish a common world (1998, 117).

The concept of labor is often used in her text to point out what life is always like, despite our illusions about limitless freedom. *Natural necessity* will always be a constraint on life. By adding ‘natural’ to necessity, Arendt evokes the image of a ground level of necessity rooted in nature that will always make up a dimension of human existence. The contemporary illusion is that there *could* be a world without labor in this sense (1998, 48; 120-1). She holds Marx accountable for upholding such an illusion. The background for this is that the image of cyclical labor, without beginning and end, has been particularly hard to accept for modern writers, even for Marx, who, despite his image of metabolism, was prone to describe labor as *work*, as primarily *productive* (while despising unproductive labor), as *making*. But he also, Arendt complains, treats productivity (work) as labor, as a *life force*. This critique of Marx entails that Arendt is arguing that counteracting the illusion of freedom would not consist in reminding ourselves of the multiple roles of necessity in human life, but, rather,



reminding ourselves of necessity as a life force, as a changeless truth about a fundamental immutable level of human life. But as we will see, all of this is very complicated.

What does Arendt see as an illusion? She mainly criticizes Marx for holding the view that labor can be turned into work so that necessity *disappears* (1998, 86-9, 104-5). Even though she is right in claiming that a form of necessity is easily forgotten in optimistic images of technology and productivity - this would be the exaggerated images of a 'jobless future' - my aim in these sections has been to show that her thesis that labor creates a natural surplus that forms the basis of the expansion of labor does not help us understand the inclination to regard the productivity of labor as a source for freedom and liberation.

Adding to the image of nature as survival, as compulsion and necessity, for Arendt nature (and thus labor) indicates the limits of what can be talked about as 'meaningful'.<sup>10</sup> I suspect she suggests that it is impossible to say anything more about what humans work (in a wide sense) than: *we have to, it is life*.

In other words, the distinction between productive and unproductive labor contains, albeit in a prejudicial manner, the more fundamental distinction between work and labor. It is indeed the mark of all laboring that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent. And yet this effort, despite its futility, is born of a great urgency and motivated by a more powerful drive than anything else, because life itself depends on it (1998, 87).

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<sup>10</sup> Is it clear how Arendt perceives meaning? Sometimes she emphasizes meaning as narration, i.e. storytelling (cf. 1998, 97). At other times meaningfulness seems to be related to shared forms of making sense of the world that have no particular form (cf. 2006a, 88-9). Perhaps these two aspects are situated in different temporal perspectives: Arendt links narratives to memory and shared agency to what it means that human community is future-directed.

Whereas politics is important in so far as it takes place between people and expresses their particular being, labor has the opposite character: it is not, and should not be, conspicuous – it takes place within the darkness of the private sphere. As usual with Arendt, she paints a historical image while at the same time hinting at a more authentic order:

[It] is striking that from the beginning of history to our own time it has always been the bodily part of human existence that needed to be hidden in privacy, all things connected with the necessity of the life process itself, which prior to the modern age comprehend all activities serving the subsistence of the individual and the survival of the species. Hidden away were the laborers who “with their bodies minister to the [bodily] needs of life,” and the women who with their bodies guarantee the physical survival of the species (1998, 72).

Arendt’s contention is that leading an entirely private life is to lead a life of privation, a life deprived of what really matters, what makes us truly human. However, in a mass society, not even the private sphere, which in its own way is an important side of human life, is truly *private* (1998, 58, 61). In the tendency of modern life Arendt charts, the character of labor is displaced as it goes from being a concern of the household to being the foremost interest of the state and politics (1998, 44-5; 117-8). This change is then, it seems, criticized according to an idea about what labor should be: hidden away, private. Labor is oblivious to the world and the conclusion seems to be that it is quite *understandable* that, in ancient Greece, slaves and women ‘were hidden away’. She maintains that labor is ‘worldless’, and by this she means that it is not shaped by human plurality and human interaction.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Arendt does not say that worldlessness in itself is negative – she says that love is worldless because it is destroyed when it appears in the public realm and she says the same thing about goodness (1998, 51-2, 75-6).

Does she really mean that the problematic status of labor can be traced to such a displacement? In other words: does she presuppose an essence of labor with which some historical periods have lost contact? What is obvious is that she *does* talk about change: labor is no longer kept in its place as one of the most important aspects of the present is the emergence of society as a sphere of common interests. So in this sense there is change. Even so, she also seems to think that there are significant aspects of labor that are always present. In one place, she says explicitly that even in this society, where labor is more efficient than before, and where it has been socialized, it has not stopped being “strict and even cruel privacy” (1998, 117).<sup>12</sup> My impression remains that Arendt, especially when she is talking about how economy has become a common interest, makes rather rigid claims about what her contemporary culture has ‘lost contact with’: labor as a private sphere and necessity as an ineluctable but burdensome dimension of human life. What remains troubling is that her interesting and valuable reflections about what I called a reduction of human life – which is especially an elimination of politics – presupposes the very questionable idea that there is a dimension of life – she calls it necessity and labor – that should be kept in its proper place.

### **1.4.1 Arendt and necessity**

The bonds of necessity need not be of iron, they can be made of silk (Arendt 1998, 139).

Above, I pointed to some of the most striking contradictions and tensions in how Arendt thinks about nature. Some of these contradictions will reappear here. The foremost tension I will look at is Arendt’s contention that necessity has an

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<sup>12</sup> For a similar interpretation of Arendt’s concept of labor, cf. Parekh 1981.

*enslaving* character, while she also argues that necessity has a proper place in human life. The question that arises here is what it means to perceive necessity as something that in itself constrains human life, the essence of which is considered to be freedom. It would then not be far-fetched to draw the conclusion that Arendt views necessity as an urgency that human existence is *subjected to*. She follows the tradition from Aristotle, a tradition that has made its mark upon the history of philosophy in many different ways: the kingdom of necessity is contrasted with the kingdom of freedom (Cf. *Politics* 1254b25, 1258b35ff, 1332b2). As we saw above in connection with Arendt's image of nature, this force – necessity as the life processes in Arendt's peculiar sense – must be guarded so that it does not usurp the realm of freedom. Again, the strange idea Arendt holds on to is that necessity has now expanded enormously beyond its essential character of 'natural' and 'unavoidable' necessity – the urgency of life itself. In *On Revolution*, the view of necessity as urgency is boldly stated:

The most powerful necessity of which we are aware in self-introspection is the life process which permeates our bodies and keeps them in a constant state of a change whose movements are automatic, independent of our own activities, and irresistible – i.e. of an overwhelming urgency (2006c, 51).

Would Arendt say that necessity is *enslaving only* when it takes a specific form? As I said above, it appears that she would argue that even though labor has mutated into a dominant aspect of shared life and the major interest of society, the primary aspect of labor – reproduction of the life process – has *not* changed. Labor has been 'let loose' from the private sphere and Arendt abhors the suggestion that this development should be perceived as progress. The significant change, for her, is that now the entire human life is interpreted

in terms of labor and work (1998, 46-8; 322). She wants to say that something important happens when labor, *the laboring activity itself*, is emancipated. All human activities have been levelled:

The point is not that for the first time in history laborers were admitted and given equal rights in the public realm, but that we have almost succeeded in leveling all human activities to the common denominator of securing the necessities of life and providing for their abundance. (1998, 126)

Read charitably, Arendt's exposition of necessity highlights tensions in the way work (in a general sense) becomes a public concern. For example, work is frequently seen as relieving the human condition, making life comfortable, more *individual*.<sup>13</sup> *At the same time*, this sense of comfort can make the purpose of work obscure: work starts to appear as an end in itself, an endless project that makes human life worthwhile and inserts it into a web of relations that induces our lives with a larger meaning. Such images of work as 'relieving the human condition', making life more comfortable, are frequently intertwined with an image of work as productive and culture-building. Work is thought to create a world of technology, institutions and habits that give rise to new possibilities, new forms of life. What Arendt helpfully tries to articulate is how the modern conception of work and progress contains a *conflation* of or *confusion* about exactly *which* aspects of work are seen to be progressive, productive or emancipatory. This is one reason why she introduces the concepts of labor and work – to better understand *different* aspects. An example of this is how work can be praised as being individualizing (when it is

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<sup>13</sup> I have in mind the typical idea about progress which is often labeled as the Enlightenment story: civilization has now reached a stage where we are free from the most grueling forms of toil. People are no longer animal-like laborers; they are, at least potentially, free and differentiated human beings.

said that work is important for individual growth) while *simultaneously* being described in the language of labor power, a process that has little to do with aims or concrete senses of progress. One of Arendt's most striking points is that society is built around laboring and consuming, but it is not at all clear *what* this society-building laboring amounts to, *what it means* that labor is the core of societal life. As she would say: could it be that we are holding on to the idea about a society revolving around labor *without wanting to be honest about* what this idea entails, that it for example may mean that some forms of work are degraded or that work is reduced to execution?

#### **1.4.2. Necessity as a 'blob'?**

There are things that must be done and as I said Arendt is right in pointing out that overly optimistic images of 'the jobless future', a future without necessity, are illusory. In other words: talking about chores that are part of the maintenance of life itself need not be misleading. We need food to eat, the sick need treatment and buildings have to be repaired. The problematic step in Arendt's thinking is taken when necessity is a link in her overall critique of society. Let me explain this. In her book *The Social Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* Hanna Pitkin scrutinizes Arendt's image of society and necessity. She tracks Arendt's concept(s) of the social, a force that is described as expanding and devouring all forms of human togetherness that have the potentiality of action and politics in Arendt's sense. The social, for Arendt, is a fluid zone that has taken over what was once either private or public. Human life now exists in a state where neither the private nor the public is clearly designated. In many of her writings (especially *The Human Condition*), Pitkin argues, Arendt is prone to view society – which for her is synonymous

with 'the social' – as a 'blob'<sup>14</sup>, a monstrous creature taking charge of our lives, without, however, having any connection with what we do to ourselves or what we omit to do. The blob is *attacking* us as it were from the outside (Pitkin 2000). It is passages like this that cause Pitkin's puzzlement:

The point is that now even the last trace of action in what men were doing, the motive implied in self-interest, disappeared. What was left was a "natural force", the force of the life process itself, to which all men and all human activities were equally submitted... (1998, 321)

As I said, Arendt fruitfully advances the idea that our lives have taken the *shape of necessity*, society has become a monolithic unity, or it appears to be a unity, but when she gives an account of what this amounts to, it seems as if necessity has *invaded* or *imposed* itself on human life.

[The] notion of people somehow letting natural necessity or biological processes into some space or realm from which these were previously excluded is not easy to translate into less metaphysical terms (Pitkin 2000, 190).

In *The Human Condition*, the social, 'necessity', is often presented as *doing* things to us (rather than we doing things to *ourselves*) in the sense that necessity or biological processes are thought to have an elusive power to expand, if given the opportunity. How can this feature of Arendt's philosophy be squared with her ideas about our inclination to turn ourselves into nobodies, 'tranquilized functionaries' fleeing from the responsibility to act? It is crucial to be a patient reader of Arendt. The merit of her thinking is that she shows how people flee from action, turning themselves into tranquilized functionaries. The description that we 'let' things happens is

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<sup>14</sup> Pitkin uses the image of the Blob as it appears in science fiction B-movies from the fifties.

an apt way of putting into words the strange process of abstaining from acting. The 'social' seems to epitomize this 'letting things happen'. One form such omitting of action takes is the idea that common affairs concern us only to the extent that they are related to our private interests. Why should I intervene in things that are not my business? It is just as easy to imagine a process of 'letting things happen' in the form of voiced legitimizations of what exactly the common interests of society should (and should not) amount to, as it is to imagine omitting to act as a quiet and half-conscious reliance on experts who tend to the business of society.

However, a real tension in Arendt's concept of the social is that she uses it to talk about conformism but also to describe the expansion of necessity and nature. When this concept of necessity is filled with societal content it is hard to discern the shift between a critique of irresponsibility and quasi-necessity *and* her ontological claims about necessity as a voracious force, a life process, the elementary level of subsistence that expands and devours.

Let me take one example of this difficulty. In one passage (1998, 105-6) the language of endless natural cycles and the natural fertility of life is said to be a metaphor coined by political theorists of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Arendt concludes that this metaphor makes certain modern superstitions, such as the idea that money begets money, *intelligible*. One would then think that she is talking about the intelligibility of an image rooted in conceptions of work, progress and wealth (the subject about which she is talking in this section). One could even interpret her as saying that this metaphor becomes real in the sense that we start to think about our lives in this way, so that we think that all forms of economic activity and work expresses 'the natural fertility of life', that economy is always based in the endless process of life itself. (Later, I will turn to one such example where Arendt shows how metaphors



become operative – behaviorism). However, in the next sentence she goes on to say that labor *is* the only activity that has this unending character, and then she does not seem to be talking about metaphors or even a reality shaped by metaphors anymore. The impression one gets is that she has moved to an ontological level, from where she goes on to point out in which ways some of Marx's remarks about fertility and labor "sounded a depth of experience" and "squared his theory, the theory of the modern age, with the *oldest and most insistent insights* into the nature of labor" (1998, 105, my emphasis). This is one textual example of how Arendt's concepts seem to shift meaning in the middle of an argument in which *the nature of labor* is suddenly appealed to: critical analysis blends into an ontological explication of what labor *always is*. When I interpret Arendt as saying that labor is an unchanging dimension of human life it is passages like this I have in mind, in which Arendt says that labor "obeys no other law and is subject to no other necessity" than fertility (1998, 106).

Pitkin suggests that Arendt's ideas about labor and necessity are difficult to understand precisely because the static view of necessity undermines the critical project of articulating the fear that society has become a place where there is no room for people to form genuine political communities. As I have strongly emphasized, the most significant ambition in *The Human Condition* is to spell out the possibility of politics, the impoverishment of shared human life and a displacement and reduction of public concerns.

Talking about an overwhelming system is not in itself confused, as I think Marx shows. His description of capitalism as an alien force confronting us acknowledges the *dynamic* between capitalism appearing like an alien force which is not imposed by some specific groups of people and its being something we sustain ourselves, as daily praxis, as system (cf.

chapter 5). Capitalism is real, but it is not inevitable, nor is it all-encompassing. The problem with Arendt is that she fails to provide nuanced descriptions of the power mechanisms, the specific delusions and the social dynamics that construct a society where everything appears to be driven by grim necessity. Her account is but hints: individuals act in an atomized way and joint action is lacking – economic structures that *appear* unstructured strengthen the tendency to think of ourselves as isolated atoms:

In this sense, the social is a particular mode of interrelationship among people, a form of togetherness in which each thinks himself an isolated atom, and behaves accordingly, but they [people caught up 'in the social'] in fact generate collective results that include the continual enforcement of such thinking and behavior on each other, and thus their 'normalization' into homogeneity. That is why Arendt speaks of them both as isolated atoms and also as congealed together too tightly, into a mass (Pitkin 2000, 194).

This is only part of the story. As we have seen, necessity and the realm of the social are endowed with an eerie activity of their own in Arendt's texts. Necessity is evoked as a force that is both inside and outside of us, a force that invades and a force we expand, but also a force that has its own elusive tendency to usurp other realms of life. To bring out the critical project Arendt engages in the concept of necessity should be scrutinized.

Pitkin notes that the concept is used in two different ways: we talk about necessity referring to what is *needed* but also in contexts where *inevitability* is pointed to (2000, 190-2). The latter sense has sometimes been rendered into elusive causal chains (which can be seen in the huge philosophical debates about freedom of the will). Even so, in real examples, inevitability is a perspective that arises in contexts in which it is important to point out physical or biological limitations.

'Humans need nutrition to survive' is one example of necessity in this sense. The second use Pitkin has in mind connects necessity with *normative* claims, in which necessity appears in connection with an appeal to the seriousness of a specific matter. In this kind of case, necessity is not inevitability in a causal sense, or can't be reduced to that; here, talking about necessity is talking about ethically binding needs. We frequently talk about necessity in order to highlight a need, where we underline that the need is an acute one. Such statements have the role of urgings: something *must* be done! However, as Pitkin says (*ibid.*), such normative moves can be resisted, the appeal to needs can be ignored. This then is necessity in a different sense than inevitability that cannot be intelligibly resisted: if we do not get nutrition, we die. In addition to these two uses of 'necessity', there are of course many other linguistic moves that are made with this concept. My point here is that it is unclear what it would mean to refer to necessity beyond the language games in which the concept of necessity is used: the word necessity is used to say something about what we need or why something cannot be done. It is as if Arendt moves onto a very unclear level when she talks about the compelling force of necessity. And I would say that it is not only an unclear use of 'necessity': the idea that necessity is a burden, that it compels and drives human life and that it should therefore be limited, *neutralizes* the linguistic moves people in fact do when they talk about something as necessary. Necessity is relegated to the background, as a mute condition of life.

As we saw, the concept of necessity has a prominent position in *The Human Condition* and as Pitkin aptly shows in her book the use of it is highly ambiguous.<sup>15</sup> To mention one

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<sup>15</sup> Necessity' according to Arendt is not only the voracious force described above – in several sections, she talks about labor as keeping up the world, as

such ambiguity that has a bearing on her critical project: Arendt continuously drapes necessity in the language of what *drives* human beings. In these sections, the image of voracious nature or the expansive field of labor is evoked. Arendt writes, for example, that it may be true that humane conditions for the ‘laboring classes’ meant that a certain form of violence and oppression has disappeared. *However*, the emancipation of labor, as she calls it, is rendered with an ominous tone: “No man-exerted violence, except for the violence used in torture, can match the *natural force with which necessity itself compels*” (1998, 129, my emphasis). In other words, labor is a natural force that keeps compelling and keeps driving. In her view, the emancipation of labor – which in itself is a very puzzling description – *strengthens* the hold of necessity. As I will go on to show, this description has troubling consequences for how she thinks about poverty and the role of labor in the sphere of what she calls politics.

So, her ideas about necessity that has been ‘let loose’ are mystifying. But for all the ambiguity surrounding the concept of necessity, for Arendt it simply *cannot* be true that people are truly conditioned by necessity – after all, the entire project of *The Human Condition* consists in calling people back to the

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saving it from decay (Arendt 1998, 100-101; 120-1). Labor is seen as a process in which the human being is in a certain sense worn out; labor takes its toll. What I have not emphasized enough is that Arendt’s image of labor is not an exclusively derogatory one. In fact, she connects this image of labor as toil with a sense of *vitality*. Labor is an inescapable aspect of what it is to be alive, and there is also a dimension of joy in that experience. It is interesting to note that Arendt doesn’t only talk about losing contact with politics and action. She also talks about a society in which automation and other technical innovations have made labor less conspicuous; she argues that there is a danger that people lose contact with this dimension of life and this has a bearing both on necessity and freedom: all alternatives are reduced to productive slavery or unproductive freedom (1998, 105). She goes as far as saying that the image of freedom is dangerous if it is disconnected from necessity.

political realm and calling people back to the – in a certain sense – *unconditioned* nature of action (Pitkin 1998, 191). When one reads the sections on politics and making Arendt provides, as we will soon see, several different views on what it means for something to be ‘conditioned’. After all – the question I started out with was what Arendt takes ‘the human condition’ to mean. My reading of it is that the human condition is a framework, rather than something that compels, but when one reads the sections on necessity, and how it appears as a force to be kept in place, it is clear that tensions emerge.

A reason why I think it is worth looking into these tensions is that one could say that the ambiguity in Arendt’s use of ‘necessity’ mirrors the ambiguity ordinary uses often display: there is a multitude of distinctions between *necessity*, *false necessity* and *quasi-necessity* - along with distinctions between vital needs and false needs. These distinctions are an aspect of the language games in which ‘necessity’ figures. Arendt’s own philosophy contains an obvious opening towards this observation. More generally, I think it is fair to say that her target seems to be the domination of quasi-necessity in our own culture, in our own ways of relating to society and public concerns. The following quote illuminates both her tendency to think of labor as something that should be kept in place and something that has transmuted into quasi-necessity. The context of the quote is a discussion of the impossibility of overcoming necessity, and the general unhappiness such attempts to liberate humanity from necessity breed. Note that Arendt herself expresses a certain hesitation when she writes that this truth is ‘uncomfortable’:

The rather uncomfortable truth of the matter is that the triumph the modern world has achieved over necessity is due to the emancipation of labor, that is, to the fact that the *animal laborans*

was permitted to occupy the public realm; and yet, as long as the animal laborans remains in possession of it, there can be no true public realm, but only private activities displayed in the open (1998, 133-4).

In this passage, where necessity is both a force that humanity has triumphed over and a realm that we cling to and uphold, one can find what Pitkin sees as a *third* use related to the second image of 'necessity' (necessity as an appeal to needs). Here, necessity takes the form of spurious *naturalization*, *false* necessity and *pretended* inevitability (Pitkin 2000, 191-2, 322). In many passages 'necessity' is something human life is *reduced* to when predictability, efficiency and labor become all-encompassing ideals. This makes it all the more difficult to see (and all the more important to stake out) what a contrast could be – what subsistence is and what our lives depends on. It makes sense to talk about false necessity in a society in which for example the present level of consumption appears as 'necessary', along with the idea that this level of consumption *must* be upheld if the economy is not to plunge into crisis. The more widely the role of necessity spreads, Arendt argues, the harder it is to spell out *true* limitations.

Arendt writes about how action has been substituted for behavior, a tendency expressed in the behavioral sciences the aim of which is to "reduce man as a whole, in all his activities, to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal. [...] [Social behavior] has become the standard for all regions of life" (1998, 45). When she talks about behaviorism, she showcases what I take to be an exemplary sensitivity for the difficulty of describing what is going on. Behaviorism is a deliberate project of reducing people to behavior; predictable 'behavior' becomes an ideal. At the same time behaviorism is an *operative* movement that transforms society: we start to think of ourselves in terms of behavior. This is one example where I (in

contrast to Pitkin, as a matter of fact, cf. Pitkin 2000, 191), regard Arendt's account to be very clear. Here she lucidly presents an instance of human beings repressing their own capacity for action. At best, Arendt is a thinker who makes us see this kind of ambiguity in our own lives: in behaviorism (and similar ideologies and schools) our own sense of powerlessness is transported and externalized as a (scientific) *truth*.

The main refrain of this section has been to show that considering that Arendt's most essential mission seems to be to formulate the role of false necessities or a problematic levelling of activities, it is confusing that she also talks about necessity as a force that has been 'let loose'. The striking ambiguity is, as I see it, that *either* 'necessity' is (1) appealed to in order to invoke a *critical perspective* on something (a displacement and impoverishment of action), *or* (2) is referred to as *imposing* itself on, or even *driving*, human life as an external force. Of course it need not be mystifying to talk about things that bind us or make us helpless, but her use of 'necessary' often makes it difficult to gasp the *character of the urgency* of necessity, and as I said, this ambiguity stems from Arendt's conflation of critique and ontological exploration of fundamental concepts. I agree with Pitkin that these features of her thinking easily overshadow another point: it is the generalization of and reductions of human life into 'necessity' that is dangerous, *not* labor or necessity in themselves. When reading her, one question becomes acute: what, exactly, is the *animal laborans*? It is clear that this concept is *not* tantamount to a specific group of people. *In what sense* does *animal laborans* pose a threat to the public sphere and the transformation of agents into functionaries; *in what sense* is this connected with necessity? It is here that her metaphors (are they metaphors?) about the voracious life process lead astray.

Read charitably, Arendt can be said to attend to a crucial question, namely the way people are rendered helpless, unable to see themselves as responsible for the future (Pitkin 2000, 192). I would even say that paradoxically, here Arendt excels in her critical use of concepts. But I would also agree with Pitkin that these tensions are symptomatic of problems within many kinds of political theory: theorists are often so enchanted by a certain way of talking and describing that they “depict human beings as helpless just when these theorists want to stress agency and freedom” (2000, 6). Several of the following chapters will highlight this inclination among theorists. Next, I will turn to what Arendt has to say about the institutional side of such helplessness.

## 1.5 Fabrication and durability

Arendt’s critical concept of alienation differs from the views in which ‘alienation’ primarily designates relations to work. She maintains that human beings have become alienated from the *world*. For her, the world is a shared human place. One of the most intriguing aspects of Arendt’s conception of the world as a shared realm is her conjecture that the world brings people together but “prevents our falling all over each other, so to speak” (1998, 52). For her, ‘world’ implies a certain level of distance between people; I take it that she means that the world functions as a sort of *mediation*.

The term ‘public’ signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it. This world, however, is not identical with the earth or with nature, as the limited space for the movement of men and the general condition of organic life. It is related, rather, to the human artifice, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together (1998, 52).



When the concept of world appears in Arendt's text, it is usually *not* the earth, or nature, she has in mind. One way of explaining the rather elusive concept would be to say that it refers to care for shared matters – the world is *between* people and it is constituted by its being shared. World alienation signifies loss or withdrawal from relations, both to other people and to the material world of produced things and the world of institutions. Arendt claims that the ultimate expression of this withdrawal is a preoccupation with or a fixation on life itself, a preoccupation with consumption and introspection. At the core is a critique of consumer society, a society that devours the world (1998, 307-12). Arendt's analysis resembles classical notions of alienation (cf. Schacht 1970) in one important respect: she talks about atomization and the loss of community, and she also writes about people having withdrawn into an inner, private sphere that thwarts a common or shared sphere of meaning – the inner becomes disconnected from everything else. Like other writers of the same period (Whyte 1957, Canetti 1984, Adorno 2001), she criticizes *mass society*. What makes her analysis exceptional is that the target is *both* competitive individualism *and* collectivism. Arendt is one of few philosophers who view collectivity and individualism as two sides of the same coin.<sup>16</sup>

Arendt is mainly preoccupied with one aspect when she talks about work: durability.<sup>17</sup> The world (in her sense) presupposes permanence and stability, and that is what work offers: things (and what she calls 'the thing-character' of the

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<sup>16</sup> Heidegger's approach (1996) exhibits a similar approach to individualism and collectivity.

<sup>17</sup> In this emphasis on durability, stability and the world as 'a point of reference' that we have in common, one may trace a leaning towards conservative thinking (she often talks about 'losing contact'). However, she is a complex thinker for whom the ideal about stability stands in relation to what she says about the new, an open future.

world) are the cornerstones of durability. Durability stands in contrast to the futility and circularity of labor, but also to the openness and unpredictable character of action. She argues that work contributes not to the sphere of natural needs, but to an artificial world, a man-made world: unlike nature, the artificial world is intersubjective, shared and durable (1998, 137-8). As I will explain, I think her emphasis on durability can be read as a historically situated reaction. Nonetheless, the *fundamental contrasts* Arendt employs (the political and the conditions of politics) remain problematic, and her concept of durability reveals those problems.

Viewed as part of the world, the products of work – and not the products of labor – guarantee the permanence and durability without which a world would not be possible at all. It is within this world of durable things that we find the consumer goods through which life assures the means of its own survival. Needed by our bodies and produced by its laboring, but without stability of their own, these things for incessant consumption appear and disappear in an environment of things that are not consumed but used, and to which, as we use them, we become used and accustomed (1998, 94).

It is tempting to assume that Arendt sketches two different forms of activities, work and labor, under which any type of job could be sorted. At best (as I said: tensions abound), her concepts seem to be instruments for illustrating what she sees as a worrying tendency – the erosion of the public sphere.<sup>18</sup> She remarks, for example, that from a certain perspective, the

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<sup>18</sup> A side of her thinking hard to dismiss as irrelevant for her project is her attempt to dig out primordial concepts purged of the confusion of modernity, a task which for her is related to treasuring the fragments of the past that make us look at our own world with new eyes so as to come to terms with the brokenness of the present. However, Arendt strongly distances herself from the idea that we have *direct access* to the tradition. For a discussion of this aspect, cf. D'Entrèves 1993, 31-3.

difference between the baker and the table maker is a matter of degrees, they both 'make'. From another perspective, if we look at the world of things, these activities are different – the table maker contributes to a world of durability (1998, 94). What does she then consider 'making' to be? Does a person who installs elevators in houses 'make' or does s/he contribute to consumption? Does an expert on jurisprudence 'make' in the sense of bringing about institutional changes? Does a plumber 'make' or does s/he merely restore the world of things? Yet, her approach does not invite a reading according to which 'labor', 'work' and 'action' can be easily elucidated with real-life examples of specific activities, so that for all concrete tasks, we could decide whether they are 'labor' or 'work' in Arendt's sense. One has to look at how she characterizes the *aspect* of 'work', which, for her, is a historically changing sphere that seems to have an ontological core: durability.

I will now go into the details of Arendt's *homo faber*. In the book, work is described as being directed at a result, a product that has another type of life-cycle than what she conceives as the mere consumption product. She considers 'work' to be the realization of a model, a project that goes from idea to the alteration of physical stuff. The focus is on physical products but the concept of work seems to have a wider meaning as progress from idea to actualization. In contrast to labor, the working process has a specific end, a point where it ends (1998, 140; 143). The craftsman exerts control over the process and its goals. Despite all this, not even *homo faber* is actively engaged in a shared world. In work, there is specialization and knowledge, but it is a solitary project, even though this lack of mutuality is not the same as in labor. Arendt paints an image of the laborer as always alone in his labor, alone with necessity: labor "is an activity in which man is neither together with the world nor with other people, but alone with his body,

facing the naked necessity to keep himself alive" (1998, 212). The seclusion of the craftsman is different. S/he needs peace and quiet; work is creative solitude rather than the community of medieval craftsmen. It is only through trade and the circulation of commodities that *homo faber* comes into contact with other people (1998, 160-4).

At the same time Arendt conceives of work as the *presupposition* of political action – work in the sense of production of world is a guarantee of shared, intersubjective experience. When she makes this point, ‘work’ seems to be more than production of physical things; the concept seems to encompass traditions, laws and institutions (1998, 95, 137, 173, 191). This is far from clear, however: in some sections, she literally *rejects* the idea that institutions could be thought of as ‘made’. Perhaps she means that institutions are not ‘made’ by particular human beings. In the following quote Arendt dismisses the idea that the realm of action could exist in isolation. Such isolation brings with it a dangerous idealization of making:

This popular belief in a ‘strong man’ who, isolated against others, owes his strength to his being alone is either sheer superstition, based on the delusion that we can “make” something in the realm of human affairs – “make” institutions or laws, for instance, as we make tables and chairs, or make men “better” or “worse” – or it is conscious despair of all action, political and non-political, coupled with the utopian hope that it may be possible to treat men as one treats other “material” (1998, 188).

The fear Arendt seems to harbor, besides the fear of an idealization of ‘strong men’, is that politics is rendered futile, that it ends up being mere words or a series of futile changes. This seems to lead her to say that politics needs a basis or a supportive structure that stabilizes it, renders it into a shared reality (cf. 1998, 173). This is the point where durability enters

the picture: work creates a possibility or space for politics in its creation of durability, a counterweight to futility of labor and action and what she sees as the deeply *unpredictable* character of politics.

For my own part, I would stress that very *different* distinctions as to how the working activity is related to society are constantly made. The terms shaping the discussion reflect people's understanding of certain forms of work and it also brings various conceptions of *society* to the surface. Let me take a few examples. (1) It is often said that society needs care workers, not computer programmers. This assertion can be made as a remark about supply/demand of labor power, but it can also exhibit a worry about primary needs being neglected in a world where work is defined in terms of wage labor, which leads to situations in which some tasks are recognized as important, but nobody are willing to pay for them being done. (2) The need for successful companies that secure a higher rate of export is frequently appealed to so that the 'interests' of society appear to be self-evident: society must support these companies. In this case, 'society' boils down to what Arendt describes as a reduction to *one interest*; society, economy and work are seen as seamlessly knit together in the project of maintenance and expansion. (3) In a crisis situation, basic infrastructure can be said to hold society together. We can imagine such a reminder about what holds society together after a hurricane where central parts of the infrastructure have broken down and reparation work is underway: to talk about society and work in this context may highlight a sense of solidarity and care for the victims of the situation. What I think such examples as these three reveal is that there is no *given* level on which to talk about work and society: the problem is often that it seems *all too clear* – and here I agree with Arendt – what the interest of 'society' is. This theme runs through the thesis.

In what way is erecting a human world of permanence different from sustaining the life process? We already know how Arendt thinks about life processes. Like Aristotle (*Politics*, 1253b23), Arendt would say that both labor and work are necessary for the existence of politics. Aristotle talks about “a certain minimum supply of the necessities” – this is the notorious passage in which he talks about *animate* and *inanimate* tools. One should note that when he is talking about this minimum, he is not talking about what is a minimum of necessities for the *slaves*. For Arendt it is important to *separate* making from acting, but it is just as important to separate making from laboring. Again, she criticizes the transformation of work into labor (even though she also rejects the tendency to give what is essentially labor the status of productive work, as we saw in her discussion of Marx). Labor is thus not only threatening to swallow up the realm of politics, but also the realm of making.

In other words, *homo faber*, the toolmaker, invented tools and implements in order to erect a world, not – at least, not primarily – to help the human life process (1998, 151).

The distinction between work and labor is that work is a unique procedure of making, whereas labor is recurring, reproduction of life (1998, 94). Arendt asserts that work is a presupposition of politics in a *different* way than labor is, even though labor, too, is a part of the human condition. The world produced by work is a frame that makes life *more* than a biological process: work is culture- and civilization-building, a frame for politics. We are born into a world that pre-exists, a world of things and institutions. She is of course not the only philosopher to have defined the character of a specifically unique life surrounding for humans. Kosik (1976) is another thinker whose ontological view on work stresses its aspect of humanizing nature. Nonetheless, a troubling element of

Arendt's argument is that the world of familiarity and durability figures only as a *background condition*. Taking into account that *The Human Condition*, along with other of her books and essays, express an outrage against what she perceives as a functionalized, bureaucratic form of life this might not be that surprising, but even if that intelligibility is appreciated, what I see as a major flaw in Arendt's thinking is the way her thinking builds on the idea that life can be divided into *background structures* and the *core* of the human life.

To expand on what strikes me as historically situated experiences that can help us read Arendt: the preoccupation with permanence and durability may seem idiosyncratic, but can – beyond what I have said about politics and institutions – be explained in terms of Arendt's worry about subjectivism, that the human world shrinks to consumption and subsistence, where the horizon of common affairs has been put to the side (cf. 1998, 141, 172-3). For her, 'subjective' is synonymous with a lack of plurality (intersubjectivity): the subjective is deprived and insulated but thinks of itself as self-sufficient and autonomous. It is important for her that work produces a world that is *not* subjective. One may not agree with the structure of the distinction between work and labor, but when work is portrayed like this, it is more intelligible why Arendt considers the transformation of work into labor such a threat – a world we share becomes a private world, a world in which jobholders are enclosed in a process that has no purpose other than functioning: making is reduced to repetitive, expansive production aimed at repetitive, expansive consumption. I think the link she perceives between privatization and subsistence is basically sound if 'subsistence' is understood as a *critical* concept – i.e. what *role* does 'subsistence' play when it is an aspect of privatization or bureaucratization? – rather than an anti-political category that

poses survival as a necessary but essentially static dimension of life.

What does it mean that the horizon of common affairs has been put to the side? Arendt claims that a human world contains concepts of the new, the better and the suitable (cf. 1998, 97; 151-3). She also writes that the common world ends “when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective” (1998, 58). In my opinion, the stress in these sections lies not primarily on permanence or durability but rather on Arendt’s indictment of the consumer society. The expansion of the laboring society is worrisome, she argues, because our daily existence is dominated by futility, expansion and waste (1998, 134).<sup>19</sup>

The idea can be developed by looking at images of economy as endless ‘production’ of profits, an endless process of growth. There is no substance in this prospect: it contains no ideas about the good, the useful and so on. Such conceptions of economy revolve exclusively around expansion or obstacles to expansion; the aspect of usefulness, beauty or goodness is put to the side. This is one of the instances when Arendt’s argument highlights tensions in our own lives: she locates the damaging effects of a reduction of life and human togetherness. She helps us see the fatality of purposes being bracketed. In the next chapter, we will see André Gorz’s version of a very similar argument.

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<sup>19</sup> Arendt’s concept of futility easily gives rise to confused dichotomized thinking. If human existence is not to be futile, and if immortality is no longer part of our understanding (as she claims), then we must stick to some sort of *durability*. I don’t see what leads Arendt to worry so much about *futility*. What exactly is the *threat* she worries about when she talks about the risk of human communities transforming into futile labor? Should durability be accepted as a counterweight?



## 1.6 The ambiguity of the worker

As we saw, Arendt's relation to stable institutions is ambiguous. She also ascribes an ambiguous role to the *worker*. Just as the laborer appears both in negative and positive terms, the worker is an equally two-sided figure. Arendt's worker is a non-political figure as she regards the political as not being concerned with productive efficiency (1998, 208). The risk when politics is seen from the point of view of productivity is a form of nihilism, where society and history are perceived as a product of making, an idea she attributes to Marx: we *make* our history (cf. Arendt 2006a). Nihilism here means that all differences are eliminated because of the erosion of the political realm, and in its stead we have what seems to be a limitless capacity of human activity, a world of endless possibilities – anything is possible! – but according to Arendt, this is activity in an impoverished sense, in the form of power and making.

In order to illuminate why *homo faber* appears as an ambiguous figure, we need to look at the danger Arendt sees in means-end rationality – a rationality that tolerates no appreciation for something as valuable in itself. *Homo faber* is a goal-oriented utilitarian and Arendt's worry is that usefulness has acquired the dignity of meaningfulness so that meaning is reduced to means and ends. “[In] a strictly utilitarian world, all ends are bound to be of short duration and to be transformed into means for further ends.” (1998, 154) She writes:

The issue at stake is, of course, not instrumentality, the use of means to achieve an end, as such, but rather the generalization of the fabrication experience in which usefulness and utility are established as the ultimate standards for life and the world of men. This generalization is inherent in the activity of *homo faber* because the experience of means and end, as it is present in

fabrication, does not disappear with the finished product but is extended to its ultimate destination, which is to serve as a use object (1998, 157, cf. 229).

As we saw, for Arendt a human world always exists in a relation of tensions as it is both connected *with* nature and at the same time considered to *dominate* nature. This is one of the key tensions in her thinking. What is puzzling is that she embarks on a critique of *artificiality* - that one does not trust anything that one has not made oneself, a form of hyper-scientific or engineering attitude. The philosophical trajectory into which this critique is fitted is the expansion of (quasi)*nature*, the realm of necessity that needs to be counterbalanced by work. Work in the form of generalized instrumentality that treats the world as an object to mold is thus a threat against the world as dangerous as the expansion of (quasi)*nature*. Somehow, these two aspects, the expansion of *homo faber* and the expansion of necessity, seem to crystallize in Arendt's concept of the social, a strange in-between that expresses alienation from the human condition. This re-introduces Pitkin's question: what is it that is threatening the political?<sup>20</sup>

One way to interpret Arendt is that she spells out a *role* making comes to play in our thinking when mastery is understood as an unquestionable right to exploit and to treat whatever is perceived as an obstacle or a means as worthless material to shape and mold. Arendt paints the contours of how making and violence go together in the instrumental project of shaping a world of objects (cf. Arendt 1998, 139-40). One such dangerous role is the idea that through work, the

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<sup>20</sup> As D'Entrèves notes, it is not only nature that has grown in a worrisome way. Also artificiality is a threat in the sense that instead of 'real' necessity, we have a man-made condition of expanding science and technology where it is ever harder to discern what is necessary (1993, 51-53).

world can become *anything* (an idea she hints at in her writing on totalitarianism) – the world can be shaped in accordance with the idea we have in our heads. The architect Howard Roark in Ayn Rand’s novel *The Fountainhead* (1949) is an example of this form of thinking in which the world becomes a mere object of one grand human’s molding. Roark is a rugged individualist who takes the core of his profession to be to hold on to the Idea; the architect is to be a ‘prime mover’. The most dangerous thing is to compromise one’s singular vision. He loathes what he sees as the modern, populist style of buildings where classicist elements are inserted for frills. He forms the image of the pure, perfect building. When the real, tangible building does not correspond to his ideas, due to terrible and populist scheming, he unhesitatingly builds a bomb and destroys the faulty creation that did not live up to the idea. Here, making is a solitary and violent process of molding. However, Roark cares little for what Arendt sees as fundamental for the world created by the *homo faber*: use. In the novel, making boils down to fierce will-power. The way the novel contrasts individualism and collectivism also evokes another danger with ‘making’, that it leans on individualism in a way that has no love or care for differences between people, that all it sees is a world which needs to be worked on - which for example is expressed precisely in Roark’s contemptuous attitude to other people as mere pawns or anonymous instances of the mass.

Another example of the destructive role of *homo faber*, the ruthless rule of fabrication, would be the idea that society itself, through work in the form of thorough and principled administration, can be methodically *constructed*. This idea about society as a human, engineered construction is the opposite pole of Arendt’s own concept of the political, where plurality, free development of differences, stand at the fore. As I’ve already noted, Arendt worries that this free development

of differences is always non-productive and frail, and therefore easily threatened by necessity or the ideal of engineering. Plurality is seen as a constitutive dimension of what she calls action: for her, frailty here is *good*, and so is the non-productive character of action.

Nonetheless, institutional stability is needed to some extent, otherwise politics would become free-floating, but when the political itself takes on the character of construction, strength or stability, then something has gone awry. One of Arendt's insights is that an aspect of the frailty of politics is precisely that it easily *turns* into an ideal about predictable making and that even though a formal and administrative side of institutions is inevitable and even good, it is wrong to think of institutions from the point of view of making in the sense that politics would have a solid basis – even though she, as we saw, emphasizes that politics needs a stable surrounding. The most dangerous wish of all is the wish that a 'strong man' will clean up and re-arrange the disorderly sphere of politics. This view of the 'strong man' is, I think, connected with a distrust of politics, the belief that mostly, politics amounts to idle talk and that something much more robust and predictable should take its place. Such mistrust of politics typically holds up a peculiar ideal of 'usefulness' (1998, 157; 188; 191; 208). This elaboration of the destructive role of work is connected with a dialectic relation Arendt astutely registers between collectivity and individualism. When society itself is seen as a process to be governed, society and individuality are split up, so that the latter becomes subjective, but not *intersubjective*. Arendt acknowledges, and I side with her, that this is not the only way in which we are individuals; this is individuality reduced to conformity or privatized experience. *The Human Condition* evokes a world drained of real possibilities: in a society of process-thinking, isolation and conformity, *anything* is possible and it is this 'anything' that is the problem. Arendt

argues that this is true for totalitarian societies as well as societies dominated by consumption and labor.

## 1.7 Politics

Arendt seems to consider action and politics as largely synonymous concepts, both of which she focuses on through the temporal aspect of initiative and hope. Her concept of the political contains two main aspects. The first is self-expression, and the second is initiative, founding, creating something new (cf. 1998, 176-7). For my own part, I find the second dimension more intelligible, especially in light of her critique of 'the social' and, as we saw and will see further, her rejection of politics as control and administration. However, she sees a tension between two aspects of politics, politics as *initiative* (beginning something new) and politics as *achievement* (as a result, as focused action aiming at a specific goal) (1998, 189). The overall characterization of politics in *The Human Condition* is that it is no more than human togetherness, human communication; politics has no other foundation than this (1998, 199). In a time when politics is written off as toothless and powerless – politics seems to be unable to deal with the big questions, global injustice and ecological destruction – Arendt's attempt to formulate the difference between politics and administration is highly relevant (cf. Pitkin 2000). Even though the defiant assertion that can be found in her books and essays that economic concerns do not belong in the realm of politics might sound outright crazy, the patient reader should try to see what she has in mind.

Let's start with a statement that on the face of it seems outrageous: the aim of politics is not to alleviate suffering. Why would she advance a preposterous idea like that? One of the images that Arendt attacks is the idea that politics is mainly about the distribution of resources and accumulation

of wealth (1998, 69). In this sense, her thinking is situated very far from the type of political philosophy in which the main field of disagreement is that between distribution and entitlement. Both of these tenets play an extremely prominent part in contemporary political philosophy – rights and resources being the two major dimensions, and models of justice being the main topic of a certain form of widespread political philosophy (Rawls 1973, Walzer 1983). I will try to shed light on Arendt's hostility against politics as a form of household economy, politics as the administration of society. Here one can see, I think, how her critique of labor and work goes together but the tensions I have noted in her concepts of nature and necessity remain.

When labor becomes the concern of politics, Arendt writes, it is based on the distorted image that politics is an expanded household, the resources of which are managed by political bodies (1998, 28-33). It is here that her concept of the *social* enters the scene. The realm of the social blurs the boundaries between the common world and the maintenance of life. When private interests – along with the market – emerge in the public sphere, and when society is assumed to be held together by one common interest, *society* appears, and with the social comes conformism (1998, 35-41). Society, in this sense is

[the] form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance (Arendt 1998, 46).

A central aim in Arendt's political philosophy is thus to specify, against the predominant ideas, what genuinely belongs to the sphere of politics and what can be seen as pre-political elements which are now, falsely, seen as political. As we have seen, she insists that politics is not based on force or violence: these modes of social being are, she says, pre-political (cf. Arendt 1998, 31, 200-2). The main point seems to

be a rejection of the image of politics as administrative power that molds society in accordance with a specific idea, aiming at a specific result. Social engineering is the classical image of the government of human life. Work, but also health and leisure, are thought of as forms that need to be molded by detailed and overarching policies. Rational principles are extolled as the foundation of society, so that human needs and interaction become a process to be rationally governed. The goal of politics is perceived to be productivity. This ideal can also be traced in present political debates: if it is to be worthwhile at all, politics in all shapes and forms must be able to maintain the process of production and consumption. Jobs are created, companies are growing, the inflation rate is kept down and citizens assist the economy by being good consumers and efficient jobholders. From that perspective, politics is judged according to how well it preserves and expands the societal machinery.

In *The Human Condition*, the promise of politics concerns the relation between people, not a maximization of resources or an engineering of distribution. As I said, Arendt maintains that imagining politics as order or solidity is to fall prey to the temptation of seeing the political itself through the lens of mastery and rule (1998, 220-2). An instrumental idea of politics (e.g. a government has the monopoly to rule over its subjects) is fiercely debunked. Arendt's critique of administration – what she grasps as the rule of nobody – is thus both an assessment of a role work comes to have, and a feature of what she calls the social. Richard Bernstein (1986, 242) suggests that Arendt saw a culmination of this sphere in the welfare state. As I said, the critique of labor and work *coincide* at this point, as administration in her sense manifests both an expansion of necessity but also the transformation of politics into ruling and government.

The problem is that Arendt is so worried about the instrumentalization of politics that what she says about politics risks ending up as a rather formal description of politics: she spells out the boundaries of politics, but leaves open what the content could be. Nonetheless, the reason why Arendt talks about politics in this way should be acknowledged. The most important thing for her is that politics (in opposition to labor) has the ability to create something new. She does not discuss freedom as sovereignty or choice. For her, freedom has to do with founding, initiative, a sense of togetherness:

If it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same, then indeed no man could be free, because sovereignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contradictory to the very condition of plurality (cf. Arendt 1998, 234; Pitkin 1998, 147).

The political is nothing without plurality – this is her important main contention about the political. In politics, for Arendt, differences are expressed in evolving forms of human communities, rather than stemming from for example individual preferences on which overarching policies with the aim of optimizing society could be based. For this reason, she is critical of politics being reduced to necessity, which one can here view as tantamount to ‘survival’ or ‘maintenance’. Necessity makes it look as if there are no challenging differences, no genuine deliberation, just a society to maintain and citizens to govern. In this image of politics, there is no space for what Arendt considers to be most important, politics as initiative, deliberation and dialogue. So where does that take us and how does it stand in relation to the other elements of her thinking?

Appealing to classical thinkers like Aristotle, the political is defined as the freedom *from* necessity. The political in



Arendt's sense starts with an irreducible sense in which we are different from each other, whereas she, as we have seen, construes 'labor' as being based on sameness and collectivity. She even explicitly labels it as *anti*-political. The context is a discussion about the labor movement. Arendt ventures into an argument in which she explains that all forms of labor communities build on sameness and sociality; the rhythm of labor creates such a sameness, a smooth functioning in which individuality does not matter.

This unitedness of many into one is basically anti-political; it is the very opposite of the togetherness prevailing in political or commercial communities [...] (1998, 213).

Instead of the institutional level, or the level of administrative policies for the benefit of all, she writes about what takes place between people, how a concern *evolves* between people and how people's engagement is born within a setting in which people have different views on things, different commitments. In the best case this engagement implies a kind of openness and hope so that people place their trust in the possibility of engaging with others. The connection between trust and the political is important. Openness excludes control, and this makes it even more intelligible why she is mistrustful of the idea that politics should be predictable. We don't exert control over the meaning of our actions.<sup>21</sup>

Arendt is right that politics can be perverted into necessity so that all forms of openness in relation to the future are closed down and politics becomes optimization and maximization, rather than the world being a place in which

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<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Arendt makes a parallel between labor and action in the sense that they both lack durability. The difference seems to be that there is nothing in labor that *could* be preserved (labor is connected with consumption), whereas politics in its authentic sense leaves traces for example in storytelling, laws or in institutions.

there is a place for – but also trust in – critical evaluations of fundamental ways of living together. In this sense, it is *not* surprising that she presupposes a tension between economics on the one hand, and politics on the other; this is a role economics has come to have.<sup>22</sup>

However, I would argue that Arendt is unequivocally *wrong* in maintaining that, *if* that is what she does, labor is inherently un-free, so that *every* contact between the political and ‘the sphere of labor’ leads to an erosion of the political realm. One of the most grotesque and disconcerting examples of such a view is Arendt’s claim that the failure of the French revolution was due to its being driven by what she calls the ‘social question’, a public recognition of the need to abolish poverty, its entanglement in laboring people’s lives and their claims to justice. Poverty is said to implicate an immediate dependency on the life process. When the multitude of the poor, imprisoned within necessity in this way, rises up as a revolutionary brigade, disaster and violence ensue. Arendt puts it as crudely as this: “When they appeared on the scene of politics, necessity appeared with them [...]”. (cf. 2006c 51-3, Pitkin 2000, 220-3). The dark undercurrent of this and similar passages is that the dream of the poor, ‘driven by the needs of their bodies’, is *inevitably* a one-dimensional craving for abundance and release from pain, the destructive side of which is also pointed out in *The Human Condition*. There, she writes a propos the utopia of leisure:

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<sup>22</sup> Pitkin suggests that it is not economics in itself that is pre-political. When economics is about fundamental forms of human organization it is important to acknowledge the political nature of economic decisions. Arendt herself sometimes seems to dismiss a certain attitude towards economics as quasi-political, rather than economy itself: the task would then be to spell out what this attitude is, but this is where Arendt’s approach falls short (cf. Arendt 1998, 185, Pitkin 2000, 179-80).

The ideal is not new; it was clearly indicated in the unquestioned assumption of classical political economy that the ultimate good of the *vita activa* is growing wealth, abundance, and the 'happiness of the greatest number.' And what else, finally, is this ideal of modern society but the age-old dream of the poor and destitute, which can have a charm of its own so long as it is a dream, but turns into a fool's paradise as soon as it is realized (1998, 132-3).

As I said in 1.4.2, one of the tantalizing questions haunting a reading of Arendt is what the *animal laborans* is a description of. Here, she does in fact write about "the age-old dream of the poor and destitute". Even though this is never spelled out, she seems to argue against the involvement of poor people in politics on the grounds that these people never know what true freedom is about. They are not fit for politics because all they dream of is abundance and a life released from pain. When the poor are let loose into the realm of politics, they drag the voracious appetites of necessity along with them. A more charitable reading would be that the claims of the poor are about the *presuppositions* of politics, what must be in place if the political is to flourish, and that politics does not *end* with for example the abolition of poverty. But to me, this is not what Arendt ultimately is saying; she seems to say that the demands of the poor are *anti-political*.

Even though the sections I quoted just now are unsettling, we also saw that the concept of the political has a complex role in Arendt's thinking. To take the example Arendt herself uses in a very good way: union struggles might play out in several ways. Her point is that the labor movement was once a truly political phenomenon. But she is eager to reassure us that this movement was *not* founded on a desire to re-organize labor or to abolish it. Without further descriptions of what once made the labor movement political, Arendt says that this was really a moment where laborers appeared in public (note that 'appear

in public' is her definition of what the political is) and instead of having the role of *animal laborans* (fighting for narrow economic interests), they "fought against society as a whole" (1998, 218-9). Arendt claims that labor unions were political in so far as they constituted a new form of public space (cf. 1998, 215-6; 219, Benhabib 1996, 142-5). For my own part I would say that of course, labor unions have often focused on struggles for interests in a narrow sense. Unions are encouraged to become integrated in the societal machinery so that their claims become more balanced and realistic: according to this view, to be a part of the machinery *is* to exert responsible power. This would be a case of integration into what Arendt calls 'society'. But it is also possible to imagine very different examples of union struggles that cannot exclusively be rendered in the language of interests.

In the documentary *Harlan County U.S.A* (1976, Direction: Barbara Kopple), a miner's union in eastern Kentucky is on strike. The wives of the miners have a prominent role on the picket line. Wages are a part of the issue, but also better working conditions, safety and fair treatment. After a while, the struggle, as the company threatens to introduce a no-strike clause and state troopers have been brought in to keep the road open for workers going to the mine, turns into a fight for the right to strike. Older members of the community recall the violent strikes of the thirties. What I think is important in the documentary is how the workers and their relatives' *own* version of the story come to the fore. The description of the strikers' activity is controversial, and the company representatives do all they can to keep up the image of greedy workers and illegitimate, violent action. One of the company bosses complains that this is not the behavior he expects from 'American women' – he refers to the women on the picket line. The perspective of the film is that of a struggling community, a context in which work does not constitute an isolated sphere.

To fight for the community, here, is not to fight for the sustenance of a social apparatus.

I would suggest that Arendt would not be able to see the *level* at which this kind of documentary operates. It works like a piece of testimony about the meaning of 'getting organized', and the testimony is rooted in a hope that future generations will also care and struggle for their jobs and their communities. This testimony does not allow an ontological distinction between different kinds of activities. Thus, a strict distinction between the political and the pre-political (or the political and the working activities) *cannot* be upheld. One could rather say, like the philosopher Richard Bernstein:

Issues or problems do not come labeled 'social', 'political', or even 'private'. Indeed, the question whether a problem is properly social (and therefore not worthy of public debate) or political is itself frequently the central political issue (Bernstein 1986, 252).

Bernstein claims, rightly I think, that (if this is her point) Arendt's distinction between the social and the political risks looking away from this sort of openness – and admittedly, I think Arendt herself at times recognizes this as well. After all, the categories of labor, work and politics are not labels of distinct activities but are instruments of a diagnosis of societal malaise. Bernstein notes that Arendt's own account contains many tensions when it comes to the idea that has shocked many readers, the idea I referred to above: liberation from necessity is pre-political. At times, she leaves room for the historical differences with regard to what the public sphere, the political, contains. However, Bernstein calls Arendt's approach to critical questions about this distinction *evasive*: she seems to hold the position that the public sphere is simply a sphere that contains questions that are *debated*. He observes that Arendt never seems to realize the context that surrounds debates: what is perceived as a *legitimate* debate, what is the

difference between obligations and *mere* debates? Rather than claiming that the public or political realm is constituted by debates, debates can be said to have their *own* social circumstances. Bernstein aptly remarks that the distinction between the social and the political when it operates in real contexts tends to rest on hidden political judgments about what is political and what is to remain social (he mentions the rejection of feminism as an example) (1986, 248-52). The reminder about the surrounding of political debates is apt when one looks at examples in our own society where some aspects of work are seen as political concerns, while others are regarded as concerns that should be dealt with only within the specific organization, and nowhere else. The distinction between the political and for example the merely technical often play an *ideological* role.

*Harlan County U.S.A* clearly contributes to a debate by defending union action. Like Bernstein, I would say that there is no clear-cut line where the political begins and ends, even though useful and not always ideological distinctions can be made in specific cases. The question whether union action is political in a *genuine* sense is itself *part* of a controversy. That Arendt is wary of defining what politics contains would therefore be a very promising start: politics is about our responsibility for the future. Her ideas about politics help us to conceive of some aspects of the political, especially politics as *resistance* and *change*. In my opinion, here it is intelligible to say, like she often does, that political agency has a revealing character – for example, that an act of civil disobedience may reveal that a regime or a law is illegitimate.

Arendt talks about politics in negative terms, rather than enumerating what she would consider the political to be. This is no mere lapse: she characterizes politics as renewal, struggles for the future and in this sense politics cannot ‘contain’ anything specific. This central point is not easily

squared with other things Arendt says. If politics is truly open in the sense that it concerns the fundamental ways in which people live together and if 'politics' refers to the establishment of new relations, then it would be very strange to set up absolute limits for *what* forms of living together would or would not be eligible for politics. As Bernstein says, such limits are a politically invested affair. There can be no *neutral* boundary. My point with the *Harlan County U.S.A* example was to show that a particular struggle reveals new sides of politics and – this is significant – new sides of work. What is striking in the film is that it shows the role family members play in the union's picket line as one aspect of an entire community being engaged in the degradation of the work that for most people offers a means of subsistence. This shows why Arendt's reduced perspective on subsistence – what I called her concept of sheer life - does not hold up to scrutiny. In the film, the strikers worry about basic features of their shared lives. 'Subsistence' here cannot be detached from concerns about what they want their community to be like. This example could remind us of how conflicts rooted in work often have the character of disagreement about *how* the conflict is to be characterized: stakes are articulated, questioned, re-articulated. It is even hard to imagine most strikes without this element of articulations about what is at stake for the workers, for the employers and for those whose daily existence the strike has an impact on.

So: on Arendt's account, human needs, labor/work and economy do not count as political concerns. What does the image of the political and the pre-political bring with it? As I said in 1.2, the questionable side of her thinking is that necessity is something to *master*, something to *surpass*, something to *demarcate*. It is time to look at what attitude comes to the fore in this idea about controlling necessity: what is shoved out of politics? In her book *Manhood and Politics*,

political theorist Wendy Brown argues that Arendt's contempt for the spaces where life is "created, reproduced and maintained" is typical of political theory.

A strange trait in Arendt's thinking is her eulogies about the failure of modern society to live up to the greatness of Greece 400 B.C. In the following passage, Arendt refers to the political experience in Plato's and Aristotle's times:

Without mastering the necessities of life in the household, neither life nor the 'good life' is possible, but politics is never for the sake of life. As far as the members of the polis are concerned, household life exists for the sake of the 'good life' (1998, 37).

It is here that life is contrasted with *mere* life, biological life – these are the necessities to master. A strict dividing line seems to be erected between the human, the political being, and the animal, the laboring animal. Historical examples have a dual role in Arendt's thinking. They shed light on a promising possibility, but the image of politics in early Greek antiquity also seems to function as a historical route to conceptual purity. Hanna Pitkin writes:

[The] ancient Greeks also import into Arendt's argument some problematic features she surely did not (consciously) intend to adopt: an agonistic, narcissistic, and misogynist striving for heroic glory [...] and a corresponding set of rigid, pejorative contrasts ranking Greek above barbarian, freeman above slave, public above private, and male above female. (Pitkin 2000, 148)

This inclination can thus be seen as unconscious, Pitkin argues, because Arendt explicitly says that labor/necessity *is* needed, it *is* a part of our life (ibid). For all the ambivalent remarks about poverty and necessity, it is very hard to think that Arendt really held the idea that some people are doomed



to a life outside politics.<sup>23</sup> Still, as Brown writes, some of what she writes about necessity seems to imply the idea that only some people count as being fully human; others are stuck in life, in necessity, in their bodies and their labor (Brown 1988, 24). Above all, this description latches on to Arendt's concept of 'natural relations' that are, to her, different from politically relevant relations: these natural relations are not eligible as *political* voices, voices constituted by what she calls plurality. Even though Arendt never explicitly said this, as far as I know, she never bothers to reject the idea of poverty as a, as it were, *technical* problem, that is, the idea that poor people can be helped by means of certain structures that somewhat unburden their daily existence, while their lives are still understood to be 'sheer life'. The covert attitude is that these poor people will remain poor. Politics is *aimed* at them, not representing them.

A certain image of the world struggles to keep itself pure, free from 'sheer life', but as we've seen, Arendt can't be said to have stood *entirely* behind that tendency. The problem is *not* that Aristotle and Arendt take insufficient notice of necessity and life – that their values are skewed. As Brown writes, the problem is the *dichotomy* they establish, hold on to and distil:

Rather, the problem lies in the extreme dichotomy established between a life of necessity and a life of freedom, between material existence and "fully human existence", between animal being and human being. When these various aspects of our existence and activities are institutionalized as oppositions and/or ordered hierarchically, the result is self-estrangement as well as estrangement from the context within which one lives (Brown 1988, 27).

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<sup>23</sup> For an extremely critical account of Arendt's tendencies to glorify the philosophical clarity of the Greek thinkers, cf. Wolin 2001, 62-69.

The major problem is Arendt's insistence that the life of necessity (even if this need not imply a direct reference to certain people) should be mastered, that is, *kept in its place*: hidden, out of sight. Above all: I am wary of the distinction between freedom and necessity. In philosophy about work a recurring idea is that freedom over necessity is legitimately won only by means of *domination* (cf. Arendt 1998, 83-4). That is, when one moves within the sphere of freedom, this presupposes that the sphere of necessity is kept in place.

But doesn't her worry about the expansion of necessity have something in them? If necessity is tantamount to the jobholder's society, keeping necessity in its place would mean to stress *other* sides of life than labor and consumption. As we will see next, this links Arendt to later critics of work.

## 1.8 The jobholder society

In one of the most shocking passages of *The Human Condition* (1998, 119), Arendt writes that slavery before modern times sprang from *the human condition itself*: life is always a burden for human beings, whose essence transcends sheer life, and slavery was consequently a form of technical solution. Slavery released the burden:

The fact that slavery and banishment into the household was, by and large, the social condition of all laborers prior to the modern age is primarily due to the human condition itself; life, which for all other animal species is the very essence of their being, becomes a burden to man because of his innate "repugnance to futility" (1998, 119).

This passage reeks of Aristotelian contempt. True life takes place in the agora, but human life is also a life of labor and necessity. She concedes that slavery was unjust and violent, but still insists that labor's rightful place is in the darkness "of

pain and necessity" (ibid).<sup>24</sup> As we saw, Arendt's overarching contention is that labor does not belong to the public life. Modern life is corrupted because there is no clear sense of the public. When she criticizes labor for colonizing the public sphere, it remains unclear what it is, more specifically, that she is critical *of*: market economy, division of labor, administration or civil society? The answer seems to be a combination of all of these modes of economic life that in her opinion contribute to a process of transformation in which work becomes labor and labor becomes a primary societal concern.<sup>25</sup> The crux of the matter seems to be a process of leveling:

The point is not that for the first time in history laborers were admitted and given equal rights in the public realm, but that we have almost succeeded in leveling all human activities to the common denominator of securing the necessities of life and providing for their abundance. Whatever we do, we are supposed to do for the sake of "making a living"; such is the verdict of society, and the number of people, especially in the professions, which might challenge it, has decreased rapidly (1998, 126-7).

Arendt writes that the laboring society *transforms* all activities into ways of making a living. Beyond this there are hobbies and play. All *serious* activities are interpreted as labor or "securing the necessities of life" (1998, 46; 126-8). These

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<sup>24</sup> In an earlier passage of *The Human Condition* she expresses the matter in a much more complex way, so that one can interpret her as saying that slavery was *not* a technical way of dealing with the human condition, but rather a way of *fleeing* from it, "to exclude labor from the condition of man's life" (1998, 84). And in yet another passage, she says that slavery during antiquity was not natural, it was man-made (1998, 112). In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt also writes about a system of slavery immersed in a futile attempt to *flee* the human condition (cf. 1968, on the Boers).

<sup>25</sup> When Arendt criticizes 'national economy', her critique is aimed at an entire *form of life*, rather than a very specific phenomenon; she does not criticize bureaucracy or market economy *as such*. In this way Arendt is conscious of historical change (cf. Pitkin 2000, 189).

remarks reflect her understanding of labor not as distinctive *types* of jobs but rather as a hegemonic form in which more and more activities are now seen to take part. In these passages and others, Arendt describes the changes labor goes through, how more and more activities are transformed into labor because of technological changes, but also because of perspectives on what is valuable. There is thus a historical dimension in how work or labor is *contrasted* with something else. The insight she offers is that the changes of work and labor are not to be understood as a neutral process. To render this insight in my own way: people react against what they see as destructive tendencies, and controversies tend to arise with regard to what work has become and what it should be.

Under the theoretical surface of Arendt's discussion about the transformation of work into labor ethical and political stakes can be discerned. One of the points she makes that has such implications is the claim that we can no longer take talk about jobs as subsistence – what she calls the jobholder society – at face value. Her argument seems precisely to be that a certain idea about the importance of work and labor takes society for granted in a way that makes the political disappear into bureaucratic agreement about our common life. 'Productivity' and expansion are neutralized and human life is drained of its *plural* forms. The consequence of such a society according to Arendt is that the dimension of shared life is impoverished. Other people are rendered into competitors or co-workers in the same expansive project, but that they have views on and reactions to things in their own right, is of no avail.

Arendt evokes what many other writers have discussed in terms of a system of consumption and production. Limits of abundance are intolerable. Consumption must be tied to collective processes in a way that transcends the needs of individuals: consumption must be attuned to capitalism's

craving for boundless circulation – overproduction is a grave manifestation of crisis. Houses, clothes and cars become products to consume, products that have a limited life cycle; these consumer goods are treated according to a logic of abundance. They are made like consumption products in the sense that they are produced to be worn out quickly and this is partly what is at stake in Arendt's worry about the transformation of work into labor. When consumption takes on this collective role, the problem of leisure will be the problem of keeping people *busy* in a way that fits the structural role of employment and consumption. Everything is sucked into what she calls the life process and there is a constant problem of keeping this process going (1998, 124-5; 131-2). I understand Arendt as saying that this is a situation – she uses the puzzling expression 'intensification of the life processes' to describe its fatality – in which we are no longer thinking about what we are doing. The implication, I take it, is that production and consumption become complementary functions upholding each other – the human is reduced to producer and consumer, so that the aim of production is consumption, and the aim of consumption is production. The individual's responsibility for society then boils down to two duties: to produce and to consume, while the collective task and the task of politics seem to be to resolve the equation of production, work and consumption. More is to be produced, and what is produced must be consumed; higher wages boost the economy, but inflation must be evaded at all costs.

A society like ours, she writes, could have minimized labor, the realm of necessity and the life processes (I take it), but this has not happened. We cling to the idea that labor and work are the most central element of human self-expression, that the core of human beings is the capacity to produce. She was critical of the trend of labor psychology in her own time and their idea that labor should be humanized, that all labor is

inherently respectable. Such ideas will only glorify labor, thereby reducing human life and falsely convincing us that labor can become something that, to her, *it can never be*: an expression of what we are as human being (1998, 149). Arendt's perspective helps us see how labor starts to appear as a collective form immune to critical evaluation. If labor becomes a collective form in this sense, we no longer have to be concerned with each other on a basic level. One has to fend for oneself. Labor, like consumption, becomes a form of collective or individual *flight* from the common. For Arendt, in such a society, it is not clear what liberation or emancipation would mean, even though such talk is always in the air and even though, as she points out, a minimization of labor is now *technically* possible. True freedom cannot start from minimization alone: shortening of time spent on laboring will not in itself erect a common world. Freedom is not synonymous with leisure. This takes her to what she perceives as a graver matter that I have already touched on: *animal laborans* does not know how to be free or what freedom is. For *animal laborans*, freedom from labor will mean "the private and essentially worldless activities – 'hobbies'" (1998 117-8; cf. 127-8; 132-3).

It is a society of laborers which is about to be liberated from the fetters of labor, and this society does no longer know of those other higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which this freedom would deserve to be won (1998, 5).

One can interpret this quote as aligning with Aristotelian notions of the higher life versus the life of reproduction, and I already pointed out how problematic that sort of hierarchy is, but it can also be read as an objection against a role labor and work has as a *compensation* for meaningfulness. A central strand that I think is more valuable than one may realize on first glance is the danger she sees in a society that despite its

easy and comfortable life thinks of itself mainly in the language of subsistence. Subsistence becomes an obsession that we cling to and here I think Pitkin's and Arendt's remarks about the powerlessness we bring upon ourselves – letting things happen – are illuminating. The intriguing (and not problematic) tensions manifested in *The Human Condition* are that on the one hand, contemporary society is obsessed with jobs and subsistence and hijacked by necessity. On the other hand, Arendt portrays a society in which people lead a comfortable life in such a way that they can't think clearly even about necessity: it has become harder to acknowledge its role:

The easier that life has become in a consumers' or laborers' society, the more difficult it will be to remain aware of the urges of necessity by which it is driven, even when pain and effort, the outward manifestation of necessity, are hardly noticeable at all (1998, 135).

As we saw, Arendt is not satisfied with the aim of 'liberation' from work: she holds that this ideal is permeated by illusions and false hopes and that it co-exists uneasily with an idealization of work and a dangerous utopia of necessity itself being finally overcome. Her pessimistic conclusion is that we no longer know how to become free. One account Arendt offers is that life has become too easy, life seems comfortable, but this has alienated us both from necessity and from the political dimensions of shared life. Private comfort (where we think of ourselves as independent) may be the utopia of a liberal account of freedom, but the ideal of abundance and "happiness of the greatest number" could also be perceived as a nightmarish tendency such that, if it became *too real*, our lives would be quite horrible (1998, 133). This is a society dazzled by growth, "caught in the smooth functioning of a never-ending process". Above, I gave an outline of the

potential gruesome implications of the contention that some people ruled by necessity can only settle for a life of comfort. I suppose she *tries* to say that this societal state of comfort makes the distinction between necessity and freedom inconspicuous, that it makes us nurse a number of illusions – we are no longer able to think straight about necessity. Economy is transformed into waste economy and one worries about losing one’s job without being able to think about what the job is needed *for*. As we will see in the next chapters, this view is shared by work critics like Marcuse, Gorz and Weeks.

## 1.9 Concluding words

It is not entirely true that Arendt considers only politics to be a worthy activity. In a short but significant passage, she points out that labor is a guarantee for vitality; in laboring, we stand in contact with life itself. She paints a contrast between vitality and real necessity, and a quasi-necessity or a flight from necessity that turns humans into vegetative consumers (1998, 120). For this reason, labor cannot be subtracted from human life altogether without something essential being lost. Arendt insists that the sphere of necessity has its vital place in human life and it is important that it is *not* broadened or elevated as the core of human life. She agrees with Aristotle in so far as seeing labor as valuable most of all for creating a space for other worthy activities: acting and thinking. Her political project resembles later critical writers’ conceptualizations of a space *beyond* a society based on wage labor along with conceptualizations of the political distinguished from politics as administration of resources.

As we saw, Arendt claims that we will never be liberated from the burden of labor. The main tenet of her argument is nonetheless that we now indulge in labor as necessity to the extent that the space for the political is about to disappear.



Society is understood to be driven by a set of law-like regularities to which politics must submit. Arendt's description of the jobholder society is linked to that broader concern. According to her, labor is situated in the kingdom of necessity but this kingdom has usurped society itself. If we read her concept of necessity in a critical, rather than an ontological sense, her question is highly relevant, as it challenges a pattern of thinking in which work and labor (to stick to Arendt's concepts) are seen as an ever-changing force tied to other forces (economy, societal interests) so that the goal of politics is to manipulate and control these 'forces'.

The problem is, however, that Arendt herself is prone to describe what she calls labor as a force that invaded human life. As Pitkin says, this feature of Arendt's thinking makes it unclear in which sense we have brought this jobholder society on ourselves, in which sense we are responsible for maintaining it. Necessity, then, has many roles in the book. Arendt claims that we are *bound* by it. This is a reminder both about the presupposition of politics and work, but also the dangerous threats posed against them. In other words, she wants us to grasp the limits both of necessity and of the sphere of action. This double role creates a troublesome tension when her analysis of what it is that threatens politics presupposes the view that necessity *binds* us and that human life is subjected to the urgency of life itself – necessity is neutralized.

This is, to my mind, one of the major tensions in her thinking. I would insist that one of the strengths in her philosophy that has everything to do with the theme with which I am grappling – the neutralization and moralization of work – is the way Arendt struggles to present an alternative to a world of privatization and conceptions of society in which activity is suspended, a world in which society is a force to perpetuate. This description resonates with how growth,

welfare and national policies are commonly understood: the aim is to perpetuate, maximize and sustain.

Arendt asserts that labor, life-affirming toil, and work, world-making, should not be politicized. If one follows a certain strand in her writings, economic concerns appear as a technical problem that is not fit for politics in her special rendering of the word – even though she would of course agree that it is a central dimension of politics as it is mostly understood, as government. According to her, the social and the political must not be conflated. As I tried to show throughout this chapter, other dimensions of her thought take us in other directions. Paradoxically, her analysis actually encourages us to think hard about what role necessity and the plural forms of working activities have in human life. Remember that Arendt sets out to *criticize* how necessity has colonized the way human beings live together, and recall her critique of the relation between consumption and subjectivism. When read this way, Arendt wants to call us back to responsibility, engagement, questioning: she is after all one of the few political philosophers who attend to the openness of the future. What do we imagine when we imagine human activities independent of a tightly knit unity of production and consumption? This is what many later critical writers have asked: if we are not to imagine that all forms of work are necessary simply in their capacity of value-creation, then how *are* we to think about necessity and in what way does this challenge our notions of human and common life? (Gorz 1989, Marcuse 1968, *Krisis Manifesto* 1999) In other words: Arendt's thinking *could* open up for a critical assessment of the relation between necessity, needs and society. What do people work *for*, what type of world does people's work create, reproduce, or destroy?

A central aim was to think through Arendt's insistence that labor is the naturally fertile and endless process of life itself,

while work produces a world of permanence and familiarity. Another distinction I wanted to scrutinize was that between the social and the political. We saw that her argument rests on a contrast between reproduction and world-building activities, along with the expressive realm of politics.

Why is this line of thought at all noteworthy? The reason is this: it is not easy to think clearly about necessity when the reigning common sense is that expansion of jobs and consumption is an ineluctable necessity, the condition of society and welfare. Secondly, in Arendt's writings one can also detect an evaluative attitude that props up already existing hierarchies of values where certain forms of labor/work are seen as less important or valuable, even though it is acknowledged that *someone* has to perform these tasks. In this hierarchical setting, the image of labor that yields no permanent results appears. To articulate this image with Arendt's vocabulary: some forms of labor support the basic functions of life. They need to be done, somehow, by someone because of the very tangible, but dark and private world of basic human needs. One can speak about a nexus of images of labor, necessity and nature here that often take the form of a defense of *work* in contrast to *labor* and here we see Arendt's shadowy distinction at play in common rhetorical patters: the lives of creative people should not be consumed by basal chores; such tasks can be performed by others so that these people have enough time to dedicate their lives to their important work. Labor is futile reproduction, while productive work contributes to the progress of humanity or the creative development of the individual. Thus, the question one may want to fire at Arendt's argument is this: do we really want to agree that there is a world of acting, supported by a world of making, on the one hand, and a private and closed world of life processes and needs, on the other hand? Like Wendy Brown one can ask what such a distinction leads to,

what kind of hierarchies it re-produces: what does it make us see and what does it make us *look away from*?

The question articulated in *The Human Condition* is one that can't be sidestepped: if necessity is described as a burden, what would it mean to be free from this burden? One of the things Arendt can teach us is that there are many ways to *deceive* oneself about necessity or about liberation from it. She writes that a worrying sign of the predominance of *animal laborans* is that the need for labor has lessened due to mechanization and innovations in the division of labor, but this is a truth which we won't take to heart. We live in a labor society in which there is not enough labor to make people satisfied, Arendt gloomily writes (1998, 134). Ultimately, her point is that *no* laboring society could answer to human potentiality. The conclusion seems to be that the expansion of what she calls the life processes can be understood from the point of view of the distrust and the hopelessness the jobholder society reveals under the surface of the apparent optimism of the consumer society and its solid-seeming belief in growth and expansion. The irony she gets at is, I think, that *no* amount of labor/work could satisfy the jobholder society. This observation is a crucial one: at the same time that many people dream of the end of work (the golden days of retirement, the possibility of working part-time, a year off, etc.), everything that departs from full-time employment just as often appears to be a an unsettling prospect. In what follows, I will repeatedly return to the issue of why leisure appears as a threat, as something unsettling, and how this reveals several tensions in how we relate to work.

## Chapter 2: The work critics

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter grapples with a tendency to think of freedom in terms of freedom *from* an imposed system of work. The image of freedom *from* is common within political philosophy. A negative formulation of freedom, defined as freedom from external constraint and interference dominates Anglophone political philosophy. Drawing on Isaiah Berlin's classical essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" (Berlin 1969) one can conclude that the idea of freedom as freedom from external constraint has a long history. For the classical Anglophone political philosophers (Hobbes, Locke, Mill), who all agreed that unlimited freedom was impossible, the challenge was to define what kind of curtailment of freedom any functioning society requires.<sup>26</sup> Here, freedom means not to be tampered with, and for these philosophers, an eternal haggling process between the sphere of freedom and other values (justice, equality etc.) must be assumed. The content of freedom cannot be settled but the *limits* and *boundaries* of it can be staked out. One topic emerges as the central question of political philosophy: what type of restrictions of freedom can be considered justified? As Berlin points out, this image rests on an individualistic understanding of human beings (1969, 123-7): society is seen as external.

One is thus free when nobody stops one from doing what one wants to do. A version of the image of freedom from coercion and domination appears in very diverse political contexts. I will discuss a group of thinkers for whom I have

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<sup>26</sup> It has been pointed out to me that this may not be that clear. Locke (1980, § 22 & 57) and Mill (1978, 12) both talk about freedom and the limits of freedom in a way that goes beyond depicting freedom as 'doing whatever I want'.

chosen the label 'work critics'. Among these I will focus on Herbert Marcuse and André Gorz who, for all their differences, share some interesting similarities with regard to how they view freedom from a society dominated by wage labor. The writers I call work critics dissect the system of work in capitalism and they investigate what bearing that system has on life. These two writers explicitly theorize work through the dichotomy between coercion and freedom, and both question dominant ideas about what necessary work amounts to. I set out to explore what these writers mean by 'coercion' and what they consider freedom from it to be. I will show that both Marcuse's and Gorz's projects are riddled with conceptual confusion and tensions with regard to how the role of technology is understood. The bottom line in my critique is that even though their conceptual framework does not succeed in giving a clear image of what they see as coercion, their respective analyses incite crucial questions about work, domination, society, potentiality and free time.

Even though, as we saw, thinkers from Aristotle onwards define work as a constraint on our lives that stands in opposition to the free life of politics and contemplation, I want to argue that *new* aspects of the idea of work as compulsion/coercion arise in connection with wage labor, a formally free contractual relation, and yet a system in which it is – generally speaking – true to say that most of us *must* work. These aspects are dealt with in critical accounts of work arguing that coercion can be seen as a very fundamental relation within capitalism, but *also* in attempts to formulate a perspective on *good* work: what is good work if it is not coercion? For many philosophers since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the challenge has been to elaborate a concept of work disentangled from the necessity to produce, the necessity of making money, or the necessity of earning a pay-check. This has been done on several levels of abstraction, but one striking

example is how Marx in his early writings – in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* he espoused his famous ideas about alienation – emphasizes that the essence of human work is that humans continue to work even when material circumstances make it unnecessary. The alienation of the worker in capitalism is expressed among other things by work becoming a repulsive activity which the worker, who feels free only outside work, engages in only because of external compulsion: s/he works in order to live. Like Hegel, the young Marx saw work (which is here production in a very wide sense) as a lasting transformation of the world, and he also perceived work as a realization of human potential; work is an essential *activity* of life (Marx 1992a, 326-9, Kitching 1988, 21-2). The question for many philosophers then becomes whether we *can* imagine a working activity not driven by necessity or external coercion. *The Economical-Philosophical Manuscripts*, an early essay by Marx, was first published in 1932 and the publication sparked an interest in his early ideas. Writers associated with the humanistic branch of Marxism prevalent in the fifties and sixties – György Lukács (1971), Herbert Marcuse (1968) and Erich Fromm (2004), among others – drew on this text in order to bring out the dignity of work that is distorted by the present system of capitalism. These thinkers were at pains to articulate a notion of non-alienated work and productivity in ways that orthodox historical materialism or structuralism could not accommodate (cf. Schacht 1970, Fromm 2004, Marcuse 1969). These writers shared the idea that alienation is not a mere economic relation. By way of the concept of alienation, they analyzed the relation between human beings and work and also the relations between humans: these discussions were often geared at disclosing the good possibilities of work. Within this heterogeneous tradition and in the many variations of Critical Theory (these overlap) liberation from the coercive and disciplinary system of work

was a predominant theme. Marcuse is perhaps one of the most famous representatives of this tradition, but a critical scrutiny of work is elaborated more methodically by the French philosopher and journalist André Gorz, whose thinking is a form of existentialism and who was suspicious of the idea of non-alienated work and the idea of work as the potential of human beings.

That the image of freedom from the coercion of work is intelligible to a certain extent can be seen if we consider the fact that most of us are dependent on jobs for our subsistence and that one of the significant present debates concerns the relation between the individual, work and society. What purposes does work serve and what impact does wage labor have on our lives? Does work make us free and independent? If so, what *sort* of life do we imagine? What is the relation between paid jobs and the plural forms of work that, regardless of the economic circumstances, *need to be done*? As soon as one enters the debate, it is clear that freedom is a fiercely *contested* concept (see Introduction); these controversies are discernible in discussions about work. When discussions about work are sparked we need to get clear about which *aspects* of work are focused on, and why *that* particular dimension of work is emphasized. This is significant because debates about work typically involve conceptual muddles in which it is not clear what is talked *about*: examples of such muddles will abound in this chapter.

What does freedom mean within a culture that thinks of itself as having achieved the basic forms of freedom? This concern is central in debates about work: which types of freedom are most important when we talk about work? One thinker who has based almost his entire philosophy on this question is Herbert Marcuse. As a follower and colleague of Horkheimer and Adorno (he was also Heidegger's student), Marcuse probed into the workings of a technologically highly



developed mass society: we seem to be free and our daily lives have been made more comfortable than ever, but from a different point of view, we are enmeshed in a society of work and consumption – a complacent affluent society crippled by its many forms of repression where work has more to do with domination than basic needs. Marcuse suggests that this is not an inescapable predicament. He advances the possibility of a society free from labor as domination. Technological rationality has a certain shape in capitalism, but technology *can* have a different role. Even though I am not satisfied with his contrasting image of work as free play, I think Marcuse's approach exposes complexities having to do with the role of work as an overarching *system*. This aspect is focused on by André Gorz, who tries to pin down what this structural aspect of work consists in and what freedom from it would mean. This is the point of connection for these otherwise rather different thinkers. Both set out to advance an alternative to what they see as a society dominated by one-dimensional rationality.

This chapter has three parts. In the first section (2.1-2.5) I write about the image of work on which Gorz and Marcuse draw: work is situated in a gigantic societal apparatus which colonizes our lives. A pivotal tenet of theirs is that work is socialized as a *functionalized* unit. This functionalization allegedly implies subordination. By means of a discussion about how they elaborate work as domination and division of labor, I point out conceptual problems in this view of work as *functions*. In the second part (2.6-2.7), I present the problem of freedom as it is stated by Gorz. He contrasts autonomy – a realm of freedom and autonomy – with what he calls heteronomous work. I find his thinking politically pertinent in its critique of commodification, but the articulation of the opposite of wage labor is too entangled with the image of a compulsory system and it is based on the rather pessimistic

idea that true freedom consists in increasing something good (autonomous activities), while reducing the heteronomous work that by its very nature cannot offer people freedom. I argue that Gorz's concept of functionality contains a muddled understanding of what he is *rejecting*. On a more positive note, I suggest that Gorz and Marcuse are right in saying that the concept of freedom cannot be settled once and for all, that it is immersed in tensions with regard to how contrasting images of wage labor and a society dominated by work are drawn. This point is exemplified in the third part (2.8) through a discussion about basic income. This debate reveals the political stakes involved in conceptions of work as domination along with attempts to imagine lives less colonized by wage labor and the fluctuations of the labor market.

## **2.2 Work and society**

Arendt argued that freedom is not the result of a process we can control. In the last chapter, I talked about how she conceives of labor and work as spheres of life that are *presuppositions* for the human potential for freedom. As we saw, her concept of freedom was an unusual one: for her, freedom is connected with politics, action and plurality, rather than with an inner sphere, or a mental faculty. In "What is Freedom?" she boldly contends that almost the entire history of philosophy has distorted the concept of freedom as it has been construed as an inner sphere (2006b). As my discussion about Arendt's distinction between freedom and necessity revealed, she is also skeptical of the idea that freedom is simply freedom *from* necessity, what she calls 'liberation'. Still, Arendt's ideas align with a long tradition in philosophy in which necessity and freedom are conceptualized as two incompatible spheres; one could even say that Arendt's distinction between liberation (freedom *from*) and freedom

*radicalizes* that idea. As we saw, despite the sinister aspects of some of her arguments about necessity, the merit of her view is that she does not regard freedom as an *automatic* result of a specific historical situation.

I think this point should be taken seriously. It is tempting to think that the modernization of society (economic growth, market liberalism and evolution of societal institutions) has increased the space for freedom and politics – the idea that, finally, we are in charge of our own lives. The standard of living has improved considerably and people have plenty of time for leisure, as working hours – in some specific countries, that is – are thoroughly regulated. People now have the skills and resources to re-shape society. One of the main points in Herbert Marcuse's book *One-Dimensional Man* (first published in 1964) is that the general conviction that we are free is a form of deception. It is just that this idea is not completely wrong either. His idea could be unpacked like this: Humans have gained several forms of freedom. For many, work is no longer physical toil. People spend more time on leisure activities than before and the standard of living for many (but not all) people in the West is satisfactory. The argument continues: these forms of freedom from brute necessity lull us into the conception of being self-managing, even though we are not. The working class no longer experiences the situation as unbearable. Instead, people are generally satisfied. Satisfaction glosses over the domination that work still exerts over our lives, even though domination no longer takes the form of physical toil (cf. Marcuse 1968, 1969). Marcuse calls this *one-dimensional thinking*, the most central trait of which is its constant affirmation of the status quo. This is the starting point for several thinkers. Here I will focus on Marcuse and Gorz, two writers interested in the dynamics between work, coercion, control and freedom.

One could argue that critique of work has existed for a very long time. The classic Greek thinkers are frequently rendered as forerunners of a modern debate about work (cf. Anthony 1977). Marcuse and other philosophers critical of work as wage labor make contributions to a discussion that has been going on for several hundred years (or at least since Marx): in what way is work as wage labor immersed in what we think of as society and in what ways has a *coercive* system of work emerged? One strand in this debate that originated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (with Paul Lafargue's *The Right to be Lazy* (1883)) is a critique of the idea that work in the form of wage labor is a *right*, that every human being has the right to employment. According to several critical voices, such a defense of the right to work confirms and contributes to a stabilization of the present system of wage labor and thereby commits itself to status quo: work is the basic form of income and it is in the interest of everyone to have a job. A system built on coercion comes to look like a system based on the universal eagerness and willingness to work (cf. Paulsen 2010, 48-9).

That work should be regarded as an aspect of society is not self-evident at all. That a society is well-organized and that there is a sophisticated division of labor need not have anything to do with work in the sense familiar to us now – work as wage labor. We can imagine very different societies in which work is in some sense shared, or societally distributed. In *Capital*, Marx shows that the division of labor is socially organized in a very *specific* sense as it is transformed into wage labor on which people are dependent for their daily subsistence, as farming, craft work etc. turn into wage labor. People must be compelled to work for money instead of working for themselves and in addition to this, workers must double as consumers. Private ownership and the state are the basis for this specific type of societal work (cf. Marx 1990, 165, 272). This hegemonic form of work implies drastic changes:

the product of work is a collective process, rather than an individual achievement, and the instruments of work are not owned by the worker. This transformation implies that wage labor is a mediated process revolving around commodities. Critics of work argue that wage labor introduces a *new* form of compulsion that needs to be exposed precisely as *coercion* – their point thus counteracts the ideological image of freely chosen, contractual work.

Critics of work have drawn on many different sources (economics, social theory, feminism and philosophy) and more importantly they have imagined very diverse alternatives to wage labor. Two main forms of critique can be mentioned for the purposes of the present chapter. The *first form* is the primary topic of this text; society is organized around wage labor so that shared life comes to appear as an apparatus over which we have no control. In a society where productivity and automation increase, it is strange that wage labor largely remains an unquestioned component of the life of society; the ideal of full employment for everyone is an insistent one, these critics argue. This is a society with the aim of creating jobs but the unsolvable question in an age of increasing automation is what these jobs are to be. Endless growth is typically criticized by these writers. The *second form* of critique, merely hinted at here, concerns the disciplinary side of laboring society: workers are made docile through various disciplinary techniques and through ideologies of work (cf. chapter 3). In many cases, the two forms of critique are closely connected.

It is essential to see how the tradition of critique of work responds to a specific historical situation and the roles wage labor occupies. Marcuse and Gorz both set out to dissect a society where paid work is the predominant source of subsistence, a society of mass unemployment and developing technology, but also a society of relative wealth. Gorz, who

published his last books in the late nineties, discussed the dismantling of the welfare state, declining economic growth and the changes in employment that a system of just-in-time production, i.e. the system of production based on strict reduction of inventory and innovations in the organizational structure, implies. These two writers can also be said to take part in a broader discussion about technical innovations and the implication for 'the end of work as we know it' (Rifkin 1995, Aronowitz & DiFazio 2010) and a *crisis of work* (cf. Sennett 1998). Gorz's writings have had a significant influence on critical attempts to outline the changes wage labor go through in an era dominated by Fordism and the welfare state – by 'Fordism' I mean mass production and consumption, the system of rationalized work, relatively high wages and easy credit (cf. Aronowitz & DiFazio 2010, 27-8) – on the one hand, and a historical situation characterized by deregulation, precarious work and knowledge work on the other hand. In the latter, capitalism obtains an increasing freedom of movement – freedom from national ties, governments take booming business to be the primary concern of society etc. – and the company is increasingly dependent on networks of subcontractors, a tendency that strengthens the tendency of precarization (cf. Gorz 1999, Granter 2009). For all their generalizations and exaggerated conclusions, Marcuse and Gorz (and similar critics) make us attend to the changing meaning of wage labor.

### **2.3 Work as subordination**

Writers who can all be said to belong under the wide heading Critical Theory<sup>27</sup> (of the Frankfurt school and beyond:

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<sup>27</sup> It is important to keep in mind that Critical Theory contains disagreements and that it changed during its active years (from about 1930 to 1970) from a

Horkheimer, Adorno, Arendt, Bloch and Marcuse) make the following type of point: the Enlightenment project – enlightenment as the interrelation between science, technology and society, a project of domination and liberation from mythological thinking – seems like a project of freedom. It bears the promise of freedom in which we are our own masters. They describe a dialectic relation between power and powerlessness, mastery and subjection. The present state seems like a realization of this promise where human beings take charge of and dominate nature and where human potentialities are gradually realized as a rational use of technology develops. This project, the project of dominating nature, has, they argue, turned out to become, it has *revealed* itself as a project of domination of human beings, and thus the true potential of freedom is quenched. Abnegation and adaptation to the apparatus are the sinister truth of the ideology of progress and freedom. They criticize the idea that technology is autonomous and that its functions can be explained without regard to society. They also reject the idea that society should adapt to the requirements of technology (cf. Feenberg 1999, 77).<sup>28</sup> The project of Rationality that seemed

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more Marxist view of political economy to thinking about administrative society and mass culture (cf. Kellner 1989).

<sup>28</sup> This image of freedom as control over nature is prominent in the writings of Friedrich Engels, who claims that mature capitalism has broken down the obstacles to freedom through mastery of nature. For him, freedom is not freedom from natural laws but rather, freedom is knowledge and control of these laws. In *Anti-Dühring*, he writes: "Freedom therefore consists in the control over ourselves and over external nature, a control founded on knowledge of natural necessity; it is therefore a product of historical development." (1947, 69) The capitalist mode of production is collapsing because of its contradictions, and the full development of the forces of production will abolish class society. Building on the technical development of the present society, a new mode of production will evolve. We become masters over our own societal relations and are no longer ruled by alien forces (1970, chapter 3).

to be about freedom and liberation turned out to be a project of violence and power. Thus, they point out tensions within this project of freedom.

The entire tradition of Critical Theory revolves around a questioning of instrumentalization and many of these writers contest the idea that technology is a neutral force.<sup>29</sup> Technology is not reducible to machines – technology is social relations. They posit technology and work as sites of social struggle and class conflict in a society where exchange governs almost all social relations. As Marcuse maintains: instrumental reason is not the neutral, rational, society-building faculty it is taken to be: it is unruly and opaque, rather than a rationally governed instrument. Instrumental reason transmutes from a force directed at nature into a tool of power over other people (Marcuse 1968, 1969). Work is immersed in an apparatus consisting of administration and technical rationality, in which we all must take part.

For all the critique of technology, Marcuse's position is puzzling. Even though the main trail is that violence and power relations are built into technology and institutions, he also develops ideas about time now being ripe for fundamental change. Here, he leans on an argument about scarcity having been overcome and a confident conviction that automation will free people from the apparatus of wage labor, if only we can break the spell of the domination of capitalist (ir)rationality. The idea that time is now ripe for change is stated rather often in Marcuse's writings. He assumes that at some point in history, oppression *was* necessary because of scarcity. Even though he is critical of technology and progress,

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<sup>29</sup> Jürgen Habermas is an exception. Even though he criticizes instrumentalization, he claims that technological reason is *always* about control, that technology derives from instrumental action itself, and that the main concern in our lives is not to let this type of rationality colonize other spheres of life (cf. Feenberg 1999, 156-9).



he simultaneously holds the view that human beings have finally conquered nature (1969, 3, 88, 110, 152). Curiously, he concludes that the 'conquest of scarcity' is completed and that the project of dominating nature can be abolished. He would then argue (like Engels) that it is the power relations of capitalism that hold progress in check and that there *is* an ultimate, rational use of societal resources and technology, so that other arrangements such as industrial capitalism can be called 'irrational'.<sup>30</sup> Marcuse oscillates between two positions.

(i) Technological development (automation, for example) has, *in itself*, provided the precondition for a new society.

Advanced industrial society is approaching the stage where continued progress would demand the radical subversion of the prevailing direction and organization of progress. This stage would be reached when material production (including the necessary services) becomes automated to the extent that all vital needs can be satisfied while necessary labor time is reduced to marginal time. From this point on, technical progress would transcend the realm of necessity, where it served as the instrument of domination and exploitation which thereby limited its rationality [... ] (1968, 16)

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<sup>30</sup> Given that Marcuse historicizes human needs and given his remarks about the false consciousness of the affluent society, it is surprising that he posits a generalized concept of scarcity, generalized in the sense that his view makes it possible to ask whether a specific society has or has not overcome 'scarcity'. Like Nicholas Xenos, I would ask: what perspective does the notion of 'scarcity' presuppose; what origin does the generalized, supposedly trans-historical, concept have? Xenos notes for example that this generalized 'scarcity' is intertwined with an equally unspecific understanding of needs, according to which it makes sense to talk about 'subsistence' in general (1989, 3). Xenos' thesis is close to Marcuse's own ideas: the concept of scarcity expresses a universalized experience of an affluent society in which 'desire' and 'need' are lumped together into a general concept of 'want'. A brute rendition of this idea: I need an Iphone in the same way as I need food and air to breathe. This is very similar to one aspect of Marcuse's culture critique in *One-Dimensional Man*.

In this quote, it seems as if the technological progress in itself opens up for a fundamental change so that the presupposition of liberation seems to be in place: necessity is abolished. That is, when this stage is reached, technology no longer necessarily implies domination.

(ii) This society has made the possibilities of technology *seem* neutral and thus a myth has been created about inevitability. Marcuse and other critical theorists of technology have argued that certain groups take advantage of the appearance of neutrality and that they strive to uphold this appearance of an autonomously rational technical approach. Such apparent value-neutrality lends itself to the purposes of the ruling class (cf. 1968, 44, 132, 1969, 36, Feenberg 2010, 69, 206). “Technocracy armors itself against public pressures, sacrifices community values, and ignores needs incompatible with its own reproduction and the perpetuation of its technical traditions.” (Feenberg 2010, 71)

So on the *one* hand, Marcuse argues that we need to challenge a neutralization of technology (one-dimensional thinking in its prime!) and the false necessities that society revolves around. On the *other* hand his own thinking about change seems to presuppose precisely that kind of neutralization, especially when he argues that scarcity is not as grim as it used to be, which for him means that most forms of repression now lack *material justification*. By this he means that producing the necessities of life takes less time than before:

Technology operates against the repressive utilization of energy in so far as it minimises the time necessary for the production of the necessities of life, thus saving time for the development of needs beyond the realm of necessity... (Marcuse 1969: 105)

Marcuse does not seem to question the idea that there is a linear story about how the development of technology transforms general scarcity into general abundance – the idea

that there is “a necessary struggle with scarcity that will yield a future of abundance” (cf. Xenos 1989, 47). A similar form of tension as that which I detect in Marcuse’s thinking is recurring in debates about socialism: is socialism a new way of grasping the world of *production*, perhaps a new organization of activities perceived as fundamental and necessary, or is it merely a new form of *distribution* in the sense that private ownership is abolished but society continues to be built around large-scale production? (cf. Kitching 1988, 148-9)

Marcuse’s oscillation indicates a tension within many kinds of critique of work revolving around a conception of a crisis of work. When I read Marcuse (and Gorz) I am lead to ask: what does it mean to claim that the world of work *can* be changed? What sort of ‘can’ is this? Does it mean that a change is *technologically* possible? In that case, what idea about technology is implied? A problematic (yet common) statement would be that productivity liberates people from toil and scarcity if the technological development is steered in the right direction (cf. Thompson 1983, 22).<sup>31</sup> The danger of this idea is that technology is dissociated from its societal relations, it is thought of as a productive force to be steered.

As we saw (1.8), Arendt argues that this idea about liberation from necessity is spurious if the setting is a society in which we can simply not imagine our lives in any other way than the present jobholder framework – she claims that this is the setting in which leisure becomes a ‘problem’ and all activities that are not jobs are reduced to hobbies. Technology itself does not, she advocates, possess what it takes to bring

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<sup>31</sup> Like Gavin Kitching, I want to emphasize that it is only in a very specific type of societal surrounding that it is possible to think about technological progress as something to ‘adapt’ society to or something to ‘steer’. This is a society of a specialized branch of engineering and R&D-departments who are dedicated to technological development and a society where production creates a great volume of products (Kitching 1988, 53-4).

freedom into human life. In a similar vein, Marcuse claims that automation tends to have a dangerously integrative effect, in other words, that work is now less toilsome so that people no longer see any reason to oppose it. Nonetheless, for him, technology is potentially liberating (1964). I interpret him as saying that productivity and automation are a *wake-up call* that could and should make us ask questions about what is the human result of such technical and organizational processes: *what* is saved, *what* is liberated, *what* is gained? To sum up: Marcuse, along with other critics of work, contests ways of normalizing and stabilizing the status quo. However, he is also prone to insist that his own proposals are *realistic*, that they are grounded in *real technological progress*. Here I see a tension.

Beyond this tension, why is it so important for Marcuse to talk about domination? According to him, in the present society, work is a repressive and dominating principle that holds sway over human life so that people are now enslaved by a false sense of necessity. He suggests that what is needed is not only a change in attitudes towards technology, but also a change in the sense of what is necessary, which would mean, among other things, that the assembly line, weaponry and mass media would no longer make up the core of our culture (Feenberg 2010, 198-9, 202).

Domination and one-dimensional thinking is a form of violence (which Marcuse calls 'surplus-repression') exercised and *normalized* in everyday life, in our working life, in consumption and in thinking – in the form of relations, habits and structures that reproduce capitalism and an efficiently functioning society. A charitable reading of what he says would be that violence is built into the apparatus of work and technology, and that this violence is exercised through apparent neutrality, which makes us act along – participate. This tendency can be seen in how nuclear power, the arms

industry, tourism (violent transformation of communities and nature) and the meat industry live on as branches of industry that are discussed with regard to their commercial prospects, rather than the effect they have on human beings and on the planet. The role such neutralizations have could help us make sense of Marcuse's concept of domination and one-dimensional thinking. As I said in the Introduction, neutralization of the form 'this branch of industry offers employment to people who would not otherwise find a job' is frequently taken to be the last and authoritative word in the controversies arising in, say, Finnish debates about the economic crisis and how it is to be prudently handled.

To take the meat industry as a further example of Marcuse's concept of one-dimensional thinking: critique of cruelty against animals – insufficient space for the animals, for example – is often repudiated by means of a frequently repeated story about the tough and competitive situation of the meat industry. When issues like insufficient space for the animals are discussed, the point of departure is taken for granted within this specific perspective. Voices appealing to animal welfare are made to look like challenges of the necessary state of affairs: the right for entrepreneurs to make a living. From that perspective, animal welfare is discussed so that gains and losses are taken to be an unshakeable framework and those are the factors that set the limits of what is possible: if animal rights claims are to have any weight, they must take into account that the meat industry is a hugely competitive branch of industry: therefore, space for the animals cannot be as generous as the entrepreneurs as *persons* perhaps would wish it to be. The bottom line is that the animals and the surroundings become assets to be used as efficiently as possible. Supposedly, there is simply no room for alternatives if the entrepreneurs want to stay afloat in the game. If one wants to keep being an entrepreneur in this

branch, there is no alternative to accepting the competition it involves. This may be what Marcuse has in mind when he talks about one-dimensionality and violence built into and normalized in everyday life (cf. 1969, 93-4, 150). Such examples about competition can shed light on what is meant by the concept of domination and a hegemonic rationality of quasi-necessity.

This form of neutralization, in which production is to be sustained and consumption is to be maximized, reveals a complex relation between legitimizations and practice, a complexity Marcuse's argument contains but which he does not articulate. A practice is *built around* this necessity and *legitimizations* of the practice reproduce what Marcuse sees as violence, the violence inherent in the status quo. The sinister nature of the example is that the quasi-necessity is *made* real, it is turned into praxis; it operates both as an array of forms in which the status quo is defended and as praxis. Towards the end of this chapter (2.8), I will return to the relation between legitimizations and praxis, that is, the relation between rhetoric and praxis, through a discussion about a concept of economic reason. I will point out that a separation between rhetoric and praxis *can* at times be called for.

## 2.4. Gorz and Marcuse on work

So what do Marcuse and Gorz say more specifically about work? Work critics like Marcuse and Gorz paint an image of work as firmly integrated in the organization of society. Unlike Arendt, they talk about *wage labor*, not a trans-historical concept of work.<sup>32</sup> In *Critique of Economic Reason* Gorz writes about work as now being a matter of social integration – work

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<sup>32</sup> Critical writers often attack each other for deploying an 'anthropological concept of work'. I don't think 'anthropological' is the right word here, as what they seem to mean is a *generalized* or *trans-historical* concept of work.

belongs to the public sphere and it is not directly related to tasks we need to do in order to maintain our individual lives (Gorz 1989, 13-7). The following quote sums up Gorz's position in his most clear-sighted mode:

There can be no society, no life, without 'work', but not all societies and lives are based on work. Work and the work-based society are not in crisis because there is not enough *to do*, but because work in a very precise sense has become scarce, and the work that is to be done now (sic) falls less and less into that particular category (1989, 153).

What he says is, I think, that there are a lot of things that need to be done: the sick are to be treated, kids are to be educated, fires are to be put out, medicines need to be developed, public transportation is to be available. Gorz, who reminds us of the importance of defining what we mean by 'work', argues that work as wage labor is not primarily concerned with these needs. In the world of wage labor, it is completely intelligible that work *can* become scarce, even though tasks people regard as important abound, regardless of whether these necessary tasks are jobs or whether they are seen as 'work' at all. Quoting Max Weber, Gorz describes capitalist work as residing in a system of one-dimensional economic rationality where all other forms of rationality are stripped away (1989, 18). He shares this point with Marcuse. The major change of industrialism was the transformation of work into calculable, quantifiable units. This process created a rift between work and the worker's motivation; motivation is no longer embedded in the job itself but rather in some external factors (1989, 20). Industrialized society has turned into a gigantic machine which, instead of liberating people from toil (according to Gorz, this is the utopia of industrialism), makes people dependent. People are tied to the apparatus, as workers, or as unemployed people looking for a job. The point

made by thinkers like Gorz and Marcuse, but also by Marx, is that the significant transformation of work (for Marx it is crucial that work becomes a commodity) affects the entire life-world of the worker. The functioning of corporations is dependent not only on investments, a prediction of demand and due payments of debts – to function, they need a stable environment of institutions, and the life of the individual must be organized in calculable ways (Gorz 1989, 21, 31). This, then, is how ‘domination’ is spelled out more specifically in relation to work.

Like Gorz, Marcuse holds that wage labor can be seen as coerced. In his psycho-analytically inspired book *Eros and Civilization* (1955) he argues that instead of fulfilling human potentiality, a historically specific combination of administration, work and technology unleashes destructive and aggressive forces. Society, here, is synonymous with what Marcuse calls repression and domination (1969, 35; 81-3, 110-1). Society, organized around competition and economic performance, is antagonistic and dependent on control exercised in work relations. People are dependent on work as most of their needs are fulfilled by paid labor but for all that people *imagine* themselves to be self-managing. This conviction conceals that people work not for themselves but for a societal apparatus over which they have no control, “which operates as an independent power to which individuals must submit if they are to live” (1969, 45).

Not only do people sell labor time, also free time is molded by the commodification of work (1969, 47-8). Marcuse scrutinizes the form of freedom that appears as part-time freedom, freedom as a certain amount of hours people have at their disposal. As Henri Lefebvre, another Marxist critical of work, points out in *Critique of Everyday Life* (the three volumes were published in 1947, 1961 and 1981): leisure should not be glorified as freedom. What characterizes leisure is often that



we understand it as a *break* from work. Like Marcuse, he defends the idea that it is not only work that is alienating: alienation also takes the form of an attempt to liberate oneself from work by creating a zone of rewarding free time. A vicious circle appears. One works in order to have leisure and leisure is defined as a break from work (Lefebvre 2008, 34-40). Many work critics maintain that the free time people have tends to be corralled back into the laboring apparatus so that leisure is dependent on work and on a world of commodities. There is thus more to say about leisure than its simply being hours that people spend off duty. Marcuse and other critical theorists describe a sort of deadlock of modernity: people find work to be repulsive, but at the same time they are afraid of freedom and *make do* with the stunted hours of leisure.

Marcuse and Gorz paint an image of work as a part of a smoothly running apparatus to which we can and must take up an external relation. They see work and consumption as imposed on us, as a rhythm of life we *internalize*. In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse tries to elucidate the totality of requirements society imposes on us. *Every* society, he says, requires domination of *some* sort; the individual is always dominated by society (he inherits this image from Freud). There is also a form of *surplus repression* which is *not* "indispensable for civilized human association". Marcuse is inclined to carve out a limit *beyond* which (capitalist) domination is no longer necessary (1969, 37). In the essay "Freedom and Freud's Theory of the Instincts" he defines domination as "in effect whenever the individual's goals and purposes and the means of striving for and attaining them are prescribed to him and performed by him as something prescribed." (quoted in Kellner 1984, 165) As you will see, this characterization is strikingly similar to Gorz's definition of heteronomous activities. Domination, then, is exercised as *force*, *ideological thinking* and *restraint* but it can also be

exercised as *internalization* (Kellner 1984, 165-7). Including everything on the scale from violent subjugation to unconscious patterns, domination becomes an extremely wide phenomenon. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse provides an account of how individuals are integrated into society as consumers, hard-working conformists or progressive individualists. A general concept of internalization is advanced to explain why people act in a docile and orderly way.<sup>33</sup>

I would suggest that the risk is that this view of domination presupposes the idea that internalization is the *only* way people *can* relate to society, that wage labor (and free time) could be *exhaustively* and *exclusively* accounted for in disciplinary terms and that the same goes for consumption: as if *all* forms of consumption are dependent on false needs and commodification. The apparatus is understood to be so vast and all-encompassing that all avenues of escape are closed off and this ultimately makes it very hard to substantiate what this description would amount to in real life. Terry Eagleton writes:

For Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno, capitalist society languishes in the grip of an all-pervasive reification, all the way from commodity fetishism and speech habits to political bureaucracy and technological thought. This seamless monolith of a dominant ideology is apparently devoid of contradictions – which means, in effect, that Marcuse and Adorno take it at face value, judging it as it would wish to appear (2007, 47).

Drawing on Lefebvre (2008) and his notion of everyday life as the place where human life always resides, I would say that the major flaw of an all-out emphasis on domination and

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<sup>33</sup> In a similar way, Gorz maintains that technology can make life easier, toil can be reduced, but work is *always* separated from life and domination is *always* part of the story (over nature and over oneself) (1989, 87).

internalization is that it fails to take account of symptoms of discontent or forms of resistance – what Lefebvre sees as spontaneous expressions of critique in our everyday lives (2008, 40). One of his insights important very important for this thesis is that it is possible to view what people do or how people react as *both* a manifestation of alienation but *at the same time* as an expression of critique, real needs, a desire for another life. Bitterness is an example: ‘it will surely always be this way...’ If the desire for another life is not recognized, what makes bitterness of this kind so troubling is not seen. Work can be treated in its mode of repressive system, but the existential destructiveness of this repression will not be grasped if it is not situated in people’s daily lives which are, in an important sense, undetermined and thus impossible to reduce to an all-encompassing framework of domination. This is a point that lurks under the surface in Marcuse’s writings: after all, his description of the domination built into everyday life is a part of a project of showing that another society *is* possible. Taking everyday life as a point of departure in describing the roles of wage labor will be a prominent theme in what follows.

To regard wage labor as domination *could* have a point, as we will see in chapter 5, in which I talk about abstractions of work to which all wage earners are potentially subjected. On a more specific level, one could talk about striking asymmetries of power in the world of work: there are aspects of coercion which one sees when reflecting on the very different bargaining positions of employee and employer.

Let me mention one example of how a critique of work can start from everyday life, rather than an all-embracing concept of domination. Gorz and Marcuse imagine society as a basically one-dimensionally rational system, even though Marcuse goes to great length to reveal that the hegemonic rationality is a form of *irrationality*, a rationalization process

the outrageousness of which is exposed when understood in human terms (Feenberg 1999, 160-1). The question is whether such an analysis of the societal apparatus yields an exaggerated image of rational institutions and rationally organized work.

Roland Paulsen has examined this description by means of an investigation of what he calls empty labor, the time an employee spends at the job doing other things than working, or doing nothing at all. He noted diverse forms of it: for some, not working was an outlet for frustration about the meaninglessness of the job, for others, it was a matter of getting away with minimal effort. Others needed a break from a hectic job. A significant observation is that in many cases empty labor is a result of there being too little to do. Idleness, in these cases, was enforced on the employees, even though they related to this idleness in different ways. Some felt they had to endure the situation, while others welcomed the opportunity to take it easy. What makes empty labor in all its forms so peculiar is that it is never done in the open. From this, a crucial point he makes is that no simple distinction could be drawn between resistance and adaptation. Should the bored web designer who is cyber-loafing on Facebook be seen as acting out his resistance, or should this behavior rather be seen as a sign of resignation, or perhaps as a way of indulging in a few leisurely moments? (Paulsen 2012) A much more detailed story about the organization, his attitude to his job and the effort required by the position would have to be added, and *even then* the question is a very open-ended (and not *empirically* solvable) one. Here I would also say that a *general* account of internalization and adaptation would not help us answer that question, even though the concept of adaptation may figure in an attempt to understand for example the employee whose attitude is that of resignation – ‘this place will never change...’. Paulsen shows that there may

be something questionable in the idea that either something is a *real* challenge of power, or it is a *mere* triviality. This is in line with what Lefebvre writes about the critique of everyday life.

Paulsen's investigation provokes the question: what are the existential circumstances of empty labor for a cashier, a web designer or a warehouse worker? What squandering of human efforts and resources do they imply? In a much more clear-sighted way than Marcuse, Paulsen's approach encourages us to attend to what is meant when efficiency and instrumentality are said to 'permeate' society. Empty labor reveals sides of work Marcuse and Gorz describe: the disciplinary aspect is strongly present when a person is simply required *to be at a certain place*, regardless of whether s/he is in fact needed there. This is domination in a very tangible way. The job-form trumps over the content and above all, the thing that makes the pivotal difference is whether one *has* a job, regardless of what the job involves. The phenomenon of empty labor evokes a more ambiguous image of the world of work than we find in Marcuse and Gorz. There are alternative ways of describing the history of capitalism than the familiar narrative about instrumentality, rationalization and control – was of resources and waste of people's time is equally important. Marcuse is not blind to this aspect: after all, the writings I have quoted from circle around a constant shift between perceiving society as rational and seeing it as irrational, as in Marcuse's denunciation of one-dimensionality. However, I would still not say that this move registers the rich flora of concepts related to waste: squandering, uneconomical behavior, carelessness, indifference, etc.<sup>34</sup>

In what follows I will say more about the pessimism I have already hinted at here. Even though both Gorz and Marcuse on the face of it stand for radical thoughts about the liberation

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<sup>34</sup> For a penetrating text on waste see Hertzberg 1995.

of or the liberation from work, as it turns out, they harbor rather pessimistic thoughts about what such liberation could be. If the focus up until now has been on Marcuse, I will now turn to Gorz's ideas.

## 2.5 Division of labor

Adam Smith (1974 [1776], book one, chapter 1) and Marx (1990 [1867], chapter 13 & 14) both wrote about the division of labor, and it is obvious that their accounts are reactions to drastic historical changes in the work process. For Marx it was important to distinguish the division of labor and specialization that has developed within work and societies (people of a certain age or gender performing specific tasks, or systems of specialization or rules as in the medieval guilds) on the one hand, from division of labor as an aspect of capitalism as a versatile system that re-organizes work according to the logic of competition on the other hand. The quest for valorization (rather than technological necessity) drives the latter kind. Marx shows how capitalism absorbs and shapes cooperation in work, and one of the central issues he focuses on is the introduction of machines and the winding historical process in which the worker and the work process have to be adjusted to the needs of an unbroken process of work. There must be no disruption, no stops, no breaks in the process itself (this unbroken work system is also extended to work associated with circulation, repair and consumption) (1990, 502). A central point of departure for Marx was that the gradual development of the capitalist system *abolishes* specialization: work becomes increasingly abstract and loses its character of performing a qualitatively specific task (cf. chapter 5). For him this capitalist division of labor coincides with the subsumption of labor under capital and in this sense it embodies power relations. For Marx the mechanization of

work poses a threat to the individual (who turns into an 'appendage to the machine'), but automation is also a positive phenomenon in that work becomes easier, more rational, and what he calls 'craft narrowness' is eliminated (cf. 1990, 487-8).

One of the prevailing themes in the literature about work that can be found as early as in Smith and Marx is the impact of the division of labor on the workers. I will return to this in the last chapter (where I will discuss Sennett's view of fragmentation of work), but already here I want to mention that this discussion has revolved around how work is split up into entities organized by an external management unit and not by the workers themselves. Writers critical of contemporary wage labor have assessed the organization of work, scrutinizing how work is divided and distributed. They regard wage labor as an aspect of society (and culture) that is in need of critical analysis, rather than seeing it as a concern for the individual looking for a job or a commercial concern of companies. Attacking the division of labor is connected with evaluating the transformation of wage labor I talked about, that work becomes a job for the individual while simultaneously forming a part of a socially orchestrated process. Gorz maintains that the division of labor reveals that work is increasingly socialized in the sense that it is no longer the exertion of the individual who strives to satisfy needs. Work is transformed into wage labor, a socially recognized function. Work becomes something people *have* rather than something they *do* (Gorz 1989, 24, 1999, 3).

The reason why I introduce the division of labor is because that discussion throws light on what I have presented as the idea of work as a societal apparatus. Next, I will give yet another example of how the political pertinence of a discussion disappears because of a generalized treatment of themes that have a central place in critical analyses of wage

labor. Let me start with what I take to be a *good* treatment of division of labor.

In Harry Braverman's classic study *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (first published in 1974), the relation between Taylorism and the process of capitalist value-creation is investigated. Braverman analyzes Taylorism as a form of de-skilling where work is structured so that management plans and organizes while the personnel on the floor executes these plans, which leads to a situation in which there is no room for judgment or skills.

Thus, if the first principle is the gathering together and development of knowledge of the labor process, and the second is the concentration of this knowledge as the exclusive preserve of management – together with its converse, the absence of such knowledge among workers – then the third step is the use of this monopoly of knowledge to control each step of the labor process and its mode of execution (1974, 119).

The worker is degraded into an executing function. This is just as true for the office worker as it is for the factory worker: both of these job types are part of a process of *homogenization* of wage labor. One of the merits of Braverman's approach is that he shows how a Taylorist regime spreads to different sectors of work. Among other things, he shows how a dynamic process of profit-maximizing and changes within the work process itself create the preconditions for work being so de-skilled that it becomes possible to move a factory from one part of the world to another (this would not have happened without other significant changes in the financial system) (Braverman 1974). This is an ongoing process we see as much now as when Braverman wrote his book. As the organizational theorist Paul Thompson (1983, 57) maintains: there have been many waves of deskilling. It appears in new ways in new forms of work – office work is one striking



example mentioned also in *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. A further strength of Braverman's book is that he takes note of capitalism as a system dependent on expansion: new areas of life are connected with commodities and services. However, when one takes a look at some of the critical literature on work, it seems as if what is meant by 'division of labor' is something slightly different than the division of labor that a system of global capitalism engenders. The discussion at times seems to be about what work *essentially is* rather than a critical account of global injustices. Below, I will mention one instance of this tendency.

Discussions about alienation and division of labor frequently have *functionalization* as their main target. Gorz argues that functionally defined work is done within an organization that determines the aims of the job. The worker may not always be aware of or have any deeper knowledge about these aims and perhaps s/he does not even need to in order to do a sufficient job. The job is defined by the pre-established organization, so that productivity and profits structure the tasks at hand. External motivating factors are integral for the system to run smoothly: money, consumption and prestige make people work. The conclusion Gorz draws from these very different aspects is that work has become a *means*. Examples he mentions are the postal, rail and air networks but also industrial plants requiring a functional specialization (1989, 32-6). So far, one may say that the discussion takes place at a sociological level where the aim is to spell out worrying tendencies in the organization of work that turns the employee into a *mere* function, a cog in the machinery denied fundamental forms of responsibility. Gorz would agree with Lefebvre, who writes that the division of labor is imposed without the worker having clear knowledge of the system of which his work forms a part. In some jobs, the employee doesn't even *need* to have knowledge about the

wider context in order to perform the job satisfactorily. This is what rightly can be called *domination*:

Therefore, for every individual, worker or expert, the division of labor is imposed from without, like an objective process, with the result that each man's activity is turned back against him as a hostile force which subjugates him instead of being subjugated by him (Lefebvre 2008, 166).

It is the next step that causes confusion. Gorz assesses functional behavior within an organization. According to him, this conduct is rationally programmed, attaining results irrespective of individual intentions. His point is that this is *unavoidable* within certain fields of work and that this has consequences for how we should think about work and liberation:

For, in order to function, the industrial-bureaucratic megamachine requires a subdivision of tasks which, once put into effect, is self-perpetuating and *has to* be self-perpetuating by inertia, if the functional capacity of each of its human cogs is to be made reliable and calculable. [...] It is strictly impossible subsequently to reinterpret this functionalization of hetero-determined activities in terms of voluntary social collaboration (1989, 42-3).

Gorz wants to make it *absolutely clear* that if an organization is to run as a smooth, functional, efficient system, there *can* be no room for self-organization. He writes that the effects of alienation can be ameliorated, but they can never be fully eliminated (cf. Granter 2009, 122). But it is not that Gorz claims that cooperation is always alienating; what he says is rather that this type of work does not allow for cooperation in the sense of self-organization. He seems to think that this characterizes the division of labor in itself and that it stems from the *nature* of (industrial and functional) work, rather than

from the specific arrangement of work and technology within capitalism.

The division of labor and knowledge into fragmented but complementary technical skills is the only means by which it is possible to accumulate and put to work the huge stocks of knowledge embodied in machines, industrial systems and processes of every scale and dimension (1982, 100).

Which are the reasons invoked? *Firstly*, he appeals to the process of work in industry. It will *always* be a matter of men serving machines or the management crew. Allegedly, the work process can be humanized in several ways, but it will never be man's sovereign action – Gorz seems to regard sovereignty as the most important dimension of human life. He denies that refinery work, work in a rolling mill or driving a train could be anything else than wage labor characterized by subordination (1989, 52-4). He claims that the economic development tolerated no other form of work than strictly quantifiable, predictable pieces of work that don't rely on the worker's own non-formalizable knowledge. This is a point Marx also makes in his own way. What is puzzling is that Gorz nonetheless seems to perceive this as an irreversible progress of industrialization itself. This aspect of work persists no matter what (cf. 1989, 56-7).

The *second* reason he offers is that certain types of work are specialized according to macro-social patterns, which means that a specific working activity has no meaning in itself, but only in combination with other activities. Unlike Braverman, he does not, at least not primarily, have Taylorism, the process of fragmenting the work process into strictly defined tasks, thus making it more controllable, in mind. Instead, he talks about the industrial process and that it is *necessarily* divided into a complex network of know-how as it is dependent on a massive scale of specialized knowledge. Such complex

networks cannot, Gorz says, be handled by means of voluntary, self-regulated and conscious cooperation.<sup>35</sup> For him, this implies that all forms of grand-scale planning require a *negation of freedom*. The idea seems to be that planning and cooperation do not function if people engage only in what they like to do the most. He mentions the example of assembling a bike: an enormous set of skills, machines and processes are involved in this seemingly simple enterprise (1989, 55).

Already here I want to make clear that I find the contrast between the voluntary and the network of specialized relations suspicious: that my work is dependent on the work of others in itself says very little about troubling restrictions of freedom. In this case, Gorz's concept of freedom fails to take issue with what he in the end seems to be concerned about and that he articulates strongly in his earlier books (cf. Gorz 1975, 93): powerlessness, humiliation and the domination a division of labor in capitalism leads to. Here, the focus is upon showing that in this destructive setting, the possibility of *wanting* to do the job is undermined. For all the formal freedom of wage labor, it makes sense to talk about *forced work*. His later claims entrenches the view that *all* forms of work must be un-free because all jobs are dependent on social relations. However, my main line of critique has to wait until section 2.7 (and some of this discussion is delayed until chapter 6). Gorz remarks about specialized networks have an appearance of common sense: it is often hard to imagine somebody doing most of the things that one does in a job

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<sup>35</sup> *Spontaneity* in the form of doing what one likes is one aspect of Gorz's concept of freedom; self-organization and sovereignty are two others. When reading him, it is not always easy to know *which* of these he is emphasizing, and how they are related to each other – it is for example very easy to imagine a case of disciplined forms of self-organized work that require that people do not give in to momentary impulses or whims.

outside of that context, at least if we think about what the jobs of an accountant, a lawyer, a factory worker or a sales manager require. These jobs are embedded in a rich context of relations and institutions structured around paid work and commodities. The problem is just that it is hard to give any *substance* to this rather trivial point, especially if Gorz urges us to look at complexity in itself, that, as he says, jobs are socialized tasks dependent on macro-social functions. What depends on his observation about interrelated tasks and functions, beyond the quotidian fact that work is structured around complex networks and that very few jobs are independent of what others do? That some jobs are parts of a composite process with many steps seems like a self-evident truth rather than an insight that helps us think more clearly about work as subordination. Gorz's generalizations make him draw hasty conclusions: he loses sight of the specific contexts in which it makes sense to talk about subordination. The problem with work under capitalism does not at all stem from the fact that work requires complex networks of cooperation or that there is somebody in charge of the project who knows more about the process than those involved. Marx writes:

All directly social or communal labor on a large scale requires, to a greater or lesser degree, a directing authority in order to secure the harmonious co-operation of the activities of individuals, and to perform the general functions that have their origin in the motion of the total production organism, as distinguished from the motion of its separate organs (quoted in Sayers 2011, 151).

As Sean Sayers points out, Marx sees this as a technical necessity with no special implications for a person's consent or freedom: freedom is not compromised by work being characterized by cooperation (2011, 151-2). Descriptions of subordination must have their point of departure elsewhere –

what Braverman describes, for example, is subordination not regarding an underlying form of freedom, but rather the specific hazards of de-skilling and the specific power relations within management-controlled Taylorized work. At best, one can see Gorz's observation as a negative critique of traditional views within Marxist writings. One could then interpret him as saying that it is wrong to think that work becomes fulfilling and un-alienated if controlled by the workers. However, he seems to be making a further claim about freedom and division of labor: what he calls heteronomous work is here to stay, even though it clashes with individual freedom.<sup>36</sup>

It is true that cooperation requires a refined system of division of labor because many projects are such that one person alone cannot handle them and work needs to be split up between people with the appropriate skills. This usually requires a certain level of centralized control and administration of the project. That need not have anything to do with disciplinary forms of domination and control of workers, nor does it necessarily take the shape of fragmentation of work and powerlessness (I will discuss that aspect at length in chapter 6). This makes it hard to see what the overarching framework of Gorz's critique of work amounts to, and what he really has in mind when he sets out to probe the possibility of 'abolishing work'. As we saw, he thinks that some forms of heteronomous work will always remain, and that there will thus be parts of our lives that remain unfree.

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<sup>36</sup> In *Farewell to the Working Class* it is obvious that he makes a very big claim: "As a structured system, society is necessarily external to its members. It is not the product of free voluntary co-operation. Individuals do not produce it by starting from themselves; they produce it on the ground of its own inert exigencies, adapting themselves to the jobs, functions, skills, environments and hierarchical relations pre-established by society to assure its cohesive functioning." (1982, 76)

The problem with this discussion is that the terminology flounders. In *Critique of Economic Reason* Gorz discusses division of labor, specialization and fragmentation in one breath. In this sense, his reasoning aligns with a long tradition in which specialization is coupled with the stunted individual whose development is inhibited:

Almost all trades and forms of labor presuppose a form of specialization which, while not necessarily being either narrow or stupefying, thwarts rather than fosters the full intellectual, physical, aesthetic, emotional, relational and moral development of the individual (Gorz 1989, 98).

As a critical challenge of capitalism this doesn't hold up: as Marx shows, the division of labor that turns the worker into 'an appendage to the machine' is not the same as work being specialized, but rather, as I said, the way the quest for valorization (surplus-value) changes the division of labor. Nor does it do as a valid insight into soul-crushing, monotonous work, which is not his intention anyway, as is seen in the quote. His own formulation leads to the question what a thwarting of the individual's development means if it is *not* connected with narrowness or stupefying work. Gorz's treatment of *specialization* is in need of distinctions. For example, specialization in medicine is hard to use as an example of fragmentation or alienation. One would rather say that specialization is here structured around the emergence of a new field of expertise and that specialization expresses the changes in how diseases are treated and perceived. This is one example in which division of labor is related to conceptions and visions about developing and improving a field of work; new areas of work emerge, new tasks are seen as necessary to perform and to define. This may have nothing to do with a one-dimensional ideal of efficiency or a process in which work is fragmented into simplified operations as in the pin factory

Adam Smith holds up as an example of division of labor and its subsequent “increase of the productive forces of labor” (1974, 110). As Eliot Freidson says, one must remember that there are no natural whole tasks in work; when one talks about specialization one does so in relation to a notion of what the entire task is. One can think of surgery, administration, police work, baking or building a house. What specialization is will thus be a historical matter of perceiving a specific job as consisting of parts (2001, 37). Again, it is impossible to say anything general about work becoming a social process consisting of complex networks where specialized skills are required – be it building a ferry, assembling a mobile phone, going over the latest sales figures with the board or editing a journal. Everything hinges on what purpose specialization serves and the context in which it appears or is quenched. What the *opposite* of specialization is will depend on such contexts. I would agree with what Wittgenstein writes in *Philosophical Investigations*: what an element is will depend on how the context is perceived. There are no *given* ‘simples’ (2009, § 47).

To sum up: the major shortcoming in discussions about division of labor is that diverse aspects of work are not differentiated: specialization of trades or occupations does not necessarily tell us anything illuminating about the fragmentation of tasks within a bicycle factory, a university, a shop or a hospital. The temptation, once again, is that hasty conclusions are drawn about work as a societal process. In other words: an assessment of monotonous work (or fragmentation or loss of control?) should not be conflated with a critique of occupations and specialization as such.



## 2.6 Gorz's critique of work

When Gorz criticizes contemporary work he does not limit himself to a critique of work as a network of functions over which the worker has no control. As I said, on another level, he takes issue with false hopes about meaningful work and a rational society. These are potentially valuable insights. In a world where wage labor is allegedly no longer the main productive force (he claims that machines are a more important productive force) and where permanent jobs for all are no longer possible, Gorz tries to convince us that we have to give up the utopia about employment for all (cf. 1989, 69). He *also* encourages us to give up some of our ideals of meaningful work that makes the human condition easier (1989, 88). In the same spirit, Marcuse claims that alienated work cannot be transformed into anything better. Even though he elaborated an ideal about non-alienated work (in *Eros and Civilization* he called this free play) his point is that the present system of work, as it is organized now, doesn't change its character simply by being owned by the workers or some such change (1969, 105; 155-8).

It is essential to make clear what political project Marcuse, Gorz and similar thinkers are committed to and I will first try to substantiate what I think is valuable in this type of critique. They wrote during a time when Marxism was on the top of the cultural agenda and the Soviet Union still existed. A skeptical approach to the glorification of work was offered as a counterweight to a glorification of productivity. Gorz is hostile to the idea (recurring in Soviet-friendly socialism) that the individual could be happily integrated into society by means of work, vaguely supposed to be based on free collaboration, even though in reality it is carried out within a gigantic network of industrial production. I assume that he thinks about the rhetoric of the humanist schools of management and

the enthusiastic proclamations of a new culture of work: from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, management schools critical of mechanistic Taylorism devised a number of theories about how to best elicit the consent of the employees (cf. Anthony 1977, chapter 10, Braverman 1974). According to Gorz, the way voluntary collaboration is conceived in these theories and management methods emphasizing human interaction remains lofty: it takes little account of lived experience. Instead these management methods flatter themselves by pointing out the fact that collaboration is now a vital part of how work is organized, a progression towards a more humane workplace. Gorz charges them with stopping short at scrutinizing what collaboration means and the tensions that ideas about collaboration may contain. Chiapello's and Boltanski's discussion of management discourse in the nineties (in their *The New Spirit of Capitalism*) reveals an updated version of this idea about humanized work. By creating autonomous teams and by introducing new skills, blue-collar workers (especially) would be made to feel less 'alienated' "because they become wholly responsible for some output, their work is thereby 'enriched', they are freed from authoritarian petty tyrants, and it is easier for them to obtain adjustments that facilitate the performance of their tasks" (2005, 82). According to Gorz, the positive-sounding stress on human interaction within management theories builds on the idea that employees are to take pride in a rationally organized whole. At the same time people are to think of themselves as independent persons (cf. 1989, 39-41).

What I think Gorz gets right is that the ideal of humanized work can be stripped down to a contradictory ideal about rationalized work optimized by management methods cultivating the 'social' dimension of work along with a subjectivist conception about human interaction, the core of which is that the employee is to *feel* or *experience* his work in a

certain way. This critique of 'progressive' management methods shows that Gorz doesn't ignore the historical and economic reasons for his pessimism about work. Even though work has been 'humanized', and even though automation has gotten rid of many dangerous and monotonous tasks, an unambiguous ideal of collaboration or meaningfulness cannot be upheld. As Gorz' shows, 'humanization of work' is a telling description. It is tacitly agreed that the need to make profits sets limits on what changes can be made, but *within* these limits, work can be humanized. Even when some effort has been made to make work more interesting, more stimulating etc., the economic logic that forces – or is *claimed* to force – firms to lay off workers is a sobering reminder of the ultimate power to decide, and thus a reminder of the frameworks of this allegedly free, social collaboration (1989, 64-6). My own position would be that it is with regard to these kinds of observations that it does make sense to talk about wage labor as domination: this observation about the ultimate power to decide reveals a troubling and *structural* form of powerlessness wage labor entails (cf. chapter 5).

Like Marcuse, Gorz dismisses one-sided images of work and free time. In the beginning of *Critique of Economic Reason*, a question I think cannot be easily brushed aside is posed. As some forms of work take less time to finish, free time is released. This also goes for the unremunerated work of the household made more efficient by tools and machines. Home appliances, to take one example, save time for everybody. The promise of these time-saving technological innovations is that they make life easier for everybody when these machines become so cheap that most people can afford them. At best, time-saving technology co-exists with critical debates about what free time is and thus what a good consequence of time-saving technology would be:

'Advances in technology' thus inevitably pose the question of the meaning and content of free time; better still, of the nature of a civilization and a society in which there is far more free time than working time and in which, therefore, economic rationality ceases to govern everybody's lives. (1989, 4)

The crux is that free time is not distributed equally or fairly and this is seen in a polarized class society. Gorz contends that everyone doesn't benefit from automation. A professional elite, dependent on the work of others (cleaners, nannies etc.) to release some free time, work as much as before, but this does not save time for the people, the cleaners and the nannies, earning a living on jobs transferred by this professional elite. Gorz paints the picture of a class society consisting of a professional elite, idealizing their hectic lives, the people who work for them in servant-like ways, and in addition to this, the abundance of people who have no job at all. In a situation where a large section of the population is unemployed or have precarious employments it is easy for the professional elite to buy cheap services as the labor market is structured around a core of workers and a periphery of more replaceable jobholders (1989, 5-7, 67). In the political rhetoric (say, in Finland in 2015), this system is justified by arguments about step-by-step entrance into the labor market and the structural need for low-wage jobs: these services, it is said, create jobs for people who need them.

So, Gorz talks about free time as time that has been set free by increasing productivity, but in a class-society the potential of real freedom is not fulfilled, as the goal here is not freedom from wage labor for everybody. The meaning of free time is thus problematized; if free time is mainly a way to delegate the chores of the people of the professional elite who want their precious free time to be undisturbed by certain everyday activities to people who need the odd jobs they can find to earn a living, then this 'freedom' is immersed in unequal

employment relations. In this case free time is transformed into 'job opportunities' for somebody else; free time is firmly integrated in work-centered society. One of Gorz's main contentions is that we *can* imagine free time less immersed in the sphere of work. This dimension of free time can only be recognized insofar as we break away from economic rationality, where the main purpose of free time is to generate new jobs (1989, 92; 94). This claim is, I think, a serious indictment of what Arendt calls a laboring society, a society revolving around subsistence, jobs and consumption and here Gorz's concept of freedom is perfectly clear: he urges the reader to imagine an alternative to a class society in which we are all dependent on wage labor.

## 2.7. Heteronomous and autonomous

The problems start to accumulate when Gorz gears up for a theoretical approach. Two of the key concepts for him are the distinction between heteronomous and autonomous spheres. I mainly follow his argument in *Critique of Economic Reason*. For Gorz, the central characteristic of heteronomous activities is their functionality. I talked about that above: in "gigantic technical installations and tentacular organizations" the worker's own aims and projects are necessarily sidestepped and the organizational aims have no substantial relation to the goals of the individual (1989, 36). Most of the cases he imagines are jobs executed *exclusively* for external reasons, such as factory work. That said, Gorz adds that heteronomous work is not necessarily oppressive, and it need not be boring: it *can* involve cooperation and camaraderie. Gorz's point is *not* that heteronomous work is deskilling or harmful. Nonetheless, the goals are never defined by the worker. I tried to read this in a charitable way (work as domination) and a way that

shows how the idea about necessary heteronomous work leads to a conflation of diverse aspects of division of labor.

What is his contrast? Theoretically, an autonomous agent “should question every external control over the character, organization and goal of work, including the economic and political decisions which condition it” (1999, 39). Although a reservation is made by adding that this is a ‘theoretical’ claim, it is clear that Gorz thinks that this is what the *ideal* of autonomy amounts to. The autonomous sphere comprises activities done for their own sake, and they are controlled by the individual (1989, 7). As we saw, he claims that wage labor always to some extent entails a lack of control and that is, for him, what makes it heteronomous. He argues that in the case of autonomous activities, there is an internal connection between means and ends: this is what he regards as doing something for its own sake. That something is done ‘for its own sake’ is of course a familiar way to distance a description from instrumentalization. For Gorz, the emphasis lies on *voluntary* commitment, and often, on doing *what I want*. As I noted above (note 35), many different words are used to describe the contrast to heteronomous activities: he talks about freedom, autonomy, voluntary activities, ‘doing what I want’ and self-organization. He also talks about economic and non-economic rationality. In his existentialist way, Gorz renders wage labor as a state in which one is *under the sway of an alien will*; one is acting in accordance with alien purposes.

An aspect that unsettles the distinction between heteronomous and autonomous – and that hints at an ambiguity in what he calls ‘social’ – can be seen in the section in which Gorz talks about three forms of activities. There are 1) heteronomous activities which maintain the functioning of society on a macro level, 2) microsocial activities and 3) autonomous activities shaped by personal desires and inclinations. The second form is a space of in-between, where

the person is not totally in control of the goals of the activities, but where the activities can still be self-organized within a group. This work-for-oneself may involve everything from doing household chores to mutual aid in the community – what matters is that these tasks are not *commodities* on the market and that it is not a part of *institutions* (1989, 154-60). Again, it is apparent how he lumps together commodification and institutions, what he sometimes calls the *socialization* of work. Gorz describes such shared tasks as a matter of people “becoming the masters of their own destinies” (1989, 159). This addition of shared communal tasks is a welcome example that shows the complexity of contrasting wage labor with activities that are not and should not be wage labor. When Gorz points at microsocial activities, he also hints at the very fluid line between things we do for ourselves and things we share with others and things we do for each other. However, for all his insights about the sites where critique and solidarity grow, his understanding of human commonality is often mired by the idea that all human activities can be seen as a *continuum* between the voluntary and enforced activities.

A problem with the contrast between heteronomous and autonomous activities is that it makes us think about work *as a coherent system*. The consequence of Gorz’s ideas about the division of labor is that this system cannot be altogether demolished, but it can be *limited* (cf. Sayers 1991, 17). Like philosophers working in Critical Theory, Gorz sets out to expose a societal tendency by debunking a specific *rationality*. The conflict he describes is between this rationality and its outside, autonomous in relation to wage labor. His view of work as ineluctable subordination inadvertently contributes to a neutralizing understanding of work if the subsequent point is that we must accept some forms of heteronomous work, but that human flourishing takes place in the sphere of self-directed activity. The message is that this latter sphere is to be

*preserved* while, as Sean Sayers suggests, he also seems to say that basic material necessities are to be taken care of by the market that tends to these necessities in an efficient, and therefore satisfactory, way (1991, 17).

I would suggest that a critical assessment of work cannot start from the presupposition that work is problematic because it is not self-directed. As Gorz realizes often enough, the ideology of self-directed work is based on an ambivalent concept of self-direction: the ideal of self-directed work has been an important part of management tactics. Instead of reflecting on the *historically specific* circumstances that make us inclined to regard 'self-directed activities' as an ideal, he jumps to the conclusion that this is what freedom always is.

One could say that the activities people find worthwhile could *not* be described as meaningful because they are self-directed. Is talking to a friend, participating in an Amnesty campaign or helping a colleague with a translation 'self-directed'? One could instead ask in what situations people focus on activities as being self-directed, in what situation activities are perceived *under this description*. The problem is that Gorz, when he tries to explicate why the expansion of wage labor and commodification needs to be criticized and why the economic rationality needs to be limited, emphasizes the alternative as voluntary, 'self-directed' activities. For him, the goal is that more and more activities are to be self-directed. In the following quote from Marcuse, one sees how the image of self-directed activities is easily transformed into a dichotomy that by being enamored with the ideal of freedom ends up in blatant exaggerations: "In a single toss of a ball, the player achieves an infinitely greater triumph of human freedom over objectification than in the most powerful accomplishment of technical labor." (quoted in Wolin 2001,



161) <sup>37</sup> One of my objections is that the contrasts Gorz makes are so rigid that the multiple roles work and non-work occupy

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<sup>37</sup> Several writers critical of modern work dream of the possibility of work as free play. Fourier is an early example of a thinker who loads work with aesthetic and libidinal energy (Granter 2009, 36-9). Marcuse is a part of this tradition and he draws on Schiller's ideas about play and aesthetics (Schiller 2008). Marcuse elaborates a contrast between alienated work (work in which one becomes a part of a machinery and which is completely determined by its function) – and free play. He is not satisfied with mere negative dialectics; he wants to say something about what work could be outside a technicized apparatus. For him, play has no external purpose and is not restricted in any sense. Play signifies an activity that makes up its own rules – it is self-directed and it is not determined by anything external. The aesthetic dimension of free play manifests the reconciliation between man and nature, and it is also immersed in what Marcuse sees as human potentiality (1969, 176-7).

I find Marcuse's concept of free play symptomatic in its being a concept dependent on its opposites, alienation labor and instrumentalization. "Play is *unproductive* and *useless* precisely because it cancels the repressive and exploitative traits of labor and leisure; it 'just plays' with the reality (Marcuse 1969, 195). Marcuse's invocation of free play is typical in the sense that it contrasts technicized society with *aesthetics*: Marcuse sees free play as an aesthetic expression. This contrast can also be detected in Gorz's writings.

What makes so many work critics resort to art as a form of escape from work society? When writers try to articulate good work they frequently turn to creative work, *poiesis*, work as a form of art, as an ideal. Sean Sayers is a typical example. Here he articulates what according to him are Marx's ideas about the ultimate form of freedom: "Artistic creation, by contrast, is truly free activity. It is not in the service of material needs and its product is not for consumption: determination by natural desire is entirely transcendental. Such an activity is not a means to the end of satisfying material needs, it has no economic functions. Its aims are aesthetic, not economic. It is an end in itself." (Sayers) 2011, 68)

The intuition here seems to be that art represents autonomy and non-instrumental productivity – this is without doubt an understanding of art that can, and should, be questioned. In a spirit of optimism, many authors set out to delineate the possibility of a new, post-industrial era of work. I think Shershow is right when he says that many theorists conjure up an image of work as the production of a creative subject. The problem is that preoccupation with work as free play or the production of subjects risks bringing with it a concept of autonomy and creativity without anchoring in

in our lives in the form of wage labor as well as working activities that are not paid work, are reduced to *one single measure* of what is worth striving for. In *Critique of Economic Reason* 'to be free from wage labor' adheres to an ideal that is thought to be the essence of what it is to be human.

Against this image of freedom as essence, a very different approach to critique of work would start from the *cases* in which it makes a difference that a specific activity is *not wage labor*. Things we do for each other, such as offering someone a meal, doing a plumbing work or fixing a broken computer, can involve plenty of exertion or skills, skills that may have been acquired within a job or formal training. We do things for each other as give-and-take favors or as a dimension of friendship. It may be significant that these services are not done as wage labor (even though money may be involved, as when I offer the driver money for the gasoline if s/he offers me a ride) but the reasons for this vary. I may appreciate the neighbor's kind attitude in fixing my computer in hir spare time, as it took hir several hours to do it. In another situation I may offer my friend money for giving me some freshly caught fish, but s/he refuses it because, as s/he says, s/he enjoys fishing (one could also imagine hir being puzzled or even hurt by the idea of remuneration). In another case, a politician is criticized for paying workers under the table for a small renovation project around the house. The politician is blamed for undermining the critique of gray economy s/he has fiercely supported. Those who criticize hir think that this case cannot be seen as 'small favors' between people; it is work

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moral dimensions: the purposes of work are, once again, seen as unimportant if creativity is valued in itself. However, my objection to an aesthetization of work doesn't imply that I would make a strict distinction between, for example, use/function and aesthetic dimensions. (On the role of the aesthetic in everyday life and daily work, cf. Saito 2007).

comparable with wage labor. What can be seen as 'comparable with wage labor' is often contested.

A central theme in the thesis re-surfaces: new concepts of work emerge as new *contrasts* are made. In a way, I think Gorz would agree with this as it is important for him that care work for example *unsettles* a traditional concept of wage labor. He tries to elucidate tensions within, as he sees it, the concept of work. Regrettably, for him, this turns into a rather essentialist – and at the same time wobbly – distinction between activities that are to be preserved as voluntary tasks and activities that *can* be jobs (or: commodities, professions, socialized functions?). Care changes meaning in a worrying way when it becomes 'work', Gorz argues. He concludes that it would be best if care was to be performed by volunteers or family members and that all such tasks should be de-professionalized (1989, 142-6). Again: what he is unable to do is to give a description of what exactly 'heteronomous activities' mean here, and in what way they clash with what he thinks should be voluntary concerns between people. Does the harm consist in care being a *job*, or a *social function*, or is the problem that care becomes a *commodity* on a market? Is it really true that all forms of standardized and regularized care are distortions of activities that should belong to the sphere of self-regulation? (cf. Sayers 1991, 18) And to also question the other side of the dichotomy: what does it mean that care is performed 'voluntarily'? Does it make sense to say that tired parents take care of their ill kids 'voluntarily'? *When* would this be said?

My point is that specific situations draw our attention to particular senses in which something takes place *beyond* wage labor. Gorz himself also looks in other, more fruitful directions. He warns us that some of our vital needs, unpolluted water and air, for example, are at risk of being commercialized. Thus, he asserts their non-commercial value in contrast to things that have exchange value (Gorz 1989, 236-

7). That these vital needs must not be commercialized is hugely important to point out, given the doctrine of job creation, an ideology according to which every new job on the market is laudable. His critique is aimed at the link between this seemingly boundless job creation and equally seemingly boundless consumption. "There is no shortage of work, since there is virtually no limit to the needs we have to satisfy" (ibid). Here the importance of the question of inside/outside the system of wage labor is easy to grasp. The target of the critique is commodified needs and unsustainable job creation. Gorz's argument shows that, for example, the hope that so-called 'green jobs' will save the economy must be an illusion if the bottom line still is that *ever more jobs* need to be created and that the economic system is inevitably expansive. As Gorz suggests, the goal should be to *reduce* jobs, to prepare ourselves for a future that does not revolve around job creation.

Talking about 'inside/outside the system of wage labor' *can* thus be politically pertinent, as the critique of growth by means of green jobs shows. It is just that this pertinence is lost when it is drenched in the idea that heteronomous work should be limited and autonomous activities should be expanded. The best one can make of this contention is to show that the scope of wage labor is not settled, and that this should lead us to reflect on *the hazards of commodified relations* (Gorz 1989, 102). Relations built around commodities can be distinguished from relations autonomous of such relations: relations based on sharing, gleaning, learning and free giving, for example. 'Autonomous' *can* be a fruitful concept and as I said his critique of job-creation is apt: the world turns into 'untapped residues of employment', the goal is that tasks that we used to take care of ourselves should now "occupy the greatest number of people and absorb as much working time as possible". He thinks about cleaning services and the food

industry (1989, 154-5). Gorz tries to create a very different entry into the dilemma of scarce wage labor than the present ideology of job creation. 'More work' should not be the general goal of society.

## **2.8 A new blob**

We now need to inquire into how Gorz thinks about 'economic' activities. This is a key concept, as the entire *Critique of Economic Reason* is structured around this concept. For Gorz, 'economic' not only coincides with commercial activities, but in addition to this he sees what he sometimes calls 'socially necessary production' as cases of economic activity, defined as instrumentalized economic rationality. So what is Gorz's position with regard to 'socially necessary activities'? No absolute opposition between necessity and freedom is construed. Gorz points out that taking care of one's own things and caring for others don't fit the description of external requirements. These chores make up an aspect of the stream of life (1989, 58-9). He explicitly says that freedom is *not* the opposite of being enslaved by necessity. As we have seen, his position is that autonomy can, to a certain extent, exist within heteronomous activities (1989, 93), which seems to be the same as saying that wage labor may contain a certain amount of individual independence. The main line of argument is this one:

We are therefore less in thrall to the 'necessities' of existence than to the external determination of our lives and our activity by the imperatives of a social apparatus of production and organization which provides willy-nilly both the essential and the superfluous, the economic and the anti-economic, the productive and the destructive (1989, 166).

Our lives are governed more by the social apparatus than by necessity, he claims. Heteronomy is thus by no means

synonymous with necessity. As we have seen, the most important trait of heteronomy is its being a *social, functionalized apparatus*. Nonetheless, when he talks about the autonomous sphere he appeals to precisely the contrast between freedom and necessity. For him, autonomous activities are not, as we saw, governed by an external goal. Even though they are not opposite to necessity, if they are *dictated* by necessity, they remain formal, Gorz says, dismissing the ideal of autonomy as craft work or alternative market economies (ibid). As I said, even though he makes a distinction between heteronomy and necessity, he contrasts necessary societal production and autonomous activities. The latter are not just play, they can also be productive projects – the important characteristic is that they are not part of society’s basic infrastructure. The implication seems to be that autonomous activities must be free from all kinds of constraints, and thus they can’t have the role of necessary tasks: “they have to stem from a conscious choice which nothing forces me to make” (1989, 168).

So what are the implications for how he thinks about work? Gorz defines work in the economic sense as taking place in the public sphere, as having use value and because it is aimed at exchange, the job performance must be measurable in time (1989, 138-9). In many cases, working for wages deviates from these criteria, but that only reflects the tensions within work. As we saw, he states that self-directed, free pursuits are inherently different from an economic logic. In the present society, autonomy can only exist when we *already* make a living, when we have *already* secured and organized the means of life. Autonomous activities thus take place beyond societal production and earning a living: Gorz even says that the autonomous sphere must be *excluded* from economic concerns (1989, 97-8). The unresolved question is whether Gorz, who argues that heteronomous work can be limited, not abolished, really ever challenges the idea that

autonomy always presupposes heteronomous (alienating) work?

Even so, the relation between the heteronomous and the autonomous sphere is by no means a rigid one. In a section that brings Oscar Negt and Henri Lefebvre to mind, he emphasizes the obligations we have as *citizens* to critically scrutinize jobs and industry and, according to him, as we acquire more autonomous free time, this form of critical inquiry could increase (1989, 82-3, 93, cf. Negt 1986). He also concedes that protests and activism within the sphere of wage labor may challenge economic rationality.<sup>38</sup> In a later book, *Reclaiming Work*, Gorz (like Simone Weil) asserts that workers should claim responsibility for work in a much wider sense than what is the case when jobs are seen as a narrow set of tasks. Workers should assume responsibility in a process of distributing work; work should be controlled by the workers to a greater extent (1999, 46). However, the point he holds on to is that we cannot get rid of heteronomous activities: heteronomous work has an enormous role in our lives, Gorz says, and this role should be diminished so that there will be more space and time for autonomous activities (1989, 93). For him, this does not mean that we are forever chained to the kingdom of necessity. Most of our needs are taken care of by

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<sup>38</sup> For example, arguments about what is a sufficient living wage do not have a purely economic character and the same thing can be said about conflicts about the content of work (1989, 116). What I talked about in chapter 1, in connection with the discussion about Arendt and her concept of the political reappears: the debate about a living wage reveals deep differences of understanding what is at stake in arguing about whether something is a political (or a mere individual) matter at all. These differences are revealed in attempts to make clear what it really means to work at jobs that are so poorly paid that one is not able to pay the necessities of life (Ehrenreich, 2002). Such appeals to a living wage cannot be reduced to an economic sphere. Appealing to a living wage often has to do with bringing out in which ways poverty structures and sets limits on daily life.

means of industrialized work, but it would be strange to one-dimensionally label this as 'necessities' as so much of what is produced is not in an immediate sense 'necessary' (1989, 166).

He is right in being suspicious of false claims about the inherent meaningfulness of work and unwarranted optimism regarding 'humanized' work. The problem, as I see it, is that Gorz's attitude towards wage labor reveals an ambivalent idea about what he would see as a better society: the goal seems to be to reduce something bad (loss of freedom) in order to increase the amount of free time. As I have said, the problem is that the argument misfires in its definition of what is destructive in work relations (heteronomous relations) and that the argument leans on sweeping and ambivalent ideals of 'self-organization' against a machinery of heteronomous work that we have to accept as a part of our lives. I would agree with Marcuse that the idea that we could live our lives 'part-time' is dangerous, even if the idea is that free time should be increased.

Let me develop my doubts about Gorz's account of heteronomous relations, now through a more specific discussion about how he thinks about economic rationality. He admits that economic rationality, even though connected with capitalism, may have diverse expressions. He nonetheless maintains that it has a common root, calculation. Calculation typically cleanses activities of all other considerations: no other aim than 'more' fits into the picture. The economic rationality excludes and dismisses qualitative judgments (1989, 121, 124). Gorz concludes that economic rationality *can* have no other role than heteronomy (1989, 169), and that there thus can be no *alternative* economies. Economy is economic rationality in the above sense, even though economy need not be *capitalism* – even in socialism economic



rationality must exist (Lodziak & Tatman 1997, 80).<sup>39</sup> The effect of this is the same as when Arendt talks about necessity: an alien force is assembled and even though it is undoubtedly understood to stem from our active ways of upholding and reproducing a system, it seems eerily dissociated from social formations we have brought upon ourselves. Gorz's functionalized and instrumentalized economic rationality is in this sense quite similar to what Pitkin called 'a blob' (cf. 1.4.2), a necessary but eerily expansive sphere attacking us from the outside. It is as if a calculating rationality intrudes on our craving for freedom.

As Feenberg writes, critics of technological rationality or economic rationality may unwittingly *affirm* the perspective of the technocrats themselves; critics unwittingly commit themselves to the technocratic view that the field of technical or economic rationality cannot be radically changed (1999). Even so, as I said, Gorz himself wavers. Sometimes he navigates towards the view that technology is neutral in the sense that *efficiency* is the main way we should evaluate it when it is used in the proper spheres of life. At times he stresses that technology is *always* steeped in values (a similar tension can be found in Marcuse's thinking, as we saw in 2.3). This once again brings us to what at least to some extent seems to be the consequence of Gorz's argument: the heteronomous sphere and economic rationality make up a necessary part of societal production so that tensions arise only when the economic sphere threatens to annihilate the autonomous sphere.

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<sup>39</sup> Gorz seems to have changed his mind as he wrote *Reclaiming Work*, in which he dedicates a long section to local exchange trading systems (1999, 102-8). His point there seems to be precisely that plenty of activities have the character of co-operation, distribution of tasks, work, economy and social interaction at the same time.

As Gorz and Marcuse project a technological logic (even though this logic is situated within a capitalist context), their perspective makes it hard to discern the difference between ideology and praxis. What is really taking place and what is a case of ideological presentation? I don't say that this is a clear-cut distinction, but for critical purposes it is useful to be aware of it. Let me illustrate what I have in mind. Andrew Feenberg mentions the example of the debate about child labor and the length of the working day in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Industrialists and politicians strongly asserted that regulations would be the end of the industry: they claimed that child labor *had* to be used and the working day *must* remain unregulated (1999, 82). This can be seen as an ideological outburst in which the industrialists advocated that this is what it takes for the industry to survive, which was of course not true at all as companies found other ways to make profits. It can also be seen as a practical defense of interests: in this historical situation, child labor generated considerable profits.

An appeal to the principle of economic rationality does not capture the complexity of what is going on in this example. This is indicated by the present situation in the same countries in which the debate took place (England, say). In these countries, the use of child labor is not seen as an option to be considered in the drive for low costs. That children don't spend their childhoods at work has become what could be called a social fact (Feenberg 1999, 98). The point is that child labor no longer – in these specific countries, that is – appears on the horizon of what is, even *economically*, possible to do.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Often, it *does* make sense to talk about purely economic concerns. For example: 'the committee looked at the question as a matter of economic feasibility but did not take other concerns into account.' Just as often it makes sense to talk about an economic *logic*. Marx is doing this in the *Capital*, but that investigation presupposes a certain form of abstraction. He tries to elucidate a capitalist process and does not pretend that this capitalist logic simply is what

This type of example shows that it is not helpful to render economic reasons into an abstract principle, even ‘economic rationality’ may, as in this example, be *appealed to* as a defense of particular interests. That is precisely why this economic rationality could not and should not be taken at face value. Instead, it is crucial to look at the tensions *within* a debate where economic factors are contested or interpreted in certain ways (cf. Cockburn 2011). To sum up: in the beginning of the chapter, I wanted to read Marcuse charitably by looking at how what from a specific perspective can be seen as quasi-necessity can *become* real when a praxis is structured around it. This doesn’t contradict the need for a distinction between an ideological idea about necessity and praxis. ‘One-dimensionality’ can also be a way in which the status quo is upheld by people appealing to economic necessity as an indisputable reason. In one and the same situation, we may both want to call for a critique of rhetorical exclusions of alternative possibilities, while also acknowledging how the present system is upheld by means of a world of institutions, laws and dependencies.

## **2.9 Freedom and dependency: a basic income?**

What does it mean to be free from work? As we saw, for Gorz and Marcuse, this is the essential question and Gorz in particular focuses on how we can become less dependent on the relations of wage labor. He calls for redistribution of work (sharing jobs rather than polarizing the labor market) but he also calls for a basic income. He was by no means the first to present the idea that has figured in political debates since the end of the First World War (van Parijs 1992, 6). As we saw,

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every particular capitalist actor would understand himself to be driven by. He explains the framework in which producers *become* competitors.

Gorz insists that autonomy requires free time, and he is at pains to show that this is the opposite of what capital relies on. Capitalism demands and creates a worker desperate to get and keep a job, and people usually have no choice but to earn their living through wage labor (1989, 119, 1999, 56). Jobs are scarce and this fact aggravates the asymmetry between employer and jobseeker/employee. The point is that in the capitalist system the amount we have to work in order to make a living depends on things over which the individual has very little influence (such as how much a specific job is paid or the general standards of the working day). One is usually hired in a way that makes it natural that one does not quit the job when one has enough money to take some time off. Capitalism presupposes that people will work continually in order to make a living. As many historians have shown (Thompson 1972), it was far from easy to make people submit to this rhythm of continuous work when the factory system was still in its early phase. Nowadays, breaks from the working life are understood as an exception, and such breaks are often seen as problematic, as is evident from political debates over parental leave. However, these questions are frequently on the political agenda, which the Finnish system of subventions for a year off ('job alternation leave') for employed workers clearly shows.<sup>41</sup>

Incomes are society's main way of distributing wealth. This means that people take part of society's wealth by working, and that wealth is mostly created in the system of paid work. Wages provide a weighty income for the state in the form of taxes. All in all, especially in countries where the welfare state plays a marginal role, social security is to a great extent

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[http://www.tem.fi/en/work/labour\\_legislation/job\\_alternation\\_leave\\_study\\_leave\\_family\\_leave\\_remote\\_work](http://www.tem.fi/en/work/labour_legislation/job_alternation_leave_study_leave_family_leave_remote_work)

centered upon employment. Many writers since Marx have pointed out that this system makes people dependent on work in a way that is quickly brought to light when a person finds himself standing outside the labor market. A trend in the latest thirty years is allegedly that those who have a secure position constitute an elite in society: work is increasingly precarized (cf. Standing 1999, 2011) – precarious work has been described in more narrow terms, as specific circumstances surrounding employment, but it has also been used in a more open-ended way, to describe the work and market-related circumstances that make life itself precarious (Precarias a la deriva 2009). From this, debaters have drawn the conclusion that our dependency on work is harmful – it manifests a split in society between those who have steady jobs and the rest of the population who have no job at all or who are desperately trying to hold on to part-time jobs or an employment with irregular hours. Many of these critics suggest a solution that would create the precondition for a life less dominated by the capriciousness of the labor market. A basic income for everyone would dissociate the right to an income from the right to a wage: basic sustenance would no longer be dependent on the fluctuations on the labor market. To have an income would not be the same as to earn a wage (Gorz 1989, 204).<sup>42</sup> Philippe van Parijs defines a basic income as an amount of money paid unconditionally, with no work requirements or a means test of whether one is eligible for it. It would thus be paid to all citizens and it would be irrespective of other

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<sup>42</sup> Many writers, Gorz included, worry about a basic income becoming a mere symptom of this polarization of society, so that some people are simply left to take care of themselves, with minimal support – a basic income then remains a mere temporary palliative and it may even be a supportive structure for fragmented, insecure jobs. A basic income would then strengthen harmful tendencies on the labor market and so job insecurity would be *even more* accepted (1989, 130). These are, I think, serious reservations.

sources of income (the implication for other transfers is debated) (1992, 3-4).

The arguments in favor of a basic income have several political homes. Milton Friedman and others have argued that a basic income would lessen the state bureaucracy – but if the basic income is too high it will make people lazy. For like-minded people, the aim of a basic income (or a negative tax, which is not synonymous with a basic income, but shares some elements with it) is then to make it worthwhile to accept a job and so the incentives to enter the labor market and accept *any* job must be optimized. I suppose the assumption here is that a basic income would be lower than the present forms of unemployment support. The ‘temptation’ of living on unemployment support instead of accepting a job would allegedly disappear. From this point of view, a basic income supports economic growth, deregulation and a flexible labor market (Gorz 1999, 81-2, cf. Foucault 2008, 203-4). The hope here is that a basic income would spur entrepreneurship.

Many people on the left consider a basic income a promising challenge of the compulsion to earn a position in society through work (Weeks 2011).<sup>43</sup> Instead of making people accept low-paying and precarious jobs, a basic income

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<sup>43</sup> Up until *Reclaiming Work*, Gorz argued that a basic income should be associated with work in the sense that a basic income should be coupled with an obligation to guarantee work for all citizens. The basic income would still be earned, even though it would not be dependent on employment (1989, 208). It is evident that he thinks about this ‘society service’ in other terms than workfare, the system of obligatory requirements of work for being granted welfare allowance. Gorz argues that workfare is based on the idea that unemployed people are work-shy individuals who must be forced to work (cf. 1999, 81) In *Reclaiming Work*, Gorz abandoned the idea about ‘society service’, instead claiming that the basic income should be unconditional and also arguing that compulsory labor alongside the labor market is untenable and that it blurs the line between work (as defined by Gorz) and non-work, for example caring for others (1999, 85-7).

could make it possible to refuse these kinds of positions (Gorz 1999, 83). One of the main strands of this idea about a basic income is to provide an alternative to the contemporary state of wage labor and to acknowledge that the impossibility of full-time employment for everyone is *not* a temporary situation that could be fixed by means of Keynes-style stimulation programs. Critics of work like Gorz argue that basic income is the best way to distribute wealth in a society that can no longer provide life-long secure work for all citizens (and a society in which resources are thus distributed unequally). They reject the image of work as a ‘shared burden’, or shared responsibility, and instead the importance of other activities is recognized. A basic income sufficient to cover basic living expenses would create the preconditions for a system in which wage labor would not structure the primary trajectory and outline of life. Other life options than employment become feasible. Other practices – other forms of co-operation and other forms of social life – than wage labor are given the space to evolve (Gorz 1999, 78-9; 83). The practical formulations of how a basic income would be realized (how it is to be financed and whether it should cover basic subsistence) differ in just as many ways as the explanations of what a basic income would be good for. Experiments with basic incomes have been carried out in the USA, Canada, Iran, Namibia and India (Birnbaum 2013).<sup>44</sup>

What makes debates about a basic income interesting is that they reveal *assumptions about work* and this is an instance where I think it is relevant to highlight tensions going as deep as being a disagreement about the extent to which work is to be regarded as the center of society and human life. Compare these views and how *possibilities* and *impossibilities* are articulated:

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<sup>44</sup> For several accounts of the idea of a basic income, cf. Van Parijs 1992.

- (1) A basic income would endanger the work ethic and it would institutionalize, fleeing from the burden of work – free-riding on the system. If a basic income made it possible to live without work, many people would lack an incentive to seek employment. Thus, a basic income would be harmful for society as it would make people passive. A system where wealth is distributed in a way not dependent on work is thus practically impossible (tax revenues would decrease because so few would work) or even morally *dangerous*.
- (2) A basic income would make people more active in the sense that they have time to develop capacities not defined by what is considered productive from a labor market point of view. Other things than paid work could be appreciated. A basic income makes it possible to enjoy friendship, be with one's family, attend to things that need to be done, make art. Even though a system of basic income can develop into something revolutionary from the point of view of work society as we know it today, it would not be a very drastic change to go through with a basic income, considering the present system of social subsidies. From a practical, administrative point of view, a basic income has to be carefully calculated so that it works optimally. From a political and existential point of view, it is impossible to estimate the subversive potential of this proposal beforehand.

The debate brings some controversies to the surface. Does employment stand for dependence or independence? Is the fundamental goal in life to have a job or is the goal rather that people should have the possibility to dedicate themselves to a multitude of things they consider meaningful? Is the right to employment more important than the right to decline a



harmful or precarious job? Should and can work be conceptualized as an obligation people have to society?

A question that is almost always sparked by the suggestion of a basic income is the following: would people still be willing to work or would they plant themselves on the couch? The question is typically articulated as a concern about the *nature* of work, rather than wage labor. Should we say that work is inherently repulsive so that nobody would work if they were not forced to do it for economic reasons? A puzzling perspective is evoked: if people were not *forced* to work, they would degenerate into idlers and loafers. In this fashion, activity is interpreted as work-related. Critics of work like Gorz argue that the worry about incentives is *symptomatic*. As the philosopher Oscar Negt observes: this fear could be said to be a capitalist fantasy, intelligible only from the point of view of ideologies about work and the forms of coercion that the world of wage labor is imbued with (1986, 181-6) The jargon about there being a need for external incentives to get people to 'work' tends to rely on a mixed message. In mainstream political arguments, work is praised as a virtue and a source of independence and self-esteem. However, when political proposals are made that would make it possible for people to reject bad jobs – jobs that put a person in a precarious position or jobs that are injurious for the health – and thus to become more independent of wage labor as coercion, a common response is that people won't bother to get a job if they are not forced to. The rhetoric about self-realization is exchanged for a language of external discipline or external incentives (Gorz 1999, 98). Gorz puts his finger on a worrying tendency in debates focusing on what measures are to be taken in order to drag people out on the labor market. He and Marcuse try to imagine a life not incarcerated by coercive patterns, and they try hard to bring out how traits that may not on the face of it strike one as coercive at all – getting a job as a precondition for

accessing primary rights and entitlements such as good health care or a decent pension – *could* still be understood in that way so as to get a clearer grasp of how our lives play out in the society we live in. What the debates about basic income reveal is that reflection on the domination of work has a practical underpinning and that reflecting on dependency on work goes together with a host of issues connected with work, such as conceptions about obligations to society, ideas about work as coercion and various understandings of liberation from work. In the next chapter I will say more about the dangers and the potentials of this perspective.

## **2.10 Concluding words**

The main tension this chapter has introduced is the utopia about automation and free time on the one hand, and, on the other hand, wage labor as coercion, leisure as the promise of job-creation and humanized work within the limits set by profits. This tension is an important one, but it loses its edge if the conception of work as coercion relies on problematic generalizations or one-sided ideals. Gorz's idea about societal functions and freely developed time doesn't meet the needs of a substantial critique of the contemporary system of work, nor does it provide a clear account of the relation between wage labor and life beyond wage labor. I discussed the idea that work is enmeshed in a general division of labor and I tried to give an outline of the problems with that description when it is disengaged from political debates. In the previous chapter, I focused on the tensions in the concept of necessity and what it means to regard necessity as a burden or as an expanding field. Here I wanted to say more about the next step in a debate that continues on Arendt's trail: what does freedom from the jobholders' society mean? How is this freedom to be articulated? Why would one say that this freedom is possible,

and yet why is it so difficult to spell out this possibility without falling into the trap of optimism about technological progress? It was evident that Gorz and Marcuse regard freedom from work in quite different terms than Arendt. As you remember, for her, freedom stood in contrast with necessity, and for her the dangerous idea is that automation in itself offers freedom in the form of liberation. For Gorz and Marcuse the main focus is on liberation from work integrated in a societal apparatus, and, for them, freedom is defined as the human activities taking place outside this apparatus. From this, we see that the meaning of 'compulsory' varies and that writers attend to diverse aspects of work; work as repetitive and anti-political toil (Arendt) or work as a functionalized sphere (Marcuse/Gorz). The reflection on the debate about a basic income was intended to show that liberation from compulsory work is a perfectly intelligible ideal, but some of the strands of Marcuse's and Gorz's analyses are categorical, and even distorting, as they posit the alternatives as being functionalized work *or* sovereign self-regulation. In the example about a basic income I wanted to suggest that talk about liberation is no mere philosophical quandary – political differences are at stake and they concern what 'the work critics' are writing about: the compulsion to work. The merit of Marcuse and Gorz is that they show that the concept of freedom cannot be said to have a fixed content; what is needed is an *acknowledgement* of the possibility that the world can be different. This was, I think, Arendt's project in *The Human Condition* as well. In the next chapter, in connection with an analysis of Kathi Weeks' ideas about liberation from work this idea will resurface. I now shift my attention from the question about work and domination to an inquiry into ways of perceiving work-centered life, busyness and what Weeks calls 'the work ethic'.

## Chapter Three: Work and busyness

Let us for once think through this thought: to accomplish something in the world. One hears so much of both impatient and misleading talk about this. To be sure, it is well that all should wish to do something. It is indeed earnestness to desire it, but should it not also be earnestness to understand in oneself and in life precisely what is meant by saying that one man accomplishes such an exceptional amount, or that another man seems to accomplish nothing at all (Kierkegaard 1956, 135).

### 3.1 Introduction

Work has an immensely prominent role in contemporary society. In typical formulations of the aim of schools, psychiatry, medical practice, and welfare policies the goal is to make as many people as possible enter into or remain in the labor market. Employment is placed at the center of societal strivings, and gaining access to the labor market is seen as a primary aspiration. One of the *existentially* most radical forms of the dominating position of work is a rendering of the question ‘what will you become’ into ‘how will you make a living?’ In her book *The Problem with Work* (2011) the political theorist Kathi Weeks probes into the background of why work has achieved this role. The present chapter enters into dialogue with Weeks’ views because I find her reasoning to be a challenging, but far from unproblematic, account of critique of work. I also think that her book is a representative and radical contribution to a contemporary debate about the relation between work and life. Weeks tries to get to grips with the roles work has by critically analyzing what she calls ‘the work ethic’. What makes her approach noteworthy is, in my view, that she highlights a number of tensions in the relation between work and life. In this sense, I see a kinship

between her reasoning and my own. The worry articulated in her book is this: if we regard work as potentially meaningful and if we take for granted that we should demand better and more meaningful work, we have committed ourselves to a hope which is easily taken hostage by the status quo.

The problem [...] is how to advance demands for better work – how to make good on work's promise of social utility and individual meaning – in a way that does not simply echo and reaffirm the prescription for a lifetime of work (Weeks 2011, 108).

Weeks' book can be read as a provocation, or as an appeal to assess the role of work. What happens when work – and the very system of work – is embraced so uncritically that we lose a sense for it is *for*? To live is to work, but what this means seems *too* obvious: we simply have to do it: to live is to work. Weeks makes an astute observation: as soon as questions about why we work are seen as perverse or irrelevant, as soon as the topic of work is surrounded by self-evident truths, something is awry. Even though wage labor has a fundamental role in present society, we must, she maintains, try to imagine a society very different from the present one. In her book, she challenges us to think boldly about *living differently* – as she calls it, “a life beyond work” (2011, 227). This demand for radical change already exists in some sense, she argues, for example in the political desires expressed in proposals about a basic income or shorter working hours (cf. 2011, 229).

Theorists of work such as Arlie Hochschild (2003), ‘Bifo’ Berardi (2009) and Kathi Weeks maintain that contemporary forms of work absorb and threaten the self to an increasing extent. My main resource in work is my own self, my emotions and my relations to others. Whereas earlier thinkers worried about work being alienating and disengaged from life, we could now, they argue, instead talk about how work

colonizes life.<sup>45</sup> If the problem used to be that the worker was alienated from his work the concern is now that people are *immersed* in their work in a way that makes it increasingly hard to distinguish work from non-work (Weeks 2007, 240-3). I don't think that this is a valid or sufficient analysis of all contemporary forms of work. Most of these work critics can be charged with constructing hasty diagnostic remarks about 'what work is like now' and the changes work has gone through. However, instead of focusing on such critique, I want to use Weeks' perspective to elucidate the role work comes to have when the question about what it is for is avoided, or when this question is repressed. These critical writers dissect skewed forms of meaning by showing multiple manifestations of what Weeks calls a work ethic that makes people look away from ways in which work takes charge of their lives in a problematic or even dangerous way. A common theme in contemporary critical accounts of work is that the elevation of work (all forms of work) as the central outlet for creativity and self-realization stands for a one-sided perspective on human life. In other words: the ideal of work as self-realization skews the ways in which things are, or can be, important in our lives.

The present chapter is dedicated to a theme that earlier and later chapters also touch upon: in which ways are questions about the meaning and purpose of work repressed? The aim is to prepare the ground for topics that will arise in later chapters. The point is not so much to attack a certain idea and to present an alternative thesis of my own, as it is to explore interrogations of work in its shape of a value that is taken for granted as the ultimate good. I will focus on Kathi Weeks'

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<sup>45</sup> The expression of 'colonization' used in this way can be traced to Habermas and his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1989) in which he chronicles the demise of the lifeworld and the expansion of markets and power relations that appear as natural entities.

description of the work ethic of hard work and self-realization. She presents this work ethic as an ambiguous rhetorical pattern. An overall aim is to scrutinize the image of a life where work has a *seemingly* unequivocally positive role, as self-realization, or as the hustle and bustle of the active life. One of the points is to pin down the expectations of life that appear here: life is something that one can take a break from as one is engaged in hectic work projects, or life is something to be managed. I will also take a look at Weeks' framework for reflecting on alternatives. She scrutinizes basic assumptions about what life. Important for this quest is that demands and affective questions, rather than clear-cut policy proposals, are understood as constructive critical tools.

I will also give an outline of what I see as shortcomings of Weeks' treatment of the work ethic. Even though her critical approach is astute, there is something that this perspective does not take account of. To talk about a work ethic is not only, I will argue, to take notice of a praxis-entangled pattern. I propose that the idea about a work ethic does not even *make sense* if the *existential* temptations and attitudes inherent in and expressed through such patterns are overlooked. It is not that Weeks is entirely insensitive to this *ethical* aspect, but it is rather that the vocabulary she uses does not do justice to the struggles in how we relate to our jobs. The reason why I find this form of critique relevant is that it is precisely the tensions of the work ethic Weeks herself highlights. One of her main questions has an ethical dimension: how can we reach beyond a naturalization and normalization of waged work? In order to cast Weeks' question in what I see as a radicalized form I will turn to Kierkegaard who, perhaps quite surprisingly, provides an excellent description of what it means that work turns into an escape from and a repression of concerns about meaning. His verdict on the life of frenzied activity, the *busy* life, culminates in existential questions: what does it mean to live

whole-heartedly? What does it mean to dedicate oneself to what is good? My aim in this chapter is thus to show that it is precisely these kinds of questions that are quenched when work takes on the role of self-realization or manifestations of hard, 'dedicated' work.

### 3.2 Busyness and suspension of existential worries

[Each] of us has to "make oneself" – to choose a position best suited to one's potential and achieve it. But to do so one must know what one's potential is (not an easy thing to do in most cases before the potential is realized) – one has to "find oneself," in other words (Greenfield 2005, 331).

Leah Greenfield writes about a culture in which everything appears to be a burden. Leisure is a burden. Family is a burden. Work is a burden. One is busy and one knows one has to prioritize and make the right choices. She is puzzled by this agonized search for the right choices. What is it that afflicts these people who live in a rather comfortable society? It is not hard toil, nor a sheer lack of time. What she describes is a form of joylessness; unsurmountable burdens wherever one looks. She calls this phenomenon *busyness*, a very ambiguous mode of being active with an equally ambiguous sense of commitment. Alan Ryan writes that 'busyness' usually means the opposite of real, productive, hard and serious work. The busy person is all appearance, and little substance: busyness is a form of pretense (Ryan 2005, 427-8). The positive-seeming image of the busy life is contrasted with a concept of busyness as sham or at least as an ambiguous attitude towards life.

Weeks for her part is not content with a neat distinction between honest toil and jobs that have only an appearance of seriousness. In what follows I carry on with Weeks' project by looking at two ideals of work where I think it actually makes sense to talk about busyness: the ideal of hard work and the



ideal of work as self-realization. These are often seen as opposites, but I will show that they are related: in both cases, the celebration of work risks leading to a view where it is unclear exactly *what* is celebrated. The nature of the commitment to one's job/to work is unclear, and this is where I think busyness enters the picture. With Kierkegaard, I will talk about busyness as *forgetfulness*. I will interpret busyness in this ambiguous form as anxiety related to work that instead of being described as just that, often appears as the purpose of life: hard work, self-realization and work-family balance. However, I do not agree with Alain de Botton, who claims that work *in itself* is an expression of anxiety and that *all* work amounts to busyness in the sense of holding a basic level of anxiety at bay (cf. de Botton (2009)). What I would like to describe is rather an existential *role* work comes to have: in contrast to de Botton's contention, this does not reveal what life *must* always be like, but what life can *become*. The basic question is, I take it: what kind of commitment does our involvement in work express?

The concept of busyness needs to be combined with other ways in which work is detached from purposes. Weeks' critique takes its point of departure from two things: the elevation of 'productive' work and the *naturalization*, what I call neutralization, of work. Many – but not all – of the writers I called work critics (chapter 2) share a critique of what is sometimes called productivism, a concept which to them is tantamount to a general elevation of work or productive activities. Horkheimer, among other critical theorists, maintains that this society glorifies productivity, even though productivity has no particular aim. "Productive work, manual or intellectual, has become respectable, indeed the only accepted way of spending one's life, and any occupation, the pursuit of any end that eventually yields an income, is called productive." (Horkheimer 2004, 28) Weeks wrestles with the

celebration of productive powers that she sees as an extension of industrial work under capitalism, but also as a typical form of Marxism where the hope is that a communist society will finally liberate the potentials of the forces of production. She claims that it is misleading to think that the problem is that, as some Marxists say, 'living labor power' is harnessed by capital, and that this living labor power should be set free so that its authentic energies are let loose (2011, 15). Thus, she is critical of a humanist version (cf. chapter 2) of the idea about unfettered productive forces.

Weeks maintains that the social role of waged work has been so naturalized as to seem necessary and inevitable: it might be tinkered with but never escaped (Weeks 2011, 7). Already here I think it is worth pointing out that two assumptions should be avoided. The first is to conclude that there are conclusive ways to establish what is necessary and inevitable. That would go against the grain of everything that Weeks says. The other wrong-headed path would be to claim that *all* uses of 'necessary' and 'inevitable' are ideological. We need to look at the specific case, what is meant by 'necessary' or within which kinds of relations people talk about something as 'necessary'.

So, *The Problem with Work* sets out to investigate the naturalized position work has gained. She challenges the "reified common sense" (2011, 43) valuation of work. This rejection of common sense takes off from contradictions, an outlook "that forces us to look for disequilibrium where we might expect to find stability, that scrambles traditional assumptions about who is active and who is reactive, and that encourages recognition of the working class not primarily in terms of its economic role but as a political agent." (2011, 94 – the context of the quote is a discussion of Autonomist Marxism but she seems to be in sympathy with this line of thinking). According to Weeks, the glorification of work

creates a sphere in which a set of alleged truths are produced and upheld. However, she does not, as some writers do (cf. Muirhead 2004, 98-103), look for a more authentic form of the work ethic that reconnects work with true moral sources and with the belief that work has an intrinsic worth. What she calls 'the work ethic', which could be understood as a version of Marcuse's one-dimensional thinking, a life geared to work, is described as a coherent yet contradictory system. The work ethic is *both* tenacious and unstable (2011, 38). This is what I will turn to in the next two sections.

### 3.3 Hard work

Weeks is one of several writers (cf. Rose 1999, Lazzarato 1996, Sennett 1998) who connect work and subjectivity, and explore how work changes our self-understanding. As she states in her book: it is not sufficient to focus on the organization of work. One also needs to attend to the moral (or quasi-moral) emphasis on work: how the central role of work is upheld. Talking about exploitation and de-skilling is not enough. Even if it is crucial to be clear about how most forms of work do not live up to the ideals people have about meaningful and rewarding work, scrutinizing these ideals themselves, Weeks argues, is essential as well (Weeks 2011, 11-4).

She talks about a work ethic central for understanding the role of work in our lives: work is considered to be endowed with dignity and this is not immediately connected with purposes or the specific nature of the job one is doing. Work is dignified *in itself*. According to Weber's classic description of the protestant work ethic, hard work is worthy *whatever* character it has: work is not done for life, but it is done in the spirit of being a moral duty in its own right. This can only be achieved through what Russell Muirhead calls 'the restless activity of consistent work' (cf. Weber 2001, 19, Muirhead

2004, 102-4) Interestingly, there seems to be a democratic potential in that idea. Hard work, regardless of its nature, allows everyone to demonstrate their worth and their personal sets of aptitudes.<sup>46</sup> However, Weeks points out that for all the democratic potential of the stance according to which all work can be a calling, such positive valuation of work tends to contain normative and hidden hierarchies and biases. She argues that class differences are hidden when work is singularly praised in accordance with the idea that even the most humble form of work is important. This praise remains a form, not an attempt to actively improve the conditions of work, or to radically change people's perception of various forms of work (2011, 44).

As Weeks claims, the levelling of all forms of work constructs *both* inclusion and exclusion. New hierarchies are generated, for example so that normative definitions of hard work tend to be biased in terms of race or gender (2011, 61-5). What characterizes such types of exclusive normativity is that they are rarely explicit. One can here think about the tendency in certain left-wing movements to glorify the toil of blue-collar work performed by men, and to romanticize hard, sweaty work. Furthermore, class-specific masculinities tend to be structured around the conception of hard work even though such conceptions take different shapes depending on whether one thinks about the ideal of 'honest, blue-collar work', the ideal of 'work hard, play hard' in a more middle-class setting or the busy life of the corporate executive. It is easy to imagine normative uses of hard/real work that builds upon exclusion

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<sup>46</sup> There is an ongoing discussion about what 'democratic' means. Michael Walzer argues that one democratic idea of work implies that there are jobs that *nobody should do* and that such jobs should be abolished. This seems a too idealistic account, he claims: allegedly, sharing hard work fairly does not work either. Another option is to re-organize work so that it *can* be a source of pride (1983, 167-180).

of other forms of masculinities; 'sitting behind a desk' or 'brainless job' are examples of pejorative descriptions of work that tend to appear in such contexts.

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière writes:

Whenever workers speak in the name of Work, affirm its rights or glorify its greatness, we run the risk of inferring a false picture of the collectivity they represent or of the realities which underly [sic] their speech, unless we determine very precisely who is speaking, who is being addressed and what the stakes are (Rancière 1983, 9).

What Rancière gets right is that elevation of work or skill (or representations of work-related pride, self-worth or dignity) is easily taken at face value so that one forgets the contexts in which such statements are made: what are the stakes and what are such statements responses *to*? What sorts of moves are made by means of such statements? What kind of self-understanding do they express and in relation to which worries and concerns are such things said?<sup>47</sup> The wider point he makes is that uncritical histories of the workers' movement often single out certain groups of workers as the *driving force* of the movement. When the stakes and surroundings of such histories are forgotten, mythologies lurk around the corner, especially mythologies about 'good' or 'progressive' workers (Rancière 1983, 12-3).

Such proneness to mythologize progressive workers shows the stakes of Weeks's argument: the praise of 'hard work' has an air of common sense, an air of appreciation and grounded reasonableness. However, what examples of such positive talk reveal is that undercurrents of exclusion and fear of failure are internal to that ethic: the image of hard work feeds off the shadow of the loafer, the unemployed, the worker whose job

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<sup>47</sup> For similar discussions, cf. Cobb & Sennett 1972, Lamont 2000.

doesn't fit into a certain idea about what 'hard work' amounts to. A similar dynamic of exclusion/inclusion can be noticed in the political elevation of hard work. Just to mention a few statements that often appear in American political debates: 'I'm worried that we will become a socialist country in which people who want to work hard and be innovative will be punished....', 'I work hard for my money. Nobody has the right to take it away from me.' 'America is a good country because you can reach your goals. If you work hard you have the possibility to be successful.' 'We want to work hard and be successful.' Such statements manifest a way of presenting oneself as a hard-working, resilient and honest citizen, perhaps in a way that forges a strong distinction between the hard-working citizen and the subsidy-dependent loafer.

It is striking how *fragile* this ethos seems: many claims in political campaigns try to drive home a point about how a lack of economic incentives will make the work ethic crumble. In other words, this work ethic is easily demoralized if 'not working' becomes an option. To repeat Negt's point (chapter 2.9): the problem of 'loafing' is a specific capitalist fear, that people will no longer be accessible to the labor market as flexible labor power. As I also said, this leads to a very mixed message about the inherent value of all kinds of work and the general worth of working hard: the emphasis on incentives tends to tip over into a language of threats, punishment and control. Welfare programs then come to seem dangerously close to discouraging people from work (cf. Shershow 2005, 116-20). The underlying assumption is that people are lazy by disposition and need to be more or less forced to work: the rhetoric shifts from choice to coercion.

Work becomes a matter of *social integration* and the aim is that people should develop 'a work habit'. Workfare programs epitomize this tendency: those who receive unemployment benefits are required to 'work off' the value of the public

assistance, which in practice means everything from mopping floors, cutting grass and doing general office work. It is claimed that such programs will take away the stigma that living on welfare is supposedly imbued with, that it will enhance people's self-esteem and that the unemployed will feel that they are making a contribution to the community (Hawkesworth 2001). In this rhetoric, the nicest thing you can say about poor people or migrants is that they are *willing to work*, that they are willing to become full-blown members of society. Margaret Hawkesworth sums up the consequences of the workfare programs very aptly, and this is what I would regard as an example of the neutralization of work:

But workfare also has a profound effect upon work life in America by foreclosing debate about the fundamental meaning of work for an individual, about the relationship between work, self-definition and self-determination and about the relation between the nature of work and the constitutive principles of society. [...] The very notion that people have a right, individually and collectively, to examine the nature of work and to choose to accept or to restructure the conditions of worklife in contemporary society is supplanted by a profound resignation to the prevailing patterns of debilitating employment as the only conceivable option (Hawkesworth 2001, 276).

This example of how debates about worklife are actively foreclosed illustrates what Weeks has in mind when she talks about the work ethic as tenacious *and* unstable, forceful *and* fragile. This side is revealed when one looks at the contradictions that go deep in the moralizing celebration of work in contrast to dependence or welfare. The quote above reminds us of how the tenacious ideology of workfare can be seen both as foreclosure of debates that threaten it and as dangerous resignation or cynicism expressed in acceptance of harmful or precarious jobs. This sums up what I mean by

neutralization of work: a foreclosure of debates that already exists all around us.

The ethic of hard work takes various shapes and it can be placed in radically different political settings: idealizations of social mobility and the idea that everybody will succeed if they work hard, *try* hard, an emphasis on working-class dignity or a celebration of self-expression (cf. Lamont 2000). As I see it, the work ethic in the sense of work as a neutralized, positive activity is characterized by its detachment from purposes and needs, while this work ethic is at the same time instrumentalized in its aspect of wage labor within capitalism. By 'instrumentalization' I mean the transformation of work into labor power, a commodity. In other words, the work ethic overflows with tensions that concern means and ends, what we are working for. Instead of inquiring into the purposes of work, Weeks notes, people make do with 'workaday existence' (Weeks 2011, 44-47). This detachment from needs has often been rendered as an ethic of discipline in which people's jobs are detached from what people judge as worthy purposes:

The crusade [of the work ethic] was also aimed at detaching things people did from what they saw as worthy of doing and thus as sensible things to do; detaching the work itself from any tangible and understandable purpose it might have served (Bauman 1998, 8).

My reading of Weeks starts from the *worry* she struggles to articulate. If I understand the argument correctly, her view (a free interpretation of Weber) is that the meaning of an ethic of hard work or an elevation of all work as worthy is separated from work as a *doing*, an *activity* that makes a difference in the world. Weeks' point is that there is an alarming tendency in this appreciation of work that makes us look away from or trivialize the shady purposes work might serve. If all work is



worthy, then no further inquiries into the functioning of wage labor is needed. If one has worked hard, one has done one's part, but what kind of 'part' one's job is supposed to be remains outside this picture of contributing to society. One could say that the ethic of hard work *fetishizes* 'doing one's part': the meaning of 'doing one's part' takes on an almost obsessive positive meaning so that it becomes very hard to see through it. Work is seen as a societal project in which we all should take part as responsible adults. This is strongly present in the idea that work is *integrative*, an idea in which Arendt would discern the most unabashed and repulsive amalgamation of labor, subsistence and shared life. As Weeks says, this kind of thinking breeds and upholds a world of inequality especially between those who have a job and those who don't (2011, 53): being a member of society is predicated on the fragile and precarious circumstance of having a job. This image of hard work is related to the idea that work guarantees independence.<sup>48</sup>

Not only is the ethic of hard work riddled with tensions: it proclaims a concept of dedication that seems to have little to do with the job being seen as important or good. Hard work is commonly understood as a virtue, but the kind of virtue that requires that people shouldn't ask themselves too complicated questions about what work means in their lives or what the job that they do means to people affected by it. The sociologist Madeleine Bunting quotes a woman in advertising:

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<sup>48</sup> One of the first substantiations of the connection between work and independence can be found in John Locke's understanding of work as something that the person himself owns, an idea related to a theory about the source of property. The person owns his own work along with the fruits of his work. By means of work, the sphere of ownership is extended – the primary form of work then appears to be appropriation of nature. The working person creates a sphere of personal independence and freedom (Locke 1980, 305-10).

I feel that there is an expectation that work should be treated as a vocation and, that working hard is just not quite enough. But I don't feel that my job is really that important (to society or to me) to really want to take on the extra and damage my home life. Not all of us have a vocation – what about those of us who want to do a good job, but want time to see partners, friends etc. after work? (Bunting 2005, XV)

The employee in the quote expresses the worry that hard work is not even enough. The work ethic of hard work reels from emphasizing 'doing one's part' to an elastic logic in which *no* amount of work can be seen as sufficient – this is what André Gorz chose to call 'economic rationality' (chapter 2). The ethic of hard work elicits the fear that one is not working as hard as others are; one is not dedicated enough. Following the pattern of 'the protestant ethic', one cannot know whether one has worked hard enough; maybe *you* are not the Chosen One, perhaps *you* will be made redundant tomorrow despite your unceasing toil. In other words, there is a striking dissonance between the ideology about work as 'doing one's part' and this paranoid and elastic image of dedication entangled with fears of losing one's job or one's position. The paranoia of hard work and dedication reveals a worrying figure of thought: one has to work oneself into a position of being a worthy member of society, and even then it is never a stable position. Perhaps this is one of the reasons behind the persistent dreams of earning a stable, recognized position by means of hard work? This paranoia also figures in the idea that the best society we can think of is a society that at least rewards hard work.

Implied in this ethic of hard work is that one is *on one's own* in many different senses of the word. The empirical facts are sobering: hard work doesn't even always pay. Some people work hard without earning a decent living and for them, it is very clear why it is often cruel to talk about work as

'doing one's part in society'.<sup>49</sup> In this way, the myths about the hard-working individual can be penetrated by sociology and journalism, but ideological depictions of the relation between the individual and society should also be dissected. The most fatal aspect of idealizations of 'hard, honest toil' by means of which one earns a place in society is that such ideologies makes it difficult to react against exploitative forms of work. Work is treated as a progressive societal project in which all of us should take part. To speak up against exploitation risks being seen as *irresponsible* and disloyal if the point of departure is that the main obligation for all of us is to find a job by means of which we contribute to the wealth of society. This shows a very delicate aspect of the ideology about hard work, namely that hard work appears like a *choice*, an *act of will* or an admirable expression of dedicated *discipline*.<sup>50</sup> In this rhetoric where hard work is related to responsibility to society, an unavoidable necessity – to get a job – is thus presented as a choice one *commits* to (cf. Bauman 1998, 19). Individualism and collectivity coalesce.

A striking example of how the ideology of independence and hard work is the distinction between the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor (or to use an older vocabulary, 'true paupers'). Some appear to live in poverty in spite of their hard work (perhaps due to sickness or age) while there is supposedly another group who has chosen their own fate by failing to enlist in decent society's work. The first group is then thought to be beyond the work ethic, while the other group, idle pretenders, is to be reformed or, to use a more contemporary word, 'rehabilitated'. The only way the latter

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<sup>49</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* (2002) is an instructive overview.

<sup>50</sup> This description sometimes clashes with another: hard work is often connected with brute necessity or unflinching toil. For all their contradictions, these rhetorical patterns sometimes overlap.

group can be saved is through being morally changed so that their attitude towards work is reformed. What such distinctions produce is, again, a work ethic that creates a language of inclusion and a language of exclusion. As several writers have shown, the ethic of hard work and independence, for all its promise of democratic value, is bound up with class differences and resentment stemming from hierarchies in how work is valued. A typical example is a working class person who defends his place in society by emphasizing his success in providing for his family while some 'other people' live off the state without giving anything back to society. Sennett talks about this kind of situation using the term "zero-sum game of respect" (2003, 46), which I think captures the sinister sides of the ideology of hard work: it lends legitimacy to competition and contempt towards what does not conform to the ideal of hard work.

I will now move on to a quite different form of elevation of work, namely work as self-realization, but the same structure of a restricted distribution of respect and fear of failure prevails, a fear which leads me to talk about *busyness*. I will also go on to illustrate what Weeks means when she talks about the work ethic as contradictory, tenuous and fragile. These images of work – the elevation of hard work and the conception of work as self-realization – should be placed within the *same* frame. For most writers, these images are opposite and they are said to belong to very different historical situations (cf. Bauman 1998, 33). My point is instead that these are two sides of the same coin. They express a similar fear, the fear of exclusion and the fear of loneliness.

### 3.4 The ambiguous concept of self-realization

The worker is portrayed neither as an economic actor, rationally pursuing financial advantage, nor as a social creature seeking satisfaction of needs for solidarity and security. The worker is an individual in search of meaning, responsibility, a sense of personal achievement, a maximized 'quality of life', and hence of work. Thus the individual is not to be emancipated *from* work, perceived as merely a task or a means to an end, but to be fulfilled *in* work, now construed as an activity through which we produce, discover, and experience our selves (Rose 1999, 104).

A dominating discourse right now is that we should all have meaningful jobs. Meaningfulness has become a cultural rhetoric that can be traced in how people talk about their lives and what is important for them (Svendson 2009, Muirhead 2004). This quest for meaningfulness can be formulated in various ways. Below, I want to focus on how the quest for a meaningful job can turn into an ideal with problematic and self-deceptive features that may not be apparent when one looks at the familiar desire to find a meaningful job. I will look at a rhetorical tangle according to which we are to live meaningful lives, epitomized by our having what appears like a good job that gives us personal affirmation. I am not saying that *every* desire to have a rewarding job is enmeshed with this logic, but I *do* suggest that the idea of work as self-realization can be an existential *temptation* which, for all its self-affirming promises, might have a disturbing side.<sup>51</sup> Paul Heelas writes about the idea that life should be brought to work:

Many (MBA'd [Master of Business Administration]) managers want work to cater for the exercise, expression and development

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<sup>51</sup> There are different ways of emphasizing self-realization in work. As Nicholas Rose points out, one way of doing this is stressing social solidarity, participation, democracy at the workplace and the worker as a unique person aspiring to meaningful work (1999, 105-7).

of personal life as an aliveness or rejuvenation of subjective life, the air of being all that they can be. Many do not want to waste their time by just 'working', without also 'growing'; many feel that life is too short and working hours too long for them to be content with the 'raiding work attitude'; many feel that their own lives are too significant to be sacrificed or disciplined for the sake of the company (unless, that is, their growth is assured) (Heelas 2002, 93).

According to this image of self-realization, work infuses our lives with significance, fills life with intensity and challenge. A distinction to 'mere work' appears: a job should contain the potential to grow and develop. It should not be 'just a job' or 'mere work'. In this collective, but also personal, way of talking, desiring a meaningful job takes the shape of a normative understanding of what it is to be a striving, healthy person.

The focus on worthwhile activities is of course important, and I will say more about that at the end of this chapter and in the next one as well: one can talk about how a job molds a person's life in a way that does *not* mean that life is colonized, but rather that a person is dedicated to a worthwhile occupation. However, in the normative idea I have in mind, the meaning of 'a worthwhile activity' is strangely displaced so that what is emphasized is what *everybody* should strive for and instead of development being connected with what is considered important, it coalesces with concepts such as *opportunity* or *career* – a notion of *success* worms its way into the ideal. What appears like a personal quest for meaning may thus be said to be a collective elevation of work as jobs with 'potential', jobs for ambitious people. This is what I have talked about as a moralization of work. When extended to individual growth and identity, work appears like one of the choices that make us unique - it is dressed in the language of life style choices. One needs to remember that there is

disagreement as to *which* jobs bear the emblem of personal success, whether it is being an electrician, a corporate lawyer or a journalist. Already this kind of disagreement indicates the tensions at play here.

The risk at hand is an uncritical conviction about some having fulfilling jobs, while others are considered to have jobs that make the life of these ambitious professionals easier. The professional and his busy life are idealized, and 'mundane' chores are contracted out to service workers (cf. Bunting 2005, 160-173; Blair-Loy 2003, 34-5). To repeat Gorz's astute observation: a class society arises that legitimizes the idea that some have 'fulfilling jobs', while a great number of people are reduced to servants. Some jobs are understood to stand for progress and creativity, while other jobs serve the purpose of making it possible for creative people to invest themselves fully in these rewarding jobs. Bauman describes what he sees as a contemporary situation: society is split into an elite of workers who praise free choice and self-fulfillment, and the rest who have no choice but to accept *any* job:

Work that is rich in gratifying experience, work as self-fulfillment, work as the meaning of life, work as the core or the axis of everything that counts, as the source of pride, self-esteem, honour and deference or notoriety, in short, work as vocations, has become the privilege of the few, a distinctive mark of the elite, a way of life the rest may watch in awe, admire and contemplate at a distance (Bauman 1998, 34).

As Richard Sennett points out in his book *Respect in a World of Inequality*, a work ethic connected with status, prestige and respect, at least in some of its appearances, does not allow for the idea that *all* should have meaningful jobs. What he says can be applied to conceptions of work as self-realization. Sennett talks about the self-understanding this work ethic presupposes: it often expresses a form of individualism, but

within this work ethic one is constantly subjected to being accepted, confirmed and watched. This gaze is also directed towards oneself, and one instance of this gaze Sennett discusses is the anguished worry that one may not be a person who has 'potential'. He says that potential is a puzzling concept existing somewhere in the space between ability, talent, aptitude and motivation – in other words, in a twilight zone between inherent traits, will power and resolution. To lack 'potential' then appears like a blow against one's entire person (2003, 74-6).

Sennett aptly outlines a fragile sense of self of the person worrying about failure, about not being motivated enough or not having earned the opportunity s/he has got. The troubling side of self-realization can be seen in a specific conception of everyday life and a specific attitude to day to day reality. I would say that the ideal of enthusiastic dedication does not acknowledge the day-to-day rhythm of work: having a bad feeling in the stomach when one drives to the office; nagging customers; a kind word at lunch; working slowly with a difficult problem and finally being able to get it right; doing the job that you don't see as the best job in the world, but it doesn't eat up your life. What happens when people are no longer able to feel enthusiastic and 'passionate' about their job? This question reveals the fragility of the sense of self expressed in the ideal of self-realization. At the same time, what I have tried to say so far is that the disturbing aspect of self-realization and the language of passion disregard fragility in the form of worries about neglecting or exploiting relations to other people. Have I been using my family as a resource in my life project? Do my colleagues appear as threats in my project of making a career? This disregard is manifest in how the emphasis on 'passion' and self-realization is glued on the brink of disappointment or disenchantment about the ideals at hand. It is not surprising that the ideal of downshifting – the



desire to settle down in a quiet life in which one has time instead of money, the desire for a more 'balanced' life – for a selected few exists as the *flip side* of the work ethic. Exhaustion and longing for some peace and quiet is, so to speak, inscribed *within* the picture of work as self-realization.

Sennett evokes an equally fragile “perverse, seductive power of inequality” (2003, 89). Here, too, competition dominates the picture. Comparison and assessment among people are the chief way in which a work ethic of self-realization is created and upheld. The work ethic in this sense is about proving oneself to be a specific type of person, and this process of appearance and proving has no end point – as Sennett writes: a kind of “moral fitness training through work” (Sennett 2003, 58; 108-10). Self-realization, in this sense, has to be representable and representative; for this reason it may not be that surprising that *recognition* is a prevailing theme in the literature on work. By ‘recognition’ writers typically mean a collective and mutual form of understanding and respect, along with a collective process of identity-formation. As Stephan Voswinkel aptly remarks, recognition of work and workers leads to the questions: which *types* of work are seen as worthy of recognition and which *sorts* of achievements are recognized? As he also notes, a common understanding of recognition is that it stems from social contribution and that in being thus inscribed in often unequal social relations, it is inscribed in existing relations of power. His conclusion is that work-based recognition reflects *social tensions*, a society in which not all forms of work are recognized. This is evident in more specific concepts of recognition as well. Professionals are admired and their work is associated with prestige, while other workers will have to make do with being appreciated for ‘doing their duty’. The latter form is, he claims, on the verge of being outmoded by a subjectivized language of self-realization, which gives rise to

new crises of recognition (2011, 274; 278-9, 280). These crises direct our attention to 'recognition' as a *symptom*.<sup>52</sup> Rather than being an ontological cornerstone of our social being (as a mechanism of subject formation), an analysis of recognition can start from the worry about *misrecognition*, about status and about jobs being despised, disrespected or neutralized for example as a 'function'.

Sennett highlights self-realization as an *ideal*: what may on the surface appear as a democratic recognition of all forms of work can turn into a fiercely competitive work ethic in which only a few people can achieve what is seen as the aim – fulfilling, challenging, but also respected, work. Sennett aptly describes this highly ambiguous work ethic: work is promoted as a universal value but “a universal value with highly unequal consequences” (2003, 89). It is not only that this work ethic of self-realization has elitist tendencies. In the summoning of enthusiasm and manifest forms of dedication, an abundance of things are glossed over: injustice, inequality, hidden dependencies, destructive organizational structures, sinewy economic relations, sexism and newspeak. The image of self-realization is often used to idealize the self-reliant entrepreneur who can turn every situation into a challenge; every situation spurs the entrepreneur to test his abilities.

Someone may ask whether the image I have painted is not *mere* newspeak. Life goes on as before and the dream of self-realization is limited to cheering speeches by work counselors and consultants. The sociologist Nicholas Rose writes:

These new images of work and the worker may seem no more

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<sup>52</sup> In several texts, Nancy Fraser has criticized an identity-based politics of recognition. Such politics displaces claims about distribution and instead the focus is upon identity and culture, she argues (2010). She also views this politics as a symptom of a society of economic inequality, and lack of preparedness to deal with this maldistribution.

than the dreams of academics, researchers, consultants, and other professional entrepreneurs, themselves in search of a sense of fulfillment, personal advancement, and a fast buck. And it is important to stress the gulf between the rhetorical hype and the realities of productive life in industry, in the 'service sector' or on the dole queue. But what can be observed here is more than the froth of ideology. Once again we can see the ways in which connections and symmetries are forged, at both the conceptual and practical levels, between political concern about the government of the productive life of the nation, the concerns of owners of capital to maximize the economic advantages of their companies, and techniques for the governing of the productive subject (1999, 119).

The valid point he makes is that talk about self-realization and creativity may seem to be fluff-talk, *mere* rhetoric, *mere* words, *mere* ideology. The distinction between rhetoric and the life at a specific workplace or the life of the unemployed has a central role in reminding us of how lofty this rhetoric often becomes. At the same time, the ideal about self-realization surfaces in economic and social relations, in legitimizations, in fears, in encouragement and advice. This very ambiguous ideal – with its hopes and blind spots – is expressed in how people think and feel about their lives and their futures. This language is also utilized in order to make people flexible, and perhaps even to make people drop some of their claims about what is just or safe: the most important thing is the stimulating job I have been offered. These kinds of suspension are what I will turn to next.

### **3.5 Managing everyday life**

It seems to me that a one-sided emphasis on self-realization and hard-working commitment takes no interest in everyday life or even, as Weeks supposedly says, it *represses* the everyday which is subjected to managing: managing the kids,

managing the shopping and managing the weekend. The everyday becomes a problem to keep in check. A typical expression of the idea of work in this sense of frantic dedication is that it is an activity people choose to engage in for certain periods of time, while (ordinary) life is temporarily bracketed. As an example of this attitude, I would like to mention a newspaper article about Swedish young female professionals working in New York. They all had what is normally called rewarding and creative jobs (some were designers, others were artists), but there was an agreement among the young women in the article that one does not come to New York to live, one comes there to work. Work was represented as immersive and entirely busy, demanding focused attention and having an adverse relation to distractions. I am tempted to add: it has an adverse relation to *life*. In the article, this point was not made in the spirit of lamentation, but rather like a *fact*: this is what professionals working in a competitive environment must be prepared to handle – no time to live, no time to rest; especially, no time to be unfocused. A certain *pride* of working hard in *New York* could be detected in what they said. One must be determined, passionate and motivated.

This image of work is a familiar one, but it is *ambiguous*, as Kierkegaard would say. Here busyness rises to the surface more explicitly. Restlessness is strangely present in this image of immersive work, as one of the modes of ‘the busy life’, as one of its equally ambiguous manifestations. This restlessness is bustling, a very positive word. It is lively, which makes it seem as if one is living to the full. Paradoxically, busyness does not exclude the ideal of being immersed in something, another very positive word: it is important to be absorbed in what one does. Even words like ‘obsession’ and ‘compulsion’ come to have an air of positive drive, ambition and ‘single-mindedness’ (cf. Blair-Loy 2003, 32-3). The problem with work

in the form of busyness is that being busy is all about creating an image, turning oneself into a manifestation. Life with all its *ethically* significant *change* and openness is not tolerated: falling in love, being sick, taking care of ailing parents or having a child, losing the job. Such changes disturb the bustling and restless prospect of an immersive career. When ideas about work as self-realization gravitate towards building a career the fragility of the work ethic is accentuated: the fragility stemming from a concept of meaningfulness being immersed in competitive relations on the labor market and in organizational life. Most of all, these fragilities concern the future.

The bracketing of everyday life in the busy schedule of the professional is routinely represented by a worry about the work-life balance. Many books by academic and non-academic authors have been published on the subject (cf. Hochschild 2001, Blair-Loy 2003, Bunting 2005). While some of these take a critical attitude to the concept of a work-family balance, questioning the framework in which the worry is situated (for example criticizing it for having a bias for certain privileged professionals), others take on the task of solving this as a given dilemma - and typically it is seen as a problem for women specifically - as two components or commitments that need to be 'juggled' and reconciled in a realistic way. As many writers point out, a danger is that such problems seem to be individual concerns or choices (Blair-Loy 2005, 3). My view is that talking about work-life balance does not quite capture what is going on when *life itself* is seen as something to control and manage according to the needs of the career. What is more, what I called a bustling working activity - the hectic positive-seeming busyness - can be seen as a *flight* from life when one considers it from an ethical and existential point of view. That kind of existential worry tends to be absent from the story about work-family balance that, in its uncritical

forms, takes the demands and relations within the world of work more or less for granted as a hectic and competitive sphere, as the hectic nature of leisure and family life are also assumed as normal components of life, the unruliness of which must somehow be controlled. In this sense, a disciplined and fulfilling working life does not have to be what it appears to be.

The tendency to repress everyday life also takes another expression, an even stronger one: *life itself*, with its “wealth of possibilities” as Weeks writes, must be kept in place (Weeks 2011, 48). Life, sleep, love, friendship, relations, joy are consumed or drained by work: working double jobs, being unemployed and worrying about work, over-working, planning life so that work is the main factor that everything else has to adapt to. Weeks argues that work relations are reproduced in ways not limited to what one would normally think of as employment: desires, habits, routines and hopes are shaped by these relations (2011, 54; 141-2). It is from the perspective of the work ethic that everything that is not production is perceived in a deprecating way:

Productivist ethics assume that productivity is what defines and refines us, so that when human capacities for speech, intellect, thought, and fabrication are not directed to productive ends, they are reduced to mere idle talk, idle curiosity, idle thoughts, and idle hands, their noninstrumentality a shameful corruption of these human qualities (2011, 170).

If free time is not a shadow of work, it poses a threat to the work ethic. This is a central tension of the work ethic she describes and as we saw, also Marcuse and Gorz tried to articulate this devastating tension. The tendency of wage labor in its present form is, according to Weeks, that our entire lives are subjected to it so that this affects what we imagine *a life* and *a future* to be. She recalls Nietzsche’s admonishing of

ascetic morality and denial of pleasure. The existential weight of these remarks can, I think (even though one may be in disagreement with Nietzsche's general scheme of thought), be illustrated by a quote from his *Daybreak*:

Fundamentally, one now feels at the sight of work – one always means by work that hard industriousness from early till late – that such work is the best policeman, that it keeps everyone in bonds and can mightily hinder the development of reason, covetousness, desire for independence. For it uses up an extraordinary amount of nervous energy, which is thus denied to reflection, brooding, dreaming, worrying, loving, hating; it sets a small goal always in sight and guarantees easy and regular satisfaction. Thus a society in which there is continual hard work will have more security (Nietzsche 1982, 105).

Nietzsche is on to something here, even though I would not go along with his economic view of human energies. The quote produces an image of a life where work shrinks the horizon of things that matter. To translate this into the situation for many people today, even regardless of the proneness to emphasize work as self-realization and, as we saw, even as a *manifestation* of it: the security of having a job makes other perspectives rather irrelevant; the security of employment is so all-important that other concerns become secondary. This may be a stunting of hope: 'at least I have a job...' Nietzsche describes how work turns life into a life where we have to settle for little: balance between the working life and family life, perhaps, earning health care through employment, and so on. However, this is *not* to say that good health care is trivial or inconsequential. The problem is, to allude to a figure of thought in Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, when life *shrinks*: paying off debts and making sure that the next generation can have what we have are then seen as *the* primary concerns and responsibilities. This is a key insight in her writings and it is from this point of view one can interpret

her worry about the disappearance of the political and the reduction of non-work activities to hobbies. The sense in which the *future* is open is lost, or distorted. As Ernst Bloch (to whom Weeks refers) writes, futurity in a very basic sense is related to *hope*: hope is internal to our sense of reality. Weeks claims that this dimension is repressed when fear upheld by the world of work diminishes our capacities to act and care. Typically, fear takes the form of a certain kind of spur, the spur to self-preservation (2011, 198). People are consumed by an exhausting sense of here and now, *this* job application, *this* career step, *this* bill, *this* meeting.

The pressures of getting by in hard times tend not, as Robin Kelley notes, to be generative of the political imagination; instead, 'we are constantly putting out fires, responding to emergencies, finding temporary refuge, all of which make it difficult to see anything other than the present.' (2011, 11)

This quote sums up the logic of what I would call *management*: time shrinks to an ever-restless now, beyond which the future does not appear as more than something to handle, control and calculate. The horizon for political imagination closes down as the attitude is that one has to *make do* within the present situation *or* one has to be *ambitious*, preparing for the next step in one's career.

I have focused on how the ideals of hard work and the elevation of self-realization risk undermining or inhibiting an ethical and existential reflection on the relation between work and life. This discussion will be continued by means of Kierkegaard's articulation of busyness as a form of self-deception. In what follows, I return to Weeks' dismissal of the 'work ethic' and her misgivings about what she calls the ethic of 'better work'.



### 3.6 Life beyond work

Like other thinkers critical of contemporary work, Weeks encourages the possibility of turning against or exiting from the present work-centered society. According to the understanding of wage labor in capitalism she promotes, work is imposed so that life is subordinated to work. My understanding of this is that wage labor presupposes that people make themselves and their entire lives available for the requirements of the world of wage labor, and this means that one's life is organized around the job or employment. Weeks proposes *refusal*:

[The] refusal of work is not a renunciation of labor *tout court*, but rather a refusal of the ideology of work as highest calling and moral duty, a refusal of work as the necessary center of social life and means of access to the rights and claims of citizenship, and a refusal of the necessity of capitalist control of production (2011, 99).

Instead of encouraging a reinstatement of noble work or better work (as in humanist Marxism, cf. chapter 2), instead of immersing oneself in what she calls 'a lifetime of work', other possibilities can be sought out. What this requires is a *disidentification* with the present, a distancing that allows for reflection and hope (2011, 205). Two aspects of such distancing are to assess common solutions for and consolidations of political organization that responds to the problem of work.

Weeks, who is wary of the conventional ways of settling these problems, suggests that work-family balance is *not* the solution. She tries to battle thinking that seems to be critical of work, but that instead strengthens its hold:

Thus we find in a body of management literature and practice that spans the Fordist and Post-Fordist periods an expressed need to locate and preserve some kind of balance between work and family – a relationship that many feminists, on the contrary,

struggled to expose as a product of normative impositions rather than natural proclivity and a site of flagrant contradiction rather than imbalance (Weeks 2011, 27).

Her claim, with which I am sympathetic, is that the proposal of a work-family balance normalizes and naturalizes the present system of work and the present norms of the family, including gender roles (2011, 155-9). She is critical of the idea that our lives unfold in neatly distinguishable spheres. She calls this a functionalist pattern of thought that takes things for granted by life being imagined as a set of pre-existing building blocks. For example, the moral call for recognition of the value of unpaid gendered work in the household further entrenches gender essentialism - that housework *is* women's work - and in this way status quo is legitimized (cf. 2011, 129). The problem with thinking in terms of spheres is that such functionalism unwittingly invites the idea that the problems surrounding wage labor boil down to *proportions* and *limits*, not as Weeks herself would have it, a problem with an entire *mode of life* and the work-centered dependence it engenders (2011, 99). The view of spheres elicits a desire to seek the ultimate balance between them. I agree with her that resisting such views can be done by highlighting the tenuous *and* unstable character of work society: this requires an investigation of how a work-centered society is *upheld* and as I said in 2.3, it requires a critique of everyday life. What makes this claim even stronger is that Weeks encourages a critique of work from *within* these tensions, one of the manifestations of which is the conventional reference to work-family balance. She warns against the image of life manically protected from the claims of the working life; 'quality time' is placed in distinction to 'working time', the fantasy of the perfect vacation or the utopia of downshifting emerges. These attempts to restrict work paradoxically turn into techniques of

managing life outside work as something that needs to be maintained as an undisturbed zone, which according to Weeks gives rise to many suspect images of the purity and authenticity of family life in contrast to the 'cold' rationality of the market (cf. 2007, 244).

As we have seen, Weeks describes life and reproduction of life in a way that underlines the state of tensions: she emphasizes the possibility of life beyond work but, like many autonomist Marxists who make a similar conceptual move, she says that "capital seeks continually to harness its times, spaces, rhythms, purposes and values" (2011, 29). Weeks astutely maintains that a vital task is to understand life in such a way that it becomes clear how the destructive transformation into an elementary function of the work society does not happen without resistance, and that such corraling is by no means necessary. What is called for is a conception of life less readily rendered into a supportive function or a unique project of self-realization. This view implies that a critique of work cannot consist in an interrogation of the role of work without at the same time being an evaluation of what work has become, what it is, and how it changes innumerable *other* things in our lives (cf. Scholz 2011). A critique of work is *also* a demand for state-financed child care, care for the elderly, support of unwaged parents etc. (cf. 2011, 173). And again: child care and support of the elderly and unwaged parents are not to be seen as a side-function to be mastered, nor as a function to be commissioned to badly paid (female) service workers.

Grasping life as a well of resources for work is thus attacked by Weeks. She wants to show the ways in which the world of work turns life into such a resource and that this is by no means an inescapable fate. Life can be seen in other ways than as an object of life management where the challenge consists in juggling a hectic work life with a

functioning family life. This requires that some descriptions of life – along with some practices – are rejected and that we are willing to scrutinize and change our own lives.

Appealing to essences, or invoking an idealized concept of work will not help; there is no safe point of departure outside the present state of wage labor (2011, 90). This makes her critical of humanist Marxism and other forms of attempts to install a concept of working-class identity based on the ideal of good or better work. Such concepts, she argues, are yet another reappearance of an ascetic morality, praising discipline and hard work. Nor does she buy into the ideal of liberating creative work: this is already one step towards tolerating precarious jobs.

I think her worries are partly overwrought if what she means is that destructive elements of the work ethics creep into *every* hope about what I have called *good work* (or family life). As I will argue in chapter 4, the hope about good work expresses people's struggle to make sense of their everyday lives. Be that as it may, I agree with Weeks that taken in itself, references to 'post-capitalist useful work' remains an empty gesture (that disregards the capitalist system), or an ambiguous allegiance to a work ethic. Like her, I would also say that the possibility of an alternative *already* exists and it exists precisely in the form of present tensions in the work society. It is these tensions that have the power to incite other hopes, other desires and other dreams. In a society where work is dependent on spending consumers, while many jobs can't even cover the most essential living expenses, or in a society where the right to work for everyone is a common rhetoric existing side by side with a structural form of unemployment, something is awry (2011, 102). The critique of work starts from here. The present distribution of wealth and work, along with the ideal that everyone should work because

work is a person's contribution to society, give rise to the question: *must* work have this role?

This is a very different position than for example that of the German philosopher Axel Honneth, who has recently argued that a critique of work must not appeal to unrealistic or utopistic ideal such as autonomy or craft work, it must not be a mere wish. Critique of work must rather be anchored in the norms underpinning the present system of work. Two such norms are that the economic system should grant all workers a living wage and that work should be socially recognized. Given that the market economy is understood as morally non-neutral, as a basis for social integration, these are rational claims "embedded in the structures of social reproduction themselves" (Honneth 2010, 225). In other words: even though people make subversive demands about things, these demands can be seen as immanent critique *only if* they make up justified standards within the present economic and organizational relations (2010, 228). In other words, Honneth takes himself to have provided a realistic *basis* for which kinds of judgments and criticism are legitimate. This view, that has been criticized for turning capitalism into an undisputable system (cf. Deranty 2012), differs from Weeks' in the way it draws a very sharp limit between utopistic claims and already existing norms, even though they can be said to agree that critique cannot draw on concepts of the nature of work, what work is in itself. Weeks abhors the idea that critique of work must be *realistic*. Instead, she argues that a central dimension of a critical approach to work includes an examination of what we take demands *to be*.

The critique of work Weeks settles on is a form of *repoliticization* of the concept of work. She talks about the expressive and performative force of demands for change. This has a bearing on how she thinks about her own role as a writer who issues critical claims about work (2011, 145; 205-6;

222). In a reflection on the Italian movement of wages for housework during the seventies<sup>53</sup>, Weeks writes that one aspect of the movement in question was that demands were put forward in the spirit of provocation, while at the same time being a manifestation of collective *action* that brought antagonism to the surface (2011, 133-5). A demand in this sense is not necessarily or not merely a policy proposal: a demand can be an encouragement to scrutinize how we live (differently). Her point, which I think is a sound one, is that this sort of demand is not necessarily put forward in the spirit of a pragmatic appeal; the *emotional* aspects of such demands are crucial (2011, 220). Again, *hope* has a central place in her outlook. To sum up: despite some ambiguities<sup>54</sup> (which I cannot go into here) *so far*, Weeks' critique of work is to the point, especially considering that she reflects on what it means to *engage in critique*. In the next section I will raise some objections to her approach, and this has precisely to do with what it means to reflect critically on work. To do this, I will first look briefly at how writers have talked about the themes Weeks is concerned with: integration into the work society.

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<sup>53</sup> The aim of this movement (represented by feminists such as Selma James, Silvia Federici and Maria Rosa Dalla Costa) was to initiate a discussion about how wage labor, far from being an independent sphere, is predicated upon work of a different kind: work performed in the home. The most eye-catching aspect of the campaign was the demand for compensation for such work, but as Weeks shows, there was also another dimension, the critique of work society and the dependencies it creates.

<sup>54</sup> These stem from Weeks' outline of her vision of collective *invention* and political change. According to Scott Shershow, the thinkers Italian autonomist Marxism (on whom Weeks draw) develop a vision of a departure from a capitalist logic. What comes in its place according to them? Creativity, community and togetherness are all central elements of their view, but it is not clear what the fundamental concern is: a new form of *productivity* or a new form of *living together*? (cf. Shershow 2005)

### 3.7 Work and adaptation

Many critical writers set out to direct our attention to an element of *social order* within the world of work: “Since at least the early nineteenth century the significance of work for public order had been as important as its directly economic function – its moralizing effect upon the worker, its capacity to enmesh the individual in the network of expectations and routines that make up the social body.” (Rose 1999, 63) This side of work is not limited to disciplinary methods of employers. For example, in Finland, it seems entirely unremarkable that the government appoints a group of labor experts who outline a strategy for how to improve people’s attitudes to work and employment and where the aim is to increase their cooperation and trust.<sup>55</sup> Such reports typically express concern for employees’ well-being while also, unwittingly, yielding an instrumentalization of that well-being: contented workers are productive workers. Even so, I would like to ask what is going on when writers theorize about the ways in which people ‘comply’ with working hard or ‘internalize’ a work ethic. Which concerns are critics like Weeks struggling with when they develop concepts such as that of the work ethic?

Critical authors wrestling with the role of work in capitalism have typically wanted to distance themselves from prevailing views in the literature on work. One classic example of such an approach can be found in Michael Burawoy’s *Manufacturing consent* (1979). One of Burawoy’s aims is to consider a different aspect of work than the external, despotic power relations that, in his view, Marxist writers have explored. The challenge, then, is to pin down what *kind*

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<sup>55</sup> For one such project, cf. Arbetsliv 2020:  
[http://www.arbetsliv2020.fi/sv/projektet\\_arbetsliv\\_2020](http://www.arbetsliv2020.fi/sv/projektet_arbetsliv_2020)

of control is exerted in wage labor. Burawoy looks at a number of management techniques that shape people's compliance: the piece rate system, job mobility and collective bargaining are three such methods. The conclusion he reaches is that there are a number of organizational conditions that function as 'breathing holes' for discontent, and that the result is integration, rather than rebellion (Burawoy 1981).

Marxists writing about the process in which work is transformed into labor power have been occupied with showing how a work-centered society (cf. chapter 2) is maintained and the historical development of integration within it. These writers have disagreed about the nature of the domination of capital: what dimensions of life should be focused on? How narrowly should the wage labor relation be defined? *How* should integration be defined?

In a recent book, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (2009), Franco "Bifo" Berardi penetrates into what he sees as affective and digital capitalism and what he conceives of as the ways it takes charge of its subjects' entire lives in its creation of docile and domesticated subjects whose attention is ceaselessly mobilized. Like other thinkers in the tradition of Italian Autonomist Marxism, whose tendencies to celebrate *cynicism* he shares, he adheres to what is sometimes called the view of the social as a factory. Not only does work dominate people's (or to be honest, throughout he is most interested in what he calls 'the cognitariat') waking hours; work absorbs people's desires and the present form of abstraction of work creates a world in which almost everything can be dealt with as flows of information. Social relations are thus stripped down and streamlined. Rose is trying to articulate a similar view: "Communication became a vital instrument for realigning workers' values with management objectives, through explaining the situation, clearing up misunderstandings, and allaying fears and



anxieties.” (1999, 72) I think Berardi’s point could be that ‘information’ and ‘communication’, *contact* between people, coalesce, becoming all-encompassing, abstracted categories threatening to make it difficult to distinguish between things of very different kinds – everything is treated as ‘information’ or ‘networks’. On the other hand, Berardi sees the present system of wage labor as highly specialized in the sense that few jobs are interchangeable. This specialized form is, he maintains, a background for why (again: information) work comes to be seen as a means for a person to exercise his unique abilities (2009, 75-8). He asks: “How is it possible to explain the workers’ conversion from disaffection to acceptance?” (2009, 79) Like other work critics Berardi claims that the present world of work, despite its aura of specialization and self-realization, stands for an impoverishment, an *affective* impoverishment. Work has turned into an ‘eternal flow’ “from which they [the workers] cannot step back save at the price of marginalization” (2009, 87; 89).

To repeat what I said in the last chapter: the problem with such analyses is that they are prone to rely on hasty diagnostic generalizations about a changing world of work. The tendency is to pick out one class – information workers, in this case – and by means of an account of the present state of the work of this class, issue wide claims about the future of civilization. I do realize that these diagnostics express an attempt to develop critical tools. This was also my entry into Weeks’ perspective: a thought-provoking analysis of contemporary work is connected with a project of making demands about a better world. Concepts such as internalization, pacification, adjustment, integration etc. seem to be contributions to a debate in which writers strive to understand the ailments of contemporary life. The essential question will then be whether using them helps us bridge the gap between a system of work and lived experiences. In other words: it is misguided, I think,

to discuss the conceptual cluster I have mentioned in terms of *social ontology* even though that may be how these critics think about their project. Writers eager to unmask and uncover unacknowledged aspects of how we relate to work easily end up subscribing to projects in which they imagine themselves to reveal the *ontology* of society or the *workings* of subjectivity. For them, the aim is to postulate a theoretical representation of how things *really are* and for all their hopes about change they seem to set out to portray mechanisms that generate specific forms of behavior and thoughts. The risk I see is that these mechanisms – internalization, adaptation – come to serve as explanation, for example of lack of political agency (as Berardi has it). A confused aspiration of social theory is that the ultimate aim is to provide an account of social order as it really is (for a useful critique of such ontological preoccupation masked as ‘critique’ cf. Pleasants 1999). A much more fruitful approach is, I think, to remain at the level of *critique*: what does it *mean* to say that the world of work builds on adaptation, adjustment or integration? What does this form of critique catch sight of and what may remain outside its grasp?

### **3.8 What does it mean to talk about a work ethic?**

There is a question I would like to address to Kathi Weeks: isn't there a risk that the concept of a work ethic leans on a too one-sided conception of our relation to work? Over-emphasizing the work ethic may lead one to look away from the existential richness of meaning that forms of commitment to work have. Think about the following examples. A mother with a young child longs to get back to work, where she has friends, her *life*, she says. A hairdresser who had to retire early because of rheumatism misses his job and the customers that used to visit the salon regularly. S/he liked his job and now

s/he tries to build another life for himself. A single parent confides to hir friend that at this point, the job is extremely important to hir: without the job, s/he wouldn't know how to keep going. The job provides the family with an income, but not only that: s/he says that she wouldn't know what hir life would be without the job. It would be *cynical*, I think, to conclude that all of these examples can be completely understood as manifestations of the work ethic, as yet another instance of how people are made dependent on work.

Weeks is aware of the fact that consent alone explains nothing, but coercion is also an insufficient perspective if one wants to shed light on the centrality of work in society. She asks whether it is not *spurious* to talk about a work ethic in a situation in which workers within flexible organizations are afraid to lose their jobs. When employees do their utmost to keep their jobs, ideological support is not needed; the economic system would be, so to speak, compulsive enough. Weber (2001, 123) famously argued that a work ethic is no longer needed in the later stages of capitalist development: technical management is now what drives capitalism. Even so, it still makes sense to talk about a work ethic, Weeks writes. For example, she argues, many organizations emphasize commitment and attitudes – compliance is not enough. The entire person is evaluated. She refers to the famous sociologist Arlie Hochschild's book *The Managed Heart* from 1983, among the first books to give a perspicuous presentation of the existential consequences of emotional work. Hochschild describes the emotional coping among flight attendants and bill collectors, whose jobs require that one engages on'es entire personality. What are the existential consequences of niceness or nastiness being a *job*? What is more, Weeks writes, when results and achievements in service work are allegedly harder to measure, evaluating employees' attitudes arises as a possibility. Consequently, specific attitudes towards work – to

approach work as professionalism or as a career, regardless of what specific position a person holds, for example – are inscribed in work relations (2011, 69-74).

Even so, Weeks' concept of work ethic seems problematic. What exactly is she purporting to *explain*? I suspect that concepts such as adaptation and integration are suspect when they appear as *explanations*. A version of this explanatory approach can be found in Bauman's writings:

The work ethic, and more generally the appeal to the sentiments and the consciences of the current and would-be factory workers, was but one of several alternative means of making the wheels of the industrial system turn. It was not necessarily the most efficient one, and certainly not the only one conceivable (Bauman 1998, 19-20).

From this perspective it seems perfectly in order to discuss the work ethic in terms of its efficiency: *did* it in fact mold productive and crouching subjects, or were economic factors more important for producing such subjects? This makes it tempting to think that there could be an *empirical answer* to whether the work ethic, at a particular historical stage, was indeed efficient. In these presentations a linear story about shifting ideals is typically produced. The trouble is that one does not get a sense for in what *way* these ideals *speak to* people; in what way *are* they ideals. Charles Taylor writes about the ideal of authenticity and self-realization:

Articulacy here has a moral point, not just in correcting what may be wrong views but also in making the force of an ideal that people are already living by more palpable, more vivid for them; and by making it more vivid, empowering them to live up to it in a fuller and more integral fashion (1991, 22).

I do not think that the vividness or palpability of ideals is restricted to either attacking people or empowering them, but,

nonetheless, I agree with Taylor that articulating an ideal has a moral role.

By talking about a *work ethic* Weeks seeks to shed light on how 'exploitable subjects' are produced. She helpfully suggests that the work ethic can be a tool for illustrating which rhetorical means are used to support for example workers' rights or women's waged work. She argues that given that there is an ideal of work as a respectable and society-building activity, claims for that ideal to be realized can also be made. Thus, workers issuing claims can hold defenders of work accountable for not even standing up for their own positive view of work (2011, 75). Granted that work is seen as dignified in itself, and if work is thought to command respect, this should imply the legitimacy of demanding better working conditions (2011, 29, 58-60). In *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005) the French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Evé Chiapello make a similar point when they investigate legitimizations of capitalism, an inquiry related to an attempt to understand how capitalism is sustained. These legitimizations cannot be grasped only as ideological forms. They were responses to critique, for example the critical student movement of 1968, and for this reason it would be counter-productive to *reduce* them to ideology or attempts to produce submissive subjects. Boltanski and Chiapello show that real concessions were made: minimum wages were settled, unions were formed, more autonomy was granted to at least some workers. Critique was responded to, but in this way the critique was in danger of being *neutralized* by being incorporated within the system, and capitalism thus becoming *stronger*. If the conditions for the workers are made more decent, then why would one say that there is anything wrong with the market economy and the world of work; isn't this development, generally, a positive development towards humanized work and flexible systems that offer creative job opportunities for

many employees? One can thus return to the point I made in connection with Rancière: it is important to look at the context in which work as self-realization is elevated or in which the right to work is appealed to. Boltanski and Chiapello provide such a background for the idealization of adaptability and creativity and they frame it in a broader network of justification and critique. The merit of their argument is that it reminds us of the *instability* that constitutes the world of work and in this sense they are in agreement with Weeks (cf. Cockburn 2011, 82-4).

What can be treasured in Weeks' analysis is thus not an act of simple explaining. Rather, much of what she says highlights the *use* – for example as a legitimization – of a certain set of rhetorical patterns: the idea of work as independence, work as self-realization or work as professionalism. Placing herself in a Foucauldian tradition (which is just one source drawn on among many) she talks about the insufficiency of the image of external power/submission. Most processes in which people's subjectivities are created can't be rendered into coercion. These processes are not only imposed on people, they shape them, people internalize them and selves are produced.<sup>56</sup> The risk is that the work ethic for all Weeks' attempts at self-scrutiny becomes a reified 'it' that shapes people's existence:

The ability of work to harness desires for a life beyond work depends, perhaps now more than ever, on the power of the work ethic. The ethic's consistent prescription for our identification with and constant devotion to work, its elevation of work as the

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<sup>56</sup> In the Autonomist literature that makes up another inspiration for Weeks 'production' has a very wide meaning. The use of the concept of productivity is paradoxical: for all their critique of what they call productivism (laborism) 'productivity' is sometimes seen as the development and changes that take place in social relations (cf. Lazzarato 1996). The problem is then that 'production' seems to take place all the time and everywhere in the 'social factory'.

rightful center of life, and its affirmation of work as an end in itself all help to produce the kinds of workers and the laboring capacities adequate to the contemporary regime of accumulation and the specific modes of social labor in which it invests (2011, 76).

Even though she mostly describes the use of rhetorical discourses and the place they come to have, in this quote (“the ethic’s consistent prescription [...] all help to produce”) it seems as if what she calls the work ethic has *a power in its own right*.

Significant sides of life are, I think, normally left out in these Foucauldian analyses of power relations. Let me unpack what I mean. (1) There are more or less formal or economically induced requirements of work inherent in a specific system of waged work that concerns how long people work and how their lives are structured because of this (for example, how time is split up into work time and leisure time). (2) There are also more implicit requirements and expectations, and this is what I talked about above as the idealization of hard work or the ideal of self-realization. These first two aspects are covered by Weeks’ Foucauldian approach, but there is also a third one which I think intersects with the first two in a complicated way. What I will say here will only be a sketch of this aspect, as I will expand on it more systematically in chapter 6. I am here thinking about the *existential* situation of people who relate to their jobs, the temptations, hopes and relational networks within these situations. People wrestle with the requirements of work and their jobs; they try to make do, they try to resist structures they experience as unfair or destructive, or they grow cynical. Talking about ‘subjectivities’ and ‘produced subjectivities’ (as Weeks often does) is misdirected here: the image of a work ethic that shapes people’s subjectivities takes one to the territory of social ontology and it leads one to ask questions about the social processes in which

these subjectivities are constructed. When the inquiry is slanted towards production and construction, what is not seen is how people *grapple* with work-related issues, how this takes place within *lives*. For all her understanding of the instability of the work ethic, Weeks' inquiry does not capture how we are all the time speaking from *within* this existential grappling. To focus on production/construction is taking a – an illusory one, I would say – step away from the way people are enmeshed within work-related tensions.

If this existential dimension is ignored, and if the language of internalization or construction of subjectivities dominates the picture, something essential in our relation to work is overlooked, and the *hazards* of what Weeks calls the work ethic, that we live *for* work rather than work *for* *life*, are then not acknowledged. Weeks' critique of work, along with similar projects, are at risk of treating 'the work ethic' as a blob (cf. chapter 1 and 2) in the sense that it is not clear in which ways we are responsible for the existence of this work ethic: what is its *appeal*? Writers like Weeks never quite succeed in even raising this as a concern. As I said, she writes insightfully about the work ethic as a field of tensions, for example the tension between independence and submission. What doesn't become so clear is how these tensions are also present *within* us. She writes:

This antinomy – that work and its ethical discourse produce both independence and dependence, captured by Weber in that strange self-discipline he struggles to account for – renders the wage relation always potentially unstable (2011, 55).

I fully agree that the wage relation is rendered unstable by such antinomies, but what bothers me is that it is not clear what is meant by 'ethical'. Is it only a form of moralistic exhortation, or could the ethical be something else as well? My own take on this is that existential struggles over the role of



work do not mirror some work ethic. If we still want to talk about a work ethic, normative ways of talking about independence, self-realization and hard work, can only be meaningful against the background of existential struggles in which what I have called moralizations and neutralizations appear. Elaborating on normative ideals and patterns is, then, not enough. If the idea about a work ethic is to be defended an account of what it means that people understand themselves and their work through such normative ideals; how would people actually *express* such ideals?

My point is that to see the ethical danger of what she calls the work ethic, its life surroundings must be taken into account. Weeks explains that she prefers to talk about politics rather than ethics because the latter is allegedly too bound up with encounters with *specific* others (2011, 228). As we saw, she is suspicious of ethical language about better work because such language supposedly has “been absorbed so comfortably into the warp of contemporary managerial discourses.” (2011, 105) In my view, this makes it seem like ‘the language’ is something that exists in itself, so that if the language is hijacked by managerial elevation of work, then that is what the language *means, tout court*, perhaps that the hijacking can be seen as a revelation of what this language *always was*). For Weeks, it seems as if all appeals to good work are always-already complicit with the management rhetoric. “The affirmation of unalienated labor is [...] too readily co-opted in a context in which the metaphysics of labor and the moralization of work carry as much cultural authority in so many realms.” (2011, 107) I would like to question such an always-already by pointing out that people make demands for better work conditions in diverse situations where one needs to pay close attention to the *context* where this language appears. It is not even clear what it would *mean* to say that

such claims are 'always-already' enmeshed in management discourse.

To take one example that may illustrate what I have in mind when I say that Weeks' rendering of the work ethic leaves something important out of the picture. The example is inspired by the interviews Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb conducted in their book *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1973). Imagine two parents who worry that their children will lose contact with them because the children have settled on a specific path of work (they have become doctors, executives and lawyers, say). When the parents talk to their friends about their kids what they say reveals a certain element of shame and indignation in relation to their ambitious offspring even though the overall impression their friends get is that these parents are proud of their children's achievements. They talk at length about how well their kids have succeeded in their careers and in their lives but how little they, the parents, know about their jobs and how rarely they see their children nowadays. The tone is that of fascination and satisfaction, but a hint of insecurity and sadness can be traced as well. The parents worry that their kids become strangers but they are proud of their children who have 'made something of themselves'. In other words, they feel somewhat unsettled by their children's class mobility and they express mixed feelings about it – an ambivalence that may not be obvious to themselves, but may be painfully apparent to their children who have to deal with their parents' fears and the sadness the eager stories about job opportunities betray. Their friends ask questions about the busy children but they also feel that they should talk to them about what it is like to miss one's grown children.

This example features ambivalent emotions, shame and insecurity. These emotions and their role in the parents' lives show the *relevance of talking* about a work ethic, for example

that we can talk about a normative expectation that parents should be supportive of the ambition of their children no matter what, or the idea that parents have an obligation to inspire a positive attitude towards work in their children. It is in this way that the ideal of independence *becomes* an ideal. It does not do to talk about such emotions as *produced*, even though they are for sure intelligible only against a very specific *background* (of praxis and thinking). These emotions are *responses*. One of the reasons for raising such a critique of Weeks' approach is internal to what seems to be her own line of thinking. Even though she has plenty to say about the kind of individuals needed by and molded by capital - capital needs in/dependent and flexible subjects - another aspect of the book elicits a different take on the question. Our lives play out in a maze of normative invocations of the value of work. How can we reach *beyond* this naturalization and normalization of work? To reach that 'beyond', we need to understand the lives we live *now*. What I think is at stake in this question is something altogether different than what can be captured by a concept of the production of subjectivities: the kind of fear and hopes that 'the work ethic' expresses needs to be acknowledged as ethically significant *responses* and by looking at these we can learn to better understand ourselves. Weeks' analysis of the work ethic dodges the *ethical* challenge of the desire to shed light onto a possibility of life beyond work society. It is this challenge I seek to *radicalize* in what follows. What existential pull do the ideas about work as busyness have on us?

### **3.9 Kierkegaard on busyness and self-deception**

An objection can be raised to this discussion about work as busyness and conceptions of a work ethic. There are cases when we just do things. A multitude of situations do not call

for specific questions. Most of our everyday life seems to be like this: hustle and bustle, things happen, we react; something else happens, we know what to do. Isn't a fundamental aspect of the active life it's being mostly taken for granted? We know how things work, we know our way about. Breakfast is prepared in a hazy rush; I drive my bike to work, a jumble of things whirling in my mind; I reply to a routine email and press 'send'; I stretch my back and shuffle into the kitchen to pour myself a cup of coffee; I say hi to my colleague. To some extent, this is true – it is not as if we are all the time in a state of meaning crisis, or that such crisis always lurks under the surface.

I use some writings by Søren Kierkegaard to point at the life situations in which the hustle and bustle of life turn into a problematic escape from existential questions. Kierkegaard formulates an astute critique of what he often calls 'busyness'. He alerts us to what makes that sort of life seem tempting. These remarks bring to the surface a theme with which I have engaged throughout this chapter: work as flight from life, a displacement of meaning. As I will show, the concerns Kierkegaard engages with can be seen as closely related to the structural issues, with which Weeks wrestles. I use Kierkegaard's reflection on the busy life to show in what way *activity* comes to be seen as something positive in itself and I also want to point out the connection with the role busyness can come to have in a view of life according to which it is important to be a striving, goal-directed person. There are two things going on here: (i) activity is valued in its own right (in the shape of diligence, for example) and (ii) one wants to be seen as an active person, which makes appearances more important than reality. Kierkegaard demonstrates how this image of resolution and direction creates a seemingly safe spot – one appears to be the resolute doer – that shields off 'distracting' worries. Even though work is not the overall topic

of his reflection, his line of thinking radicalizes what Weeks writes about the work society and its foreclosure of the pressing question: *how are we to live?* This existential and ethical question is unlike a concern about which one can say ‘this is not the right time to ask that question; there is a time for everything’. This question does not go away and it is never timely, that is, there is no specific time for it, nor are there periods or situations sheltered from it (1956, 42). This perspective on untimely questions cannot be easily squared with the tendency I talked about above, where jobs are understood as so important that life itself must be paused or managed.

Kierkegaard describes the existential luster and danger of the busy life in a sermon with the title *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. The context is the bourgeois circles of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Copenhagen. What Kierkegaard says evokes the image of burgeoning urban life. He talks about an attitude towards life that is not clear to the person living it, and that can even be described as a mode of self-deception: it is more important to seem busy than to devote oneself to something that one finds meaningful. Kierkegaard focuses on the notion of busyness (*Travlhed*), the bustling life and the person for whom leisure would bring hir *too painfully close to herself*. The person does not dare to stop to think, to be confronted with himself and the emptiness of hir life. Kierkegaard looks at what it means to be lulled into a spiritual stupor that comes with living according to an agile rhythm of respectable business. Central to the argument is the idea of willing one thing, which is *not* at all the same as dedicating oneself to one specific purpose. To will one thing, according to Kierkegaard, is by no means a glorious exercise in will power (1956, 56). He explains why it is impossible that the person who strives for honor and power wills one thing. Willing one thing is willing the *good*.

He introduces a cluster of interrelated concepts in order to show that an existential problem has several *forms*. The busy person is *double-minded* (*tvesindethed*), dispersed among the events and progressions that are his life. Being involved in plenty of things is not a problem in itself. The problem is that the busy person braces himself with the security of an elastic 'in case that' – his will is *conditioned* by this 'in case that', which means that his will is not absolute, but always dependent on this and that thing that happens to come along. If my project does not succeed, I can always resort to the comfortable reassurance that this is not my *real* calling anyway (Kierkegaard 1956, 59-60, 83, 199).

As we have seen above, what *seems* like a life of resolution and dedication may deceive in its insistent and ambitious appearance, so that the frailty or the anxiety of that life is not obvious. Kierkegaard draws the contours of a person inclined to create a pleasant image of himself, a person seeking honor:

Is, then, this desire for counting, is this to will one thing? To count and count until it suffices, to count and count until a mistake is made; is this to will one thing? Whoever, therefore, wills this honor or fears this contempt, whether or not he is said to will one thing in his innermost being, is not merely double-minded but thousand-minded, and at variance with himself. So is this life when he must grovel – in order to attain honor; when he must flatter his enemies – in order to attain honor; when he must woo the favor of those he despises – in order to attain honor; when he must betray the one whom he respects – in order to attain honor (Kierkegaard 1956, 58-59).

This person is thus externally *driven* but his goals are unreal, and they cannot *become* real. The goals reflect a person's self-deception; Kierkegaard talks about being 'at variance with oneself'.

Even though the sermon is written from a religious perspective, it can be applied to a discussion about work as

well. Work can become appearance, admired for being a purposeful occupation, or an admirable position. Furthermore, *diligence* is commonly seen as a virtue in itself. The ambiguities Kierkegaard pinpoints are close at hand: on the one hand, diligence seems good because it expresses a person's attachment to specific *purposes*: s/he is steadfast, does not give up as soon as an obstacle appears. Such a person could be understood as responsible and reliable. On the other hand, the concept of diligence seems to express a form of generality that puts *all* purposes in brackets. What is important is not the thing to be done, be it a gardening project, an essay in philosophy or a sales pitch; what matters is the *general* industriousness, the *general* activity. The concept of diligence does not discriminate between the kinds of purposes to which a person applies himself. Nor does it reveal *how*, in what *spirit*, a person relates to what s/he does. Activity is, as it were, distilled into a general form. Such reductive concepts of activity are all-important for Kierkegaard, who is at pains to show what such perspectives reveal about a person's commitment (or lack of it):

When a man is active early and late "for the sake of the Good," storming about noisily and restlessly, hurling himself into time, as a sick man throws himself down upon his bed, throwing off all his consideration for himself, as a sick man throws off his clothes, scornful of the world's reward; when such a man makes a place among men, then the masses think what he himself imagines, that he is inspired. And yet he is at the other pole from that, for he is double-minded, and double-mindedness no more resembles inspiration than a withdrawal resembles the steadiness of the standing wind (Kierkegaard 1956, 101).

Kierkegaard thinks about a person who in one way is dedicated to a good purpose but somehow everything s/he does turns into a *project*, or more derisively still, s/he is the well-meaning *busybody*. For this person, goodness seems too

slow; s/he tries to make it temporally accessible, manageable, tangible – *attainable*, to be gloriously conquered. This person succeeds in deceiving us, but mainly himself, Kierkegaard says, because s/he does not seek rewards, she seems to be dedicated to a worthy purpose. A person who *loses* himself in the task fits this description; s/he responds to all requests and s/he diligently does everything s/he thinks that people expect hir to do: hir industriousness expresses a sort of worry that s/he is not doing enough. S/he is not interested in worldly happiness nor does s/he seem interested in how s/he appears to the world: s/he really applies himself to things. The double-minded life has a deceptive “gloss of unity and of inner coherence” (1956, 103, 119), but the busy person (in Kierkegaard’s use of the word) pursues transient interests and hir attitude remains fickle. This person is *self-forgetful*. Busyness, Kierkegaard writes, is like a charm, an enchanting forgetfulness. When work has *this* role, other worries are more or less quenched.

The TV-series *The Wire* (2002-2008) offers a striking example of what Kierkegaard talks about as the person who wants to “take the good by storm” (1956, 100) and who doesn’t understand that the good can “go on without him” (1956, 102). This example is also a further attempt to explain the entanglement between the existential and the structural. The frame of *The Wire* and this example are the agonies of police work in a post-welfare city in which the police much too often are preoccupied with presenting beautiful statistics that will bring them more funding, rather than solving crime. The story of the series gives no false hope of glorious police investigations and solved cases. There is work to be done, the question is just: what is good work and what does a sound relation to it mean in an organization plagued by competing priorities due to financial problems? There is clearly plenty of work out there to do. The world portrayed is a world of social problems that go on and on – criminality is part of an ailing



society of business, poverty and marginalization. No single case closure can get rid of those structural problems. The conversation below is an exchange between Jimmy McNulty and Lester Freamon. Both of them work in the Baltimore police department and both are involved in tracking down a drug cartel. McNulty lives for his cases and likes to do things his own way. He has zero tolerance for the bureaucratic apparatus. He wants to bring the cases to closure and there is no time for anything else, no time to live. When things come to a halt, when the cases go nowhere, he slides into a state of frustration and despair. He doesn't know what to do with himself. His life is a mess but he keeps justifying his situation by appealing to his work and the toll his work takes on him: if one is a police officer, this is what life *must* be like. He assigns his depression to the frustration related to police work and the slow progression of the cases. His own view, and even more so, the view of people close to him, is that it is his cases that keep his life from falling apart completely: paradoxically, they keep him going. In the end, it all revolves around is what a 'having a life' amounts to.

**Lester:** Tell me something, Jimmy. How exactly do you think it all ends?

**McNulty:** What do you mean?

**Lester:** A parade? A gold watch? A shining Jimmy-McNulty-day moment, when you bring in a case sooooo sweet everybody gets together and says, "Aw, shit! He was right all along. Should've listened to the man." The job will not save you, Jimmy. It won't make you whole, it won't fill your ass up.

**McNulty:** I dunno, a good case –

**Lester:** Ends. They all end. The handcuffs go click and it's over. The next morning, it's just you in your room with yourself.

**McNulty:** Until the next case.

**Lester:** Booooooy, you need something else outside of this here.

**McNulty:** Like what, dollhouse miniatures? [Lester makes dollhouse miniatures in *his* spare time.]

**Lester:** Hey, hey, hey, a life. A life, Jimmy. You know what that is? It's the shit that happens while you're waiting for moments that never come. (*The Wire*, 3.9)

McNulty's frenzy can be understood in relation to the machinery the series depicts in which the appearance of efficiency is conflated with real work. From one perspective, he is represented as somebody very dedicated to his job (he applies himself fully to the cases). From another perspective he is portrayed as a person deceiving himself about his job and about many other things about himself and his relation to work. He fits Kierkegaard's description of the impatient, driven man who strives for a good cause but who is, as Kierkegaard says, double-minded and forgetful. In his wish to save the city of Baltimore in his job, and to save himself by working, he forgets himself; he appears to be a resolute person, but work has the role of an escape that in a paradoxical way provides some security. The series connects this forgetfulness with structural busyness, pointedly represented by shadowy bargaining, the administrative hunt for decent statistics, and lean organizations. The existential situation feeds on this kind of structural predicament and the system feeds on the existential worries. The series shows different responses to busyness and quasi-work. Cynicism abounds among his colleagues, but McNulty reacts in another way: he becomes the rebellious renegade.

McNulty's frenzied dedication re-introduces what I talked about in connection to self-realization above: frailty. What becomes of him if he fails in his pursuits? In this life, failure and disappointment lurk around the corner, as the example from *The Wire* shows: McNulty's hectic work keeps his

existential worries at a distance. *Before* having failed, from one perspective the busy person's life is successful, from another it is a life of self-deception. The idea underlying this claim is that the person whose will is not divided dedicates himself to the good in an absolute way. This does not mean that one specific thing is pursued obsessively. What Kierkegaard talks about is instead a specific kind of *concern* and the *spirit* in which people dedicate themselves to something. Worldly matters, work and success, are essential, but the role work has will depend on the *good* (Kierkegaard 1956, 111-112, 119, 200).

In one of his edifying discourses, "What We Learn from The Lilies of the Field and from the Birds of the Air" Kierkegaard contrasts two images of work as subsistence. Work, in itself, is not bad. By something he calls '*Næringsssorg*', worry about making a living, he intends to describe a particular *attitude* towards work; work, and money – worldly goods – and not God, are seen as the means of survival. One is worried about making a living, and one cannot devote oneself to the present. One does not trust God, nor that God will see to it that one lives. The small-minded person who is ensnared by '*Næringsssorg*' will never be satisfied; s/he will work and work, save and collect. Nothing will suffice. His life will be devoted to survival. In relying on himself, s/he turns away from God, but his self-reliance turns out to be a prison. In his desire for security and wealth, s/he worries about the future – s/he compares himself with others, s/he wants to achieve what they have achieved. '*Næringsssorg*' is a state in which a person's actions are performed out of worry, out of insecurity (cf. Kierkegaard 1993, 165, 172-174, 179-80). Thus, he aptly draws our attention to an alternative to a life in which worry, comparison and the fear of failure reign supreme. To will the good is not to will some specific worthy purpose recognized by some worthy people: it is to be whole-hearted.

I would thus concur with Weeks in saying that valuing work 'for its own sake' could have (and very easily has) an ominous meaning if it implies that work becomes a realm of its own where 'being active' is the all-inclusive aim and industriousness seems to promise a life of personal development and social inclusion. Kierkegaard's very important point is that the person preoccupied with good deeds and the person preoccupied with honor can be *equally* self-forgetful in the sense of not being whole-heartedly present in a situation.<sup>57</sup> Both may be preoccupied with 'leaving a mark on the world', 'changing the state of things' or 'leaving a record'.

In this chapter, I wanted to track the process in which the purposes of work are bracketed. More strongly than Weeks, Kierkegaard shows that work as busyness is synonymous with a *loss of reality*. The double-minded person wants lots of things, but what s/he wants is not real. As the McNulty example indicated, the *mode* of striving is in a certain sense disengaged from reality. Thinking about 'accomplishments in the world', according to Kierkegaard, *cannot* be real. This lack of reality can take on many appearances: it can appear in the form of boundless enthusiasm, immersion, or invocations of 'grim necessity', a grown-up's stern responsibility for 'real things'. One reason why I have talked at length about Kierkegaard's account of busyness, double-mindedness and forgetfulness is that he takes issue with something many work critics rarely stress, namely the existential tension that a life of busyness makes manifest: one wants to lead life as if the most important thing is to leave a mark, to work hard and to dedicate oneself completely to the projects at hand, but this

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<sup>57</sup> This can be translated into a more general moral philosophical question about doing the good in order to be a *specific kind* of person, the person who is doing the good.

project is surrounded by frailty and an ambivalent attitude towards what is really important.

### 3.10 Concluding words

Kathi Weeks concludes her book with a discussion about the relation between work and life. She considers the colloquial invocation 'Get a life!' A life in this sense is a *possibility*, she suggests. It has no given form and in the best case it is an alternative to privatized withdrawal. Even though the political utopias she discusses – shortened working days, basic income – do not change the world of work drastically or instantaneously, these changes bear with them a provocation to think about another life, different from the life of careers and commodification. The endeavor is more about evoking new terrains of struggle and to open up a critical distance to the present, than about reaching a specific destination (2011, 221). She challenges us to listen carefully to cries of desperation and dissent. To quote Ernst Bloch: "Nevertheless, the rebellious desire, desire for something different, does not fail to appear in the long run, nor even in the hours after work; for human beings are not a commodity." (Bloch 1986, 910)

The merit of *The Problem with Work* is that she shows the problems involved in rushing to the defense of work, no matter what. She shows that this neutralization and moralization of work can be regarded as a stunting of life, where the terms are dictated beforehand. When work turns into an incontestable realm, the ways in which wage labor summons life and the future are difficult to grasp. This point touches on an overall trajectory in the thesis: if the meaning of work appears in the language of common sense, the present state of work is indeed presented as 'challenging' – an awareness of crisis belongs to this common sense. But the important challenges are to normalize work so that the

question is how people can *live up to* the multiple challenges of the working life: how is work-family balance to be sorted out or how are unemployed people to be 'activated'? Weeks sets out to tear down this normalization of the status quo.

Weeks and Kierkegaard are both concerned about fundamental reflection about our lives and futures being whisked off with the excuse that always appears to be justified: '*there is no time for such-and-such concerns now*'. '*We cannot afford to think about this now*.' I have explored how a truncated view of the future arises when life is seen as a project to be managed. The future is *blocked* or the future is reduced to worries about how life is to be managed. This is also how my remarks about the busy life and my reflection on critique of work go together. By her insistence on critique as a form of wake-up call, Weeks encourages the reader to radicalize the question about the future. What may have appeared as side-remarks about rhetorical techniques are thus intimately connected with the subject at hand: busyness. Weeks is right when she shows that a neutralized common sense view of work and life can also be said to be a *hopeless* view, where a system of work seems like a given necessity in which all of us have to become fully integrated.

Drawing on Ernst Bloch's three-volume *Principle of Hope* (1954/1955/1959) Weeks talks about fear of utopias: we are scared of becoming and becoming different (2011, 203). For her, this becoming-different is a challenge to think beyond a work-centered society. Unlike Weeks, I would emphasize that this battle should *also* be directed at cynicism with regard to work. In a talk, the philosopher Göran Torrkulla asks: do we *dare* to ask the question whether our own work is or can be made meaningful?<sup>58</sup> The question concerns whether we dare to think about work as serving the needs of human life and

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<sup>58</sup> At Korpo filosofidagar, July 2011.

whether work can be a part of the world we share with others. The form of Torrkulla's question is important: to whom is it addressed, who is asking?

As we saw, many of the critical writers on work are worried about the role of work as a lifetime of work. Acknowledging the meaning of work, to them, comes dangerously close to embracing the prospect of *boundless* work and *never-ending* devotion. What is often seen as a utopia – work as a limitless, creative pursuit in contrast to 8 hours of toil strictly separated from leisure – they view as a monopolization of life. The answer is not that work should be valued in a more *modest* way. Weeks is rightfully critical of the view that work should be valued *at the right proportions*. What, then, did I want to say? The idea behind this worry about limitless work, I take it, is that an acknowledgment of the possibility of fulfilling work is *already* on the brink of being an injunction to a lifetime of work that takes no account of the need for, to take one example, a shortened working day. The willingness to apply oneself to useful activities is hijacked by the obligation wage labor instils. If meaningful, work seems to occupy a *rightful* place at the center of life. According to Weeks, living for work makes it hard to reject the demands of the present order of capitalist work (2011, 8, 12, 87, cf. 88). In opposition to Weeks, I would suggest that daring to ask questions about meaningful work *does not* make one complicit in upholding a collective lifetime of work. Kierkegaard's pivotal question: "What is your occupation in life?" (1956, 198) should not be rejected because it allegedly is easily co-opted by the work ethic. The task of the next chapter is to delve right into the question of good work. The concept of vocation will be used as a tool to open up controversies surrounding the meaning of work and jobs. What the following chapter shows, I hope, is that the fear Weeks nurses about meaningful work is misdirected.

# Chapter Four: On vocation

## 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I try out the concept of a vocation. By doing so, I attend to a specific aspect of how people talk about work. Concepts such as vocation are what enable us to distinguish between different understandings of what a job is. The aim of this chapter is also to reflect on what role such discussions about the character of a specific job have. In the previous chapter, I discussed the relation between work and life as a relation saturated by concerns about what a good life is. Here, I want to continue the discussion about the relation between work and life by considering an articulation of work and meaning that takes its point of departure in the concept of a vocation. The underlying idea is that, as the British philosopher Iris Murdoch writes, moral vocabulary can be said to communicate a *vision*. Moral vocabulary should thus not be required to be specifiable according to strict criteria available to all: “it is surely true that we cannot always understand other people’s moral concepts”. In this way, reflection on moral concepts will be an extension of what agents are doing (Murdoch 1997, 82). A leading thought in what follows is that moral concepts are intertwined with agency.

My use of the concept of a vocation in order to shed light on a person’s commitment to his job may lead somebody to point out that vocation is a concept that belongs to a past historical period in which it was intelligible to say that some people devoted their entire lives to a specific profession. The concept of a calling was important for Luther, but could it be intelligible for us? In a context of job insecurity and short-term employment it might seem outrageous to say that somebody



devotes his life to a specific occupation. As Richard Sennett writes in several books (cf. chapter 6), the reality of projectization and precarious work is a hostile environment for any kind of commitment. What adds to the oddness – and risk – of talking about work as a vocation is that the language of commitment has been adopted by business firms in need of ‘devoted’ workers who are ‘passionate about their jobs’ (cf. chapter 3). My initial response would be that remarks about changes in people’s relation towards work tend to be of a very broad kind, and such diagnoses tend to be simplistic. More importantly, even though we rarely talk explicitly about a job in terms of its being a vocation, and when we do, as in ‘vocational training’, it is often synonymous with the labor market, I will suggest that this concept can be used to open up a discussion about commitment. Such considerations are needed more than ever when commitment is under threat. Reflection about the meaningfulness of work is also needed as a *counterweight* to the cynical attitude towards all forms of talk about good work (for an example of what I mean by cynicism, cf. Cederström & Fleming 2012) that suspect forms of glorification of work have often led to. Another clarification needs to be made: when I invoke the concept of vocation I do it with a critical distance to the tradition in which the concept of a vocation is embedded, a view of work according to which all human beings should inhabit a fixed place in society, so that a vocation is connected with societal order (Taylor 1992).

In the documentary film *Vikarien* (2006, dir.: Åsa Blanck & Johan Palmgren), a teacher in a primary school in a Swedish suburb struggles to keep order in the classroom and to reach out to the restless students. He explains that many of the teachers at the school, exhausted by the difficult working situation, are constantly on sick leave. Being at a loss how to make things better he calls up his old teacher and asks him to be his substitute for a while, knowing that the older teacher

had a way with the students. Even the older teacher occasionally finds himself standing helpless in the face of the chaotic classroom; at one point, the substitute teacher gives up and leaves the school, only to return later on. In this kind of example, one may say things such as ‘without a special commitment to his work, he would never be able to cope’. The teacher’s job confronts him with a specific kind of *difficulty* and I am impressed by his ability to do a good job despite the hardships. When I marvel at the way certain people relate to their jobs and the challenges in these jobs the perspective is significant: *I marvel, I wonder* at how these teachers persevere on the job. Such reflections about work and meaning are part of exchanges between people, on the job and outside, where people try to come to terms with experiences, hardships and challenges. One crucial element in this chapter is to explore what it means to say that experiences related to work and meaning are *interpersonal*. This implies that such experiences are not withdrawn from discussions and questioning. These exchanges make up an aspect of *doing* and *acting*. Thinking and acting are interrelated, and as Simone Weil shows, existential and ethical problems arise when they are disconnected.

I try out the concept of vocation in connection with how people talk about what it means to be devoted to a particular occupation. One of my aims is to show that commitment to a job can be described in other ways than as a psychological attitude, an appendage to the existing norms of a specific profession – a common image in professional ethics. The chapter is a response to the Australian philosopher Raimond Gaita’s thought-provoking remarks about vocation (even though the settings in which his reflection about vocation figures concern other things than work). An important point he makes, a point suggested also by the British philosopher Roy Holland, is that it is through concepts such as that of

vocation that the possibility of deepening in an activity can be brought out; this makes it possible to talk about what makes a job a *worthy* occupation. We are enabled to talk about e.g. the difference between politics as a concern with justice and politics as a mere power struggle or to distinguish between teaching as a knack and as a commitment. Even though the perspective is helpful in counteracting a trivialization of the language used to explain how something is worthwhile, Gaita's elaboration of the concept of vocation presupposes what I see as a problematic idea: allegedly, only some activities are proper candidates for being a vocation. He suggests that there are jobs (a garbage collector, for instance) that are characterized by functionality. These jobs need to be done by somebody, but the person performing them cannot be perceived to be committed to them in the way a teacher may be committed to *his* job. This claim strikes me as questionable. I will try to demonstrate why this is so via Simone Weil's concept of a vocation. Weil's contribution to my discussion consists in her, as I see it, striking approach towards what makes work oppressive. In contrast to Gaita, her approach is also situated within political philosophy.

One of the reasons why I find it illuminating to talk about work as a vocation is that I seek to shed light on what is at stake when work becomes oppressive, or when it is degraded into mere execution. In this way, this chapter connects with the next, in which issues surrounding such transformations will be addressed head-on. I will conclude the chapter with a short reflection on why questions about work and meaningfulness cannot be disengaged from their relational settings and that it is here that the concept of meaningfulness has its home.

## 4.2 Gaita on professionalism and vocation

In one of the essays in *A Common Humanity* Gaita writes about the life of the intellectual and the meaning of truth in such a life. The concept of truth, he writes, is often understood as an instrument, or a mere technical interest in the nature of reality. Gaita protests against the picture of the academic as an expert, a person who is skillful in a particular area. Instead, he wants to show that the responsibilities of an academic can be understood from the point of view of the life of the mind as a vocation (Gaita 2002, 187-192). He recalls two of the teachers at his university with whom he made friends. He was able to keep in touch with both of them despite the fact that they were hostile to each other for political reasons. Gaita admired the respect his friends showed for his intellectual independence: they did not try to make him choose sides. He talks about their respect as being an expression of their dedication to the life of the mind. The commitment to intellectual seriousness was displayed in how they were able to put the conflicts with one another aside in their relation with Gaita. Reflecting on how to describe their dedication, he writes:

Only something like the concept of a vocation, I think, will enable one adequately to characterise the kind of obligations acknowledged in that respect and in the nature of their commitment to their students and to the life of the mind. It showed in the way a commitment to truth and truthfulness shaped their lives. The concept of a profession and its associated responsibilities and commitment will not capture it. It would divide their work from their life in the wrong kind of way and it would do so because it would make their passion into a contingent psychological attribute, external to the obligations they acknowledged when they reflected on what it meant to be a university teacher. By their example they disclosed values different from and deeper than any found in the most rigorous professionalism (Gaita 2002, 195-196).

From the quote it is evident that Gaita distinguishes the concept of vocation from professionalism and professional obligations. Even though I think we should acknowledge the multiplicity of meanings 'professionalism' has,<sup>59</sup> Gaita is clearly right in saying that such perspectives are unable to give substance to a concept of vocation. He emphasizes *one* such use: 'professionalism' yields descriptions in which the connection between the profession of a university teacher and the teachers' lives is psychological and therefore, one could say, external. Professionalism is here taken to consist in formal obligations in addition to which one may have a certain emotional investment in the job, 'passion for a job' perhaps, which is then accounted for as a psychological contingency or disposition. Mike W. Martin puts forth the characteristics of this image: personal values are strongly distinguished from the professional role or the professional obligation (accounted for in legal or institutional terms). To express the idea in another way: the professional role is what it is, regardless of what my own private ideas about it are. One should thus be able to define one's professional responsibilities. The idea of a code of ethics may then seem appealing: in tricky situations, a professional could invoke unequivocal, standardized sets of rules in which the responsibilities of a professional are spelled out.<sup>60</sup> According to this line of thinking, commitment may be

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<sup>59</sup> A common definition of professionalism is that it presupposes some level of self-regulation so that professionals to some extent control their own work, which is often legitimized by referring to the expertise of professionals or the function these professions have (Cf. Freidson 2001, 56, 180). But 'professionalism' is also used in a different way, in cases where one would consider it natural for a person to react in a certain way, but his professionalism enables him to react in a different way, withholding the spontaneous reaction - think for example about a funeral home director who has learned to cope with the grief of the clients.

<sup>60</sup> For two excellent critiques of applied ethics and responsibility cf. Wolgast 1992 and Hertzberg 2002.

important in the form of motivation/passion/personal values but the rules of the profession are external to personal commitment (Martin 2000, 3-4). In contrast to this picture of professionalism, Gaita claims that the concept of a vocation concerns a person's way of relating to and understanding the world and himself. Talking about his friends, Gaita describes how the teachers related to politics, and how they tried to keep their work unaffected by ideological quibbles. In the example, responsibility, commitment and work go together: personal commitment reveals a *possibility*, what academic work can, at best, be like.

In the quote above, the meaning of 'obligations' is ambiguous: one may read Gaita as suggesting that professionalism in his sense presupposes that responsibilities can be explicated given some reflection, which latches onto a familiar image in applied ethics according to which ethics is a form of *knowledge*, an image opposed by Gaita's overall perspective. This view of morality is common in discussions about professionalism. A leading branch of the ethics of professionalism consists in spelling out the *ideals* of professions or professionalism. From this ideal, concrete obligations could be assumed and applied to the particular situation. These ideals are often regarded as having a regulative role in the practice of professionals. According to Eliot Freidson, it is by virtue of the connection between professions and transcendent values that professionals are allowed a degree of independence. It becomes evident that there is also a moral aspect to this: professionals are said to be devoted to more than a fat paycheck. This is not, he seems to say, merely a contingent fact, but something that *defines* professions (or the legitimacy of professions) (2001, 121-3).

However, one may also interpret the quote - this reading is reinforced when one looks at what Gaita writes later on - as implying that the obligations connected with a vocation stem

from *reflection* on what it means to be a university teacher and that the problem with the rhetoric of professionalism is that it *externalizes* passion from the university teacher's reflection on his job. "The concept of a profession [...] would make their passion into a contingent psychological attribute, external to the obligations they acknowledged when they reflected on what it meant to be a university teacher." (2002, 195) The risk this remark brings with it is that it seems as if e.g. the obligation of intellectual honesty were an obligation derived from reflection, as if particular obligations could be deduced from the *concept* of university teacher – as if there were certain obligations *inherent* in the concept, or as if particular dimensions of a job are disclosed as one engages in deep reflection on what a specific activity means. Gaita often writes that reflection on what it means to be a university teacher *yields* certain obligations (cf. 2002, 203).

What I take issue with is *not* that it is important to think about what one is doing. My doubts concern whether Gaita's emphasis on the vocation of an academic is dressed in a conceptual language that leads him to a one-sided image of what it is to be dedicated to an occupation.<sup>61</sup> According to this interpretation he gives a far too intellectualistic image of what a vocation is, even among academics. It also goes against the way Gaita underscores that the teachers' vocation was expressed in the *relations* they had with others, in friendship, in conversations: their vocation was expressed in how they lived as academics. The emphasis on reflection unwittingly

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<sup>61</sup> He writes about the question if academics have an obligation to be public intellectuals: "Reflection on what it means to be a university academic yields no such obligation. I mean that it yields no obligation of the kind that arises from the very nature of being an academic." (2002 203-4) He goes on to make a distinction between external reasons (that academics owe something to society as it pays their salaries) and the real obligations that are revealed when one reflects on the academic vocation (2002, 204).

directs our attention away from the *specific situations* in which people grapple with the meaning and responsibilities of their jobs. To take an example from my own field: in a situation of academic competition, let's say when I apply for scholarships and try to present my work in a way so as to attract the sponsors, I might feel that I am seduced into intellectual dishonesty. I gradually notice how my own academic interests start to conform to the typical debates. The problem evolving from a situation like this one is, I suppose, the reason one might want to talk about 'an obligation to keep one's work intellectually honest'. It is in this type of situation I come to reflect on – and *act* on – what it means to be an academic. That is why it is strange to think that 'the obligations of an academic' can be deduced from a particular *concept*, or a certain transcendent ideal about what a profession should be. It would be to give a distorted and too contemplative image of the dynamic and relational reality of work in which people's commitment is expressed in ordinary situations: caring about the bad atmosphere in the team, asking a colleague whether s/he needs help with a certain task, or arguing about whether unnecessary compromises have been made.

In connection with this, when discussing the meaning of work or what it is like to be an *x*, one needs to acknowledge how tempting it is to direct one's gaze at work in such an exclusive way that the very ordinary circumstances of finding one's job, with all that it contains of friends, tasks, security, routines etc. bearable or even rewarding drops out of the picture. Could you imagine yourself asking your friend who delivers mail, works in a flower shop, as a pharmacist or as an accountant for a plumbing firm: is it the job itself you like, or is it something else? When would you ask that? What would the question imply, what kind of answer would be encouraged? My own hunch is that distinctions between the job and 'everything else' differ hugely depending on the



concern in question: are you asking whether your friend should quit his job or are you asking him why the job makes him lie awake at night? The inclination to make a strong context-less distinction between the job itself and psychological circumstances can be alleviated by reminding oneself (once again) of what an ambiguous concept work is. What one will say thus depends on *what* one looks at and with what interest one looks at it: the *role* of a doctor ('role' is a tricky concept), the *employment* as a doctor, a medical *training*, a specific job *situation*. Without any specific context in mind, it is hard to speak about the meaning of a job or what is external to it. I am not saying this because I want to broaden the picture; the remark latches onto Gaita's own project of denouncing reductionism and external images of morality. I consider what I have said here to be in line with how I grasp the gist of his argument. The framework of professionalism externalizes commitment – Gaita is right about that – but there is also the risk that one is staring so hard at the meaning of work ('what it means to be a teacher/doctor/politician') that one conflates one's own ideas and preconceptions about what is external to a particular job with *the* meaningfulness of a job.

In other words, a complex question is what it is to investigate what a job means to somebody. Like 'understanding', the concept of meaning is used in multiple ways. We talk about meaning as grasping the *point* of something, as in the cases where we ask what *use* something serves. We also talk about meaning when we discuss whether something is meaningful or meaningless (at all). In those cases one may be perfectly familiar with the use something serves. When people talk about meaningfulness, they often appeal to experiences, and then it may – to the philosopher worried about realism or anti-realism – appear that whatever I find meaningful *is* meaningful, that there can't be anything more to say about meaningfulness than: this is how it appears to *me*,

from *my* perspective this is meaningful, *I* experience this as meaningful. In another use of 'meaningful', the psychological level of experiences does not solve anything. We ask questions such as 'are you serious, how *can* you think this is meaningful?' As I will go on to show, the categories of subjective or objective are not exhaustive: meaningfulness cannot be exhaustively defined on such a continuum. Your caring about something may strike me as mysterious, or even questionable, or it may open up a new horizon for me. My point is that it is not at all obvious what talking about finding one's job meaningful entails, what such talk concerns, how and when it is raised. This is important to keep in mind when meaningfulness is treated as a shorthand way of coming to terms with the nature of work and good work. In other words, to look at *uses* of the word meaningful is far more fruitful than attempts to fixate what meaningful work (inherently) *is*.

To sum up: questions about 'what it means to be an X' – take note of the form of the question! – cannot be isolated from the particular problems arising within the *life* one leads. Appealing to certain 'grammatically grounded'<sup>62</sup> ideas about what an occupation is seems to direct one's attention away from the urgency of a person's struggles with the responsibilities or obligations of his job. My point is that this is not what Gaita wants, either (he is against foundationalism). It matters that Gaita is discussing the life of academics in the sections I have quoted from and one would perhaps think it self-evident that reflection is emphasized there. In my view, *not even* of an academic does it make sense to say that the *concept* of an academic plays a very fundamental role so that it

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<sup>62</sup> A discussion about what Gaita means by 'concept' and 'grammar' could be in place here, and I think his own image is very complex. However, I have chosen not to venture into such a discussion as that would take me too far from my main errand.

could be appealed to when one, for example, wants to settle the ailments of the contemporary university. As we will see, Gaita's emphasis on the role reflection has in understanding what it means to be a university teacher is very deliberate (though ambiguous) and I will go on to question the ideas he nurses about how some activities allow for reflection about their deepening obligations, while others do not because of their 'constitutive grammar'. I wonder whether Gaita should acknowledge the risk that he is transforming his own perspective – what he, personally, is able to view as a vocation or what he is unable to perceive as a form of self-exploration or as more than technique – into a 'grammatical' point based on conceptual reflection on what it means to be an X. Gaita's emphasis on grammar ignores the interpersonal nature of remarks about meaningfulness, and the fact that this interpersonal character does not always revolve around reflection in any immediate sense. However, as I said, there are also other elements in his account: after all, the personal story has an important role, not just as an example but, as I think Gaita himself would say, as a case that bears witness to a moral possibility.

### **4.3 'A deepening understanding'**

I now turn to discuss Gaita's claim that only *some* forms of work can be a vocation, an idea that takes on all the more luster if one presupposes that this can be decided through philosophical reflection (even though, as I said, it is quite hard to know where Gaita stands on this). What Gaita says about the distinction between professionalism and vocation can be understood in connection with sections in *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* dedicated to the concept of craft. The chapter in which these sections appear contains a discussion about naturalism, virtues and their relation to human needs.

Gaita brings in the concept of craft to shed light on how virtues are not instrumentally related to needs. One of the overall aims of the book is to counteract reductive (often utilitarian) conceptions of morality. He sees crafts as distinct from skills. Virtue ethics has utilized the analogy between crafts and virtues, but in that tradition crafts have, Gaita complains, mostly been treated as *skills*. Skills are, he says, determined by their relation to certain defined ends and this has a bearing on how one talks about what it means to learn something, to master a skill. But the concept of a craft need not be restricted to a description of how well particular ends are achieved. As in the sections from *A Common Humanity* quoted above, Gaita introduces the concept of vocation to stake out a certain possibility which must not be muddled by using the wrong kind of vocabulary:

Craftsmen, like all whose self-understanding is conditioned by their having a vocation, are engaged in a limitless process of self-exploration through an exploration of what they do. What they are and what they do come together in the concept, 'what it is to be an X' (a craftsman, a nurse or a teacher, for example). Certain forms of the question 'What is it to be an X?' depend upon a kind of contrast between appearance and reality that allows for the idea of an understanding which may deepen without limit. [...] Concepts whose constitutive grammar is purely functional (the concept of dustman, for example) are relatively transparent, and even though some are very complex, their complexity is finite and of a sort that enables us to expect that opinions on what it is to be such an X will converge amongst competent inquirers (Gaita 2004, 86, my emphasis).

There are many things in the quote I would like to challenge. Again: by appealing to what he sees as 'constitutive grammar', Gaita relies on the *conceptual* in a misleading way: a certain dimension of work will, he seems to say, emerge when we reflect deeply on what it means to be an X: a constitutive

grammar shines forth. What I agree with is that self-exploration and engagement sometimes come together, and talking about a vocation makes sense there. The problem is that from Gaita's horizon, some activities will appear as practical chores, while there are other activities that have the potential to deepen our understanding of what they are about. 'Skill' is, he maintains, a *functional* concept and 'dustman', for him, exemplifies functional work. Answers to the question 'what it means to *be* a dustman' will thus yield descriptions that do not involve questions about *meaning* in the way 'what it means to be a teacher' does. This contention about the constitutive grammar of what it is to be a dustman is puzzling, even though Gaita's point seems *tempting* to accept. I can definitively feel the pull of the idea that providing a functional or technical description with regard to some jobs seems more accurate than with regard to others. After all, people *talk* that way about jobs and even about their *own* jobs, and they do it to make various points. Think, for instance, about a person who dreams about quitting hir job. S/he tells hir friends that the job s/he has at present offers no challenges, no development, no deepened knowledge. S/he is eager to learn something new, she says. The job s/he has now is fine, but after you've got the hang of it, there is nothing that keeps you active. Even though this way of talking may not be what Gaita had in mind, it is one instance of such distinctions.

I find Gaita's elaboration of work as a vocation illuminating to some extent, especially in its rejection of psychologism, namely his rejection of the suggestion that passion is a psychological state that can be separated from professional obligations. I also by no means interpret Gaita as putting forward a strong thesis that distinguishes functional jobs from vocations – his main contention concerns 'what it is to be an *x*' and what one can mean by crafts. From there, he develops an idea about functionality and vocations.

So what is the problem with arguing that only some types of work can be a vocation? I have already begun explaining why this philosophical move is problematic: accounts of ‘what it is to be an X’ cannot be detached from accounts of the *life* as an X, of the way new concerns and worries arise within a practice (I will return to this in chapter 6). One can, I think, say that such concerns do not always take the shape of ‘what it is to be an X’ even though they express forms of how a person’s commitment to his job deepens. There is no detached, grammatical level of exploring what an activity means and somehow Gaita might agree: after all, he claims that the mode of reflection he has in mind is a form of self-exploration.

Let me first try to spell out in what way Gaita’s point seems to be on the *right* track. It is possible to reach a level of agreement about what it is to be an X, Gaita says, if this X is *not* seen as a craft. This is shown by the converging opinions of competent practitioners regarding what a job is about (what is required of a practitioner). I agree with Gaita only *this far*: in many jobs, an important dimension is that practitioners express their own views on what is central for doing the job well. The question about what good work amounts to arises again and again and it is hard to imagine many jobs without such discussions and controversies. A concern about what it means to be a therapist or a teacher is linked to the *practice* of being a therapist or a teacher; of confronting situations, talking with colleagues with different backgrounds and life stories, starting to doubt one’s judgment, or voicing a worry about the commercialization that has a hazardous influence on teaching or interacting with clients. Think for example about care workers at a home for the elderly discussing a set of new policies and the impact these policies have on the space they have for working in a way they themselves find acceptable. It would be strange to say that their discussion only has a *therapeutic* function; that it lets off the steam for example. We

*could* imagine somebody, perhaps the employer, reducing such discussions to psychological expression of discontent in order to trivialize the employees' opinions and perspectives and to render them toothless, mere *opinions*, rather than testimonies of problematic tendencies. Also imagine a group of journalists discussing a new marketing strategy aimed to increase the amount of subscriptions. Some of the journalists grow impatient with the discussion and say that this type of thing prevents them from attending to their core responsibilities: investigating and writing. The discussion that takes place within the practical setting of the job can't be isolated from other aspects of the situations in which the conversations take place: a relation with a long history, vulnerable moments and vulnerable power relations, the desire to be right, bitterness, moments of insight, attempts to make oneself understood.

As I said, such issues are by no means strictly limited to 'what it is to be an x' even though they express worries and hopes about the job or the community of which the job is a part. It is easy to imagine how relations of power and position influence situations in which good work is debated – one need only recall one's own experiences as a new and insecure employee at a job and the very different meanings it may have in that setting to ask for advice from a co-worker; one's insecurity may even imply that the only thing one sees is the other's authority, not the specific weight experience has within that job. A case in which a person's experience has authority *regardless* of hir formal position can also be imagined.

So, there are jobs in which debates about the nature of good work seem inevitable and this is shown in how practitioners value experience in ways that go *beyond* having acquired a set of skills, technical expertise. In this sense, talking about a dimension of deepening might reveal a *dimension* of work: commitment.

This dimension of deepening is internal to commitment. Lars Hertzberg writes about the temptation of social theorists to describe *all* occupations as roles that mold the practitioner's personality. This may be true of some types of jobs, but it remains the exception. When it is true, it is in the sense that commitment *reveals* what that job is (the concepts of role and personality easily create muddles and it may be important to try out other concepts for describing in what way a person's job shapes his life. He goes on to elaborate on the meaning of 'being a scholar at heart'. I read Hertzberg as saying that commitment is so central for some jobs that the standards of what good work means are tied up with commitment.<sup>63</sup>

[The] standards of scholarly work are set only through the ways in which scholars actually commit themselves in their work. Their commitments show what it is to find meaning in a life of scholarship. And this can only be shown by someone for whom that life has meaning in itself, that is, by somebody who is a scholar at heart (1994, 271).

This quote shows how a generalized description of a job may not at all reveal what good work could be; this is revealed through people's commitment. I think Gaita would fully agree because this goes against the idea that passion could be disengaged from the obligations of the job. Standards of scholarly work may be expressed in quantitative terms (if quoted many times in journals with the right profile, a scholarly article is ranked as a contribution with a high standard), but Hertzberg's point seems to bring out another different dimension of speaking about standards, where the focus does not lie on standards as formalization or

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<sup>63</sup> 'Commitment' can have different roles. In contrast to the scholar at heart, one can imagine a person who is very 'committed' but only in the sense that s/he shows *enthusiasm for* new projects etc., while the commitment never materializes in his work.



prescription: standards are not the standards of an institution, the academic market or the standards set by one's peers. The obligation one has in scholarly work is not defined in that way (1994, 270). If standards are revealed through commitment, the project of strict definitions of the obligations of a job seems spurious and this again brings us back to the impossibility of fixating a definition of work, the limits of work or the essence of a job. With this in mind, what is important is how commitment comes through in somebody's life and how people actually talk about what it means to mature or to gain experience within a job, or to become jaded, cynical or bitter.

This perspective is challenging because it attends to the question of good work from a very different angle than a perspective of professionalism that revolves around an ideal about agreement on standards and quality. What can be said is that good achievements, good work, quality, etc. have *different* roles depending on what kinds of jobs, or what historical situation, one talks about. One important circumstance is in which way the standards of good work are settled or revealed, and whether quantitative or qualitative terms are used. What is more, it may even be a *violation* of what is seen as central in a job to talk about 'standards'. I think this is part of Gaita's rejection of professionalism. The risk is that one ends up in a discourse in which professional ethics is seen as a set of standards that can be decided by a committee, so that responsibility consists in complying with these external standards. An emphasis evokes the image of a profession as a specific field: the standards of a profession are derivable from and even synonymous with the given practice (for a contribution to this debate cf. Applbaum 1999).

The limits of a job are historical in a way that is saturated with meaning. The ways in which good work is discussed are rarely static: power, change and disputes enter the story as is very easy to demonstrate if one takes a look at the

contestations of New Public Management and the concepts of quality that have been brought into many professions – or rather, that have been *forced* on many employees who report their powerlessness over the system. If Gaita’s concept of a vocation is applied to exasperated doctors, teachers or administrators who feel that external standards and quality systems make it impossible for them to live up to what they see as good work, the seriousness of what *is in jeopardy* gets clear. Professions are sometimes understood as making up a logic of their own, characterized by the control professionals exert over their work; professionals are free to judge and choose the ends of work. This logic is defined in contrast to markets and bureaucracy. Professionalism is described as a shrinking realm squeezed in between state regulations and commercial interests (cf. Eliot Freidson’s book *Professionalism: The Third Logic*). The language of professionalism (for example in the shape of “a logically distinct way of organizing and controlling work” (2001, 197)) doesn’t at all guarantee that the *moral* hazards of a situation, be it the commercialization of the university or engineering, are taken seriously (cf. Wolgast 1991). The risk is that we then only see an assault on *professionalism*. If conflicts come to look like a struggle between a set of professional ideals and institutional facts, for example so that the only problem with new public management is that it infringes on the autonomy of professionals, the aspect I pointed to above is not seen: the need for people to take a stand on what good work means. Nor does the language of professionalism capture the ethically immersed relational aspect of such changes, how practitioners relate to clients and how they relate to each other. What can be concluded here is that this type of example shows that the concept of vocation can alert us the fear among practitioners that a job is being corrupted. This does not stake out a distinction between jobs; rather, one can say that the fear that a job is corrupted reveals

the room for a worker to voice his own understanding of the job and in that case it doesn't make sense to say that the job is merely functional, or saying it would mean to occupy a specific position (perhaps as an employer). In other words, the distinction is relevant, but not in the way Gaita thinks. Let me continue on that track.

#### **4.4 Gaita on functionality**

Several writers argue that there is a difference between a practice that involves only technical competence and full-blown practices in which there are internal goods, rewards that are internally related to the activity itself. The goals cannot be understood without the means, and conversely, the means cannot be understood without the aims. For these writers, 'internal goods' are capacities that transform us as persons and in this way they are related to a way of life. Russell Muirhead mentions washing dishes, trimming lawns, copying papers and operating machinery. These are activities that may require technical skills, but they contain no internal goods, he argues in his argument that draws on the philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre. He adds that the activities he mentions *can* be seen as practices under one condition: if they are situated within a wider context (2004, 195-7). MacIntyre himself (1981, 175) wrote that football and chess can be seen as practices with internal goods, whereas the concept of a practice *cannot* accommodate brick-laying and planting turnips. Like Gaita, he underscores that practices have no fixed goal and that they are separable from technical skills.

[A] practice, in the sense intended, is never just a set of technical skills, even when directed towards some unified purpose and even if the exercise of those skills can on occasion be valued or enjoyed for their own sake. What is distinctive of a practice is in

part the way in which conceptions of the relevant goods and ends which the technical skills serve – and every practice does require the exercise of technical skills – are transformed and enriched by these extension of human powers and by that regard for its own internal goods which are partially definitive of each particular practice or type of practice (1981, 180).

Muirhead, for his part, seems to deny that there can be a *categorical* distinction between practices and non-practices (in MacIntyre's book the difference is not categorically expressed, either). The importance, for him, of the concept of a practice is that it clarifies the promise of good work. If one take's Muirhead's stance, practices are defined as an *open-ended* concept. When I engage in a practice as a beginner, I cannot know beforehand what engaging in it will mean. If the only thing Muirhead says is that the promise of good work involves more than skills in a technical sense, that it involves more than concepts of functionality, then I agree with him.

However, when Gaita argues that there is a distinction between merely functional jobs and crafts that allow for deepening I doubt such a distinction can really be made in the way he does it. Step by step, I will attempt to give reasons for my hesitation. In chapter 2, I discussed how the term 'functionality' has appeared as a critique of de-skilling and societal machinery. When Gaita talks about a vocation he contrasts it with an image that appears *neutral*. Gaita's main contention about functionality is this: if a job is functional, it contains no room for development other than a development in competence or mastery. Functional work *is what it is*. One can understand him as saying that in the capacity of dustman, the dustman *is* a function (cf. 2004, 86).

He does not seem to understand the *cruelty* such a view unwittingly gives expression to. Gaita's assumption leads one to think that there are some activities that can be accounted for solely from a practical, technical point of view. If one

interprets what he says in a drastic way, the argument implies that some jobs are very easy and straightforward to describe; since they are functions, there is nothing more to say about them beyond pointing out their technical relation to a particular aim. If one has a reduced understanding of functions, not even instrumentality seems to fit into the picture, as instrumentality opens up for a complex relation between means and ends. The problem is also (again) that the idea of work as a function zones in on work in a much too one-dimensional way when it is assumed that the job of a dustman (secretary/cashier/receptionist?) is exhaustively described by pointing at the functions it serves, while a reflection on the work of a doctor or an academic allegedly discloses and responds to essential human values.

My main objection is that this would make it impossible to distinguish a job that can be characterized in functional terms (by mentioning the purpose) from jobs which are *degraded* into mere functions. Imagine a grocery store where a person sits by the checkout point, repeating the same movements over and over again and never having the time to exchange a few words with the customers, or imagine a cleaner who was once a part of the university staff, but now works for a private firm, and is treated by the university staff as a function, rather than a person. That these jobs have a history is crucial, as well as the changes even the concept of functionality goes through when it is inserted in a new context, such as the outsourced cleaning services at the university.

When one reads a book like the journalist Studs Terkel's *Working* – containing interviews with people working in a huge range of different occupations – one also realizes that it makes a difference if a person *himself* says that the job is just a function or whether s/he is *treated* like an exchangeable function (cf. Terkel 1997).

Again, what I take to be the decisive reminder here is that workers have their own views about what the job is about, what degradation of it means and what is important for doing it well, views that, as I said, might differ in significant ways from the employer's definition and prescriptions. One example could be a person who helps elderly people in their homes. Her employer strongly emphasizes that the schedule must be kept at all times. Time is not to be wasted and the visits must never stretch out. The employee's experience is that these schedules cannot be kept, that sticking to them conflicts with her commitment to doing the job well. Following the schedule appears to her like an infringement on the essential responsibilities: feeding, washing or doing the daily shopping (for a good account of this, cf. Mattson 2014). These ways of voicing disagreement reveal a side of work that, repressed, forgotten or ignored reveals the power relations of neutralizations and descriptions of a job in terms of certain fixed obligations.

A recent example of such a disagreement took place in Stockholm, Sweden. A new time-measurement software program has been introduced in some municipalities to make the healthcare workers' visits at elderly people's homes more efficient. Many workers experienced this software program (ParaGÅ) as a strain on their work that has made it harder to do the job they are supposed to do; the stress that the system brought into the working day puts the well-being of the employees and the clients at risk. One of the unions the employees are represented by decided to manifest the discontent with this new time-measurement system by refusing to use program. The employer responded with a lockout. Another union representing the employees of the same company criticized the refusal and expressed positive

views about the software system in question.<sup>64</sup> In my view, such examples illuminate why there can be *no ready-made distinction* between functional jobs and vocations.

Let me mention a couple of further cases that go against Gaita's distinction. First, a rather familiar, even mythologized, example: consider the way a bartender works a bar. S/he recognizes the patrons and cares about them. S/he tries to create the bar as a space for everyone. S/he is clearly demarcating what kind of behavior is not appropriate. Whenever needed, s/he can appear gruff. Most of the patrons appreciate hir eye for tricky situations and when this bartender is retired, the patrons talk about the significant changes this has meant to the community built around the bar. I think this kind of example is interesting because it sheds light on how witnessing somebody's work or hearing somebody talking about hir job opens up a way in which the job makes a moral difference. This is in line with what Gaita would say. My point is that references to 'the merely functional' elicit an inclination to create neat categories that makes us less prone to take interest in what a job is like and to listen to people talk about how they experience their jobs.

To take another example, in his book *Working in The Shadows* the journalist Gabriel Thompson talks about his experience of cutting salad. The learning process was not just a practical process of working faster and more efficiently. He explains that it was also a process of getting familiar with the environment, the group of (mostly immigrant) workers and their various attitudes towards the job. This made him re-evaluate how people tend to talk about skills. He became increasingly suspicious of the idea that cutting salad is a simple job that one could learn in a few minutes. He describes

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<sup>64</sup><http://www.ka.se/informationen-om-paraga-maste-bli-battre>  
<http://arbetaren.se/artiklar/syndikalister-varslar-om-strejk-mot-aleris/>

both solidarity and animosity among the workers: some workers are irritated with Thompson's clumsiness while others help him out (2010, chapter 1). The examples show that an intimate knowledge about a job reveals *new* forms of care – care in a multi-dimensional sense as expressed in the practitioner's *attention*: Thompson describes both a way of relating to the task and how the salad cutters related to co-workers – all of which is inconspicuous to people buying salad from the grocery store (in chapter 6 I will discuss care more directly), and which is definitively inconspicuous to people having made up their mind that some jobs are by nature manual and involve skills so basic that anyone can do them.

It is true for many jobs, I think, that an outsider may, for different reasons, have a limited understanding (or imagination!) of the attentive care that a practitioner's work is an expression of. Like the Norwegian philosopher Jacob Meløe, I would say that a person who knows nothing about fishing does not share the *world* that the fisher inhabits, a world of the sea, boats and the fisherman's working day. 'World' here includes both how (and what) we *see* and how we *act* (1997). Muirhead is thus right when he writes: "It is difficult to identify the internal goods relevant to particular lines of work, and we should not be too quick to judge particular jobs or careers as simply lacking them. Internal goods may be hard to locate even at an individual level, with respect to one's own job" (2004, 163). Again, it is important not to have too reduced an idea of work in mind here; it is precisely in connection with distilled ideas about 'the job as such' – ideas about what is internal and external to the job – that one may be prone to overlook or trivialize such care.

In Gaita's phrasing of the contrast between a vocation and functional tasks functionality is somehow the bare fact of a job as *execution*, important only in so far as it is *done*. This image is related to another one: there are necessary tasks that must be



done but nobody would do them if they had a choice to do something else. What kind of case would one think of here? It would be outrageous were we to assume that the person cleaning the streets from garbage necessarily sees himself as a mere function. One could instead think of somebody who likes his job because it is so *easy* to perceive its function – and here function is exchangeable with *purpose* and *aim* – to see the difference the daily toil makes. This is a language game of function very different from the language of crude and purely technical instrumentality. Gaita takes for granted that the concept of functionality does not allow for deepening: he seems to argue that concerns about meaningfulness does not and cannot arise here. As we have seen, the view of work as a function risks bracketing the concrete circumstances that *degrade* work into mere execution, for example that the employee is barred from paying attention to anything beyond getting the job done. ‘What it is to be an x’ here seems to be reduced to a minimal set of obligatory tasks, and the rich varieties in how we talk about work and necessity – what must be done – is glossed over. If the only thing Gaita’s argument implies is that a practice or a job can be degraded, I would agree with it. But degradation never figures in his discussion.

Some writers argue that a distinction between the social role of a job and its inherent meaning helps us see the difference between a job being intrinsically meaningful for a person and its being socially useful. As Russell Muirhead writes, an account of work that emphasizes its social utility but ignores people’s own claims and aspirations is one-sided (cf. Muirhead 2004, 152). Nobody could deny that a person could at the same time see that a job is socially worthwhile, although s/he couldn’t see himself fit for the job. I also agree with Muirhead that social utility that takes no regard of the people who do the jobs is a flawed one – and I would say that

it risks omitting the essential question: social utility for *whom*, under what *circumstances*? The problematic step is taken if it is assumed that there are specific useful jobs that *in themselves* are such that a conflict occurs between usefulness for society and 'intrinsic meaning', that a job is useful but that its intrinsic reward is such that very few people would see it as a job they could see themselves doing. Muirhead seems to assume such inherent conflicts and he seems to have garbage-collectors and grave-diggers in mind. On the other hand, I think the *wrong* response would be the subjectivist one: a person's own attitude solves all questions about meaning. If a person happens to like a job, then that job can be seen as meaningful, regardless of its conditions. However, it would be very dangerous to think that *any* job could be meaningful, given the right attitude.

I suspect that the trouble with Muirhead's question 'is there an irresolvable conflict between social utility and intrinsic reward?' is that it encourages philosophical attempts to resolve an *eternal conflict* assumed to characterize work in itself, in every society. I think there is a real, very important worry that underlies the question, but it needs to be reformulated so that it really has the capacity to challenge how we perceive work and social utility, along with tendencies to neutralize such conflicts. In a way, Muirhead radicalizes his own question later on, even though he does not spell out the connection. In connection with a discussion about the division of labor, he writes: "Capitalism thus contains an enduring antagonism between what human beings are and what it asks and requires them to be..." (2004, 158) Gavin Kitching follows a similar train of thought in a discussion about Marx's concept of labor power. He writes that a commodification of work makes a certain form of degradation of work possible. Creativity itself becomes a commodity. Then he adds:

On the other hand, however, it does not seem to me that there is much human creativity involved in mining coal, or packing cakes into boxes, or assembling transistor radios from standard components. Would one not much rather that machines did all these repetitive, boring, dangerous, or dirty tasks? Why have 'living labor power' involved in them at all? (Kitching 1988, 119)

This remark prompts the question whether there are certain jobs *that should not exist at all*, if the mere existence of these jobs is degrading. For Kitching this is a serious concern: if we cannot think of a job as an expression of human creativity, then what would it mean to think of a better arrangement of this job? (However, I think creativity may not play the role Kitching thinks it does.) Would the goal be that we are all to share these jobs between us, or is the aim rather full automation of these tasks? (1988, 134) Again: the risk is that this turns into a sort of intellectual musing: could we imagine Marx enjoying a sewer job? Or the question could be reduced into playful and hypothetical personal soul-searching: could *I* stand to do it? The fundamental question is all-important: should *anybody* do these jobs? What does it mean that this is a job? Many people have *no choice* but to accept jobs like this. Such questions will inevitably incite distinctions between various forms of repulsive jobs. Which jobs are unpleasant (but *somebody* must do them, if no machine can), which jobs are monotonous, which jobs are morally and emotionally challenging, and which jobs should not exist *at all*? Such questions arise in the midst of our ordinary lives, not merely in a philosophical mode. The stakes of these discussions are big: if there are jobs that nobody should do, there may also be services or commodities we must live without. If there are jobs that are dangerous or existentially empty and that many people agree should be abolished, what bearing do these moral views have on the factual existence of those jobs? What

political measures can be taken that makes it possible for people not to accept such bad or dangerous jobs?

To sum up: what I protest against is the idea that there are aspects flowing from the *nature* of work or derived from the essence of a task that create a basis for a grammatical distinction between work that can deepen and work that revolves around function, skills and competence. If one reads Gaita uncharitably one may even say that his take on functionality exacerbates the already existing risk of neglecting and undervaluing certain jobs.

#### 4.5 Work and reality

As we saw, Gaita relates the concept of vocation to activities that can deepen. Roy Holland says something along similar lines when in one of the essays in *Against Empiricism* he talks about how mastery stands in relation to *reality* in a specific way that allows for deepening (Gaita draws on Holland in his texts). Mastery has to do with learning and the way work is judged qualitatively. He hereby wishes to open up a discussion about the value of education:

I do not mean the mastery of just anything but rather of *things which have enough in them* (or which lead on to and facilitate other things which have enough in them) to occupy a person's consciousness and absorb a substantial portion of his energies; *things which afford enough scope for there to be an indefinite progression of work*, with the possibility always of advancement and the growth of comprehension and the natural joy that attends the exercise of a human faculty (Holland 1980, 56, my emphasis).

The problem with this quote, and Gaita's perspective, is that they adhere to the picture that the inherent worth of an activity is central for what it is to talk about a vocation and mastery. I have already addressed what I think is wrong with that figure of thought. Holland's question: 'what has enough

in it to occupy a person's consciousness?' easily turns into either a question about an activity as such, or a question about psychological experiences of meaning. Both Gaita and Holland strongly oppose the latter option, psychologism. Holland's 'what has enough in it' can be interpreted as a *practical* (rather than grammatical) point: in the course of everyday life, in the midst of doing and acting, we make distinctions between activities that are worth engaging in and activities that don't. Holland's essay contains some astute remarks about mastery and work that go in the opposite direction of stressing the inherent nature of a specific occupation. He says for example that mastery does not thrive in competitive relations; it develops in relations of common love of work. As with Gaita, I think Holland is on to something in his essay. He attends to aspects of work which do not conform to 'the rat race', or the kind of thinking according to which the most important thing is to get what one is entitled to (1980, 58). I agree with Holland that it makes sense to talk about a deepening knowledge of work to bring out such aspects, and from this point of view he is right when he says that an achievement is not external to the task when it is seen from other perspectives than execution. A certain type of attention to what one is doing takes on a very different meaning when one starts to worry about results alone (1980, 57-8, 60). The internal relation between means and ends is a recurring theme in the philosophy of work. In connection with a discussion of Hertzberg's example of a scholar at heart, I talked about the difference between a person geared towards maximizing academic merits, and a person who is committed to the life of the mind in a way that is internal to the content of that life. This point about the role results or achievements play shows how difficult it is to describe a job with respect to what is internal and external to it if this is done in isolation from the situations in which it becomes relevant to make such

distinctions. In this sense, with regard to how careerism or an enforced ideal of efficiency shapes a person's relation to his work, talking about shallow and deep understandings of a job has a point.

Above, I briefly mentioned the complex role of experience in relation to work as a vocation. Holland's essay encourages a distinction between being a beginner and having worked oneself into mastery – with all the social relations that brings in. A sense of vocation appears in the ceaseless dynamics of working which cannot be reduced to a strictly defined end. In such cases work is not a closed process, but rather a deepening of one's contact with a certain practice. In this interpretation of work as practice, mastery is both learning and care. With Todd S. Mei, I would say that the task constantly reveals things to the practitioner. Many forms of work can therefore also be seen as an act of a self-exploration, where questions arise about appropriate participation: “[The] use that resides in the manner of being of a thing discloses itself to the human subject as a calling for appropriate participation with it.” (Mei 2009, 69) Through such descriptions, Mei's project is to place work within an ethical context. Deepening here has to do with the way work cannot be reduced to strenuous molding of non-responsive material; the material may be resistant to the practitioner's ideas, the material may have been handled carelessly, or inappropriate tools may have been used.

Mei's formulation shows how a project may change aspects: after I have worked effortlessly on it, *just going through with it* as a matter of course, the project may take a surprising turn, perhaps due to a bungle, and I have to re-evaluate everything. From having appeared as a functional skill-centered task, a project may transmute into an endeavor where I explore the tools, my own capacity and perhaps my own involvement in the job. I dwell on the task as long as is needed and new aspects appear along the way. An example

that might capture what I can make of this point is how a job (in a wide sense) can make us experience the world and ourselves in unexpected, new ways. In a radio program, a person who has worked in the culture sector for most of her life tells the story of a drastic change in her life. The stress of working as an editor and academic assistant exhausted her. She enrolled to train in an education to become a plumber. In her daily work, she sees how the way she habitually behaves is challenged in many ways. She had to unlearn a feminized way of saying 'am I standing in your way?' She had to rethink why she is scared of being troublesome. She learns how to study pipes with sensitive fingertips. Learning the job of a plumber is learning to look at the world with a plumber's eyes and hearing with the plumber's ears and feeling with the plumber's fingers (cf. Meløe 1997). The plumber talks about the aliveness of sensations and attention, but these are not disjointed from learning the mechanics of heating systems in a house. I do want to say: at best, devoting oneself to a specific job, occupation or task teaches me something about life – my life; the life of others; the form of life we share – and gives me a sense of what is real, the reality of phenomena as diverse as the ear-pinching screams of children, a talkative pensioner doing her daily shopping in the morning, heating systems, flavors, tax regulations, the relation between the depth of the sea and the spawning of fish, the best way to treat insomnia, my tendency to shy away from awkward situations, your secret revolts against management. This is a different way of talking about work and reality than what is the case when hard work is valued in its own right (3.3): in that rhetoric, 'accepting reality' means *bowing down* to hard work, 'doing one's part', 'facing the realities of life'. Here, 'reality' is rather, as Gaita and Holland point out, a potential for deepening.

## 4.6 Weil on work

As we have seen, both Holland and Gaita talk about vocations as confronting a person with *reality*. I criticized Gaita for showing a deficient understanding of what may make a certain job meaningful. I now want to address the question posed in the above through Simone Weil's perspective on work. I think her point of view radically challenges the idea that one could somehow by an act of reflection distinguish jobs that are mere functions from jobs that can deepen. She does this through an analysis of work and oppressive conditions in the working life. As an act of solidarity with the workers Weil took jobs in factories in 1934 and 1935. The work was a strain on her health and she was laid off from several positions because she worked too slowly for the fixed rates and had accidents (cf. Pétrement 1976). In several texts, among them "Factory Work", Weil attests to the *degradation* experienced by the workers in the industrial factory; she writes about affliction, oppression of the soul. Oppression of this kind cannot be described exclusively in terms of bad working conditions, even though that is part of how she describes the oppression she witnessed. Weil writes about the *horror* of factory work, the spiritual stupor that the factory produces:

From the moment one is clocked in to the time one is clocked out, one must be ready at any instant to take an order. Like an inert object that anyone may move about at will. [...] There are moments when work is absorbing enough for thought to occupy itself within the limits just set forth. Then unhappiness, suffering, comes to a cessation. But in the evening, once outside the plant, and especially in the morning when one's steps are bent toward the place of work and its time-clock, it is dismal to turn one's thoughts to the day's work looming up just ahead (Weil 1999a, 55-6).



Work can thus be absorbing, but only for a while. The true unhappiness is perhaps felt in the evening, when one thinks with dread about having to go to work the next day. That work can be momentarily 'absorbing' is thus no true solace. She elaborates on how factory work, the powerlessness and the numbness, injures the soul. The factory destroys a person's capacity to think and feel; it creates loneliness and fear. "Come what may, the work must go on. It is up to the worker to get on with the job. And he does get on with it. [...] Here, you are nothing. You simply do not count. You are here to obey, to accept everything, to keep your mouth shut." (1999a, 55-6) When Weil calls the factory work she experienced soul-destroying, this shows that she is not talking about slight inconveniences that could be easily fixed. Weil's worry, a justified one, I think, is that the powerlessness felt by workers is described in such terms (for an updated version: talking about work as not being *challenging* enough) that its nature is not clear – an insufficient language expresses a failure to act on the injustices, the misery of the factories. The difficulty is, she writes, to imagine anything which does not 'bear misfortune's mark' (1987a, 50).

As Andrea Nye writes about the consequence of work stripped down to a bare sense of execution: such work makes possible the scenario that work is "any action, no matter how useless, evil, or destructive" (Nye 1994, 87). The only thing that matters is what is accomplished. This is oppression, not functionality in the good sense, by which I mean that things are moving along without hitches and that the smooth process is furthering a worthy purpose. Weil describes a state in which the worker is left to himself; s/he starts to look upon himself as if s/he were nothing. Telling the workers why something is done was not done; the answer is 'don't worry about it'. Weil's testimony does not have a bearing on factory work only; her insights into soul-crushing work can illuminate the most

diverse forms of work; jobs in which one's responsibility is minimized or skewed and the only thing that matters are quotas, sales, procedures or formulas.

At the same time, according to Weil, physical labor can also be a *calling* on a par with science and art, even if physical labor *is* neither science nor art. The concept of attention is important for how she understands the potentiality of work:

Physical labor may be painful, *but it is not degrading as such*. It is not art; it is not science, it is something else, possessing an exactly equal value with art and science, for it provides an equal opportunity to reach the impersonal stage of attention. [...] Exactly to the same extent as art and science, though in a different way, physical labor is a certain *contact with the reality*, the truth, and the beauty of this universe and the eternal wisdom which is the order in it (Weil 1999b, 322, my emphasis).

She suggests that working in a factory *can* be connected with a sense of indispensability. Work can be reflective, it can contain a unity of thought and action rather than a sense of being insignificant, subordinated and bossed around.

It is necessary to transform incentives to reduce or abolish what makes for disgust with one's work, to transform the relation of worker to factory, of worker to machine, and to make possible a radically changed awareness of the passing of time while working (1999b, 66)

Her vision of a just society, which is laid out in *The Need for Roots* is structured around a society in which each is dedicated to a calling: a person's calling is his belonging to a specific place in society and s/he should be satisfied with this place, whichever it is. The roots Weil talks about in that book can be interpreted in other ways than as an ideal of a hierarchical society in which everybody is devised a fixed place, even though that troubling feature is also strongly present in the book. Roots derive from obligations, activity and

responsibility – being a member of a work community is in this sense linked to activity as a member of society. This means taking an interest in society beyond one's own interests and position. Initiatives must make a difference and the moral well-being of workers must be taken into consideration. Through an analysis of primary needs, Weil emphasizes the ways in which people have a need to be involved and included (1987a). This is related to the idea that work is one of the activities that enable us to gain a sense of who we are and we are also able to get a deeper knowledge about the world (cf. Nye 1994, 73).

For all her insights, it is hard to stomach some of Weil's remarks about work: work is seen as a form of servitude calling us back to reality, either in the form of degradation or sacrifice. Another disturbing feature of her ideas about work is that she argues that 'the spirituality of work' is something people regardless of political or religious background would agree about – but she adds that this is easily distorted into a collective slogan (1987a, 92-3). For me, the idea that work in itself can provide roots is disconcerting because it easily adheres to a conditional image of membership in society (cf. 3.3). Can there be *any* good idea about a society based on work?

Even so, as a *counter-image* in relation to the trivialization of oppression, or even in relation to the much more harmless idea of professionalism as a set of formal requirements and an inner 'drive', Weil's writings on work provide a radical challenge. Her view is as far as one can get from the ideal that work should match one's personality traits or one's talents (Weil regards talent as a mediocre virtue). When she talks about the horrors of the factory, the point is not that a person's talent is spoiled: the work she describes destroys a human being because it isolates hir from everything that matters; it prevents hir from being a thinking and acting human

individual with all that it entails. In *The Need for Roots* she describes the shock a young person is subjected to when s/he enters the working life.

From one day to the next, he finds himself an extra cog in a machine, rather less than a thing, and nobody cares any more whether he obeys from the lowest motives or not, provided he obeys. The majority of workmen have at any rate at this stage of their lives experiences the sensation of no longer existing, accompanied by a sort of inner vertigo, such as intellectuals or bourgeois, even in their greatest sufferings, have very rarely had the opportunity of knowing. The first chock, received at so early an age, often leaves an indelible mark, It can rule out all love of work once and for all (1987a, 52).

Weil provides no philosophical ideal of full-blown agency; her main assertion is that something is askance when acting is severed from thinking. Neither is the point that everything would be fine were the factory to introduce a few flexible routines. It is an entire world of work that needs to be changed, Weil suggests, a radical change of circumstances is needed and in order to accomplish that, the *character* of the discontent of workers needs to be clear: “how abolish an evil without first having perceived in what it consisted?” (1999a, 54) She asserts, as I said, that discontent is often distorted by the people who suffer from it and who express it using the catchwords of the day.

A vocation, for her, brings us into an *ethical* (and for her, religious) contact with the world as it really is. In Weil’s thinking, a vocation does not consist in overcoming the challenges of an ambiguous empirical reality – it is taking part in an intelligible, meaningful world in which I am an ethical subject. Vocation in this sense is a demand that *I* acknowledge as absolute, a call that is addressed to me as an ethical subject. It is important for her that ‘I’ should not be understood psychologically: like Gaita, she does not want to say that

vocation is on the level of psychological attitudes. Weil talks about work as *obedience* necessitated by the content, and not the fruits, of the task. Yet still: it is I who acknowledge it. My action is a response to a demand and this embrace of the demand is a recognition of reality. This can be contrasted with what she says in "Factory Work" about obliging because one is too scared to protest: "The new change is suddenly imposed, without advance notice, under the form of a command that must immediately and unquestioningly be obeyed. The one obeying is thus made to feel that his time is incessantly at someone else's beck and call." (1999a, 56-7) A strand in Weil's thought is that necessity in an oppressive sense, 'crushing necessity', is characterized by subordination and power relations. Necessity as a mere maintenance of existence is always a form of slavery, she argues in *Gravity and Grace* (1987). Obedience in the good sense has to do with the necessity of the task; work is then described in the language of response, rather than the language of inner drives and will-power. This form of obligation has a framework of consent, not coercion, humiliation or fear.

At this point, what I have said may also seem to be an idealization of physical toil. It would be ridiculous to maintain that physical labor simply *is* a certain contact with reality. Weil is clearly *not* saying that all forms of manual work have this power. She evokes what she perceives as a *possibility*, the unity of thought and action.

Weil's concept of vocation is connected with attention. It is all-important for her that the worker has a sense of the purpose of the work s/he is doing; when work is de-associated from all senses of purpose, acting is separated from thinking. For Weil, such de-association is morally and existentially damaging; work in which thinking and acting are separated is alienated work. In "Factory Work" she gives a harrowing outline of how the role of management in companies has

detached thought from reality; workers perform tasks that transform them into thoughtless, soulless beings. Such work annihilates thought, but in that, it also annihilates the soul. One gets used to caprice; one gets used to being bossed around, obeying: “the futurity is dead because of its unforeseeableness” (1999a, 69).

The split between action and thought destroys responsibility. A passage from Matthew Crawford’s *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* illustrates what this amounts to. After finishing his undergraduate studies, Crawford got a job in which he was to write short summaries of academic articles for the benefit of libraries. At first, he was elated by the feeling of finally having a job, but he got increasingly skeptical. The employees of the firm were to write scientific abstracts of articles. The abstracts were written according to a rigid formula. The idea was to add value for the customer, but in practice, the abstracts did not even require an understanding of the specialized articles. He recalls a middle manager at a whiteboard lecturing the employees about the procedures. To him, the middle manager appeared like a bureaucrat, for whom the official ideology (a respectable job, adding value for the customer) is one thing, reality another. The job forced him to suppress his ability to think. The procedures were decided by somebody ‘far away’ who did not care about what the job was really about (2009, 129-141). He describes how responsibility shrank to responsibility to a formula. This is an example of the hazards of a split between thought and reality.

It needs to be mentioned that Weil’s philosophy is characterized by the mode of confession, not generalizing statements. She brings out an ethical dimension that has a bearing on the subject with which I have engaged in this chapter when she emphasizes that we will never be able to grasp the oppression of degrading work if we are not able to

see how work can offer joy and satisfaction in a way not limited to transient psychological states. This is what I take to be one of the most central lessons to be drawn from what she says about work. This shows the importance of keeping the possibility of seeing work as a vocation as an ever open issue, not to be restricted by conceptual remarks about what *kinds* of work can be properly described in those terms. Weil shows how oppression can be understood as a quenching of the potential to do something meaningful. To sum up: Weil's approach reveals the *urgency* of grappling with the meaning of work and the character of oppressive work. This is the reason why Weil figures prominently in a chapter about work as a vocation.

#### **4.7 Don't throw your life away**

At this point I wish to take a step back and reflect on the questions I have been struggling with in this chapter. In what contexts does the question about a person's commitment to his job arise? What hangs on such questions? I also like to remind you that I did not ascribe to Gaita the idea that jobs could be sorted in two neat categories. Even though he does not engage in such categorization, his conception of 'constitutive grammar' reveals a problematic attitude.

One should remember that Gaita's aim is not to elaborate a philosophy of work (there are only a few stray passages in his writings about work); his interests lie elsewhere. When he talks about vocation in *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* and *A Common Humanity*, these remarks illuminate what for him is a broader issue. Gaita's primary errand is to develop a philosophical framework for a moral vocabulary of the *absolute*. He sets out to challenge the view of morality presented by for example utilitarianism or naturalism by firmly establishing a view of morality that takes its departure

from concepts such as goodness, reality and meaning. By doing so, he displaces the normal philosophical way of grasping what a moral question is.

One of the reasons why I engaged in a dialogue with Gaita is that attempts to say something about the meaningfulness of work have often been brushed off as a legitimization of the status quo. For many work critics (chapter 2 & 3), work in the sense of wage labor is embedded in a swampy area of moralization. To these work critics, talking about good work seems politically suspect. As I tried to explain in the last chapter, Weeks does not take sufficient note of people's existential relations to work. These are questions people do in fact struggle with in their lives and I have been stressing that these struggles are entangled with the circumstances of waged work (reductions in staff, overwork, division of labor, unemployment, etc.) but also the hopes and anxieties people have. Again: the concept of vocation takes the discussion into a very different direction than talking about moralization of work – such discussions typically aim at *unmasking*, for example in which ways moral concepts figure in ideological patterns. Even though such projects of unmasking do have a place, I also think it is extremely important to, as I said at the end of the last chapter, *dare* to ask the question whether our own work is or can be meaningful. This question is interwoven with another one: as I said in my critical review of Gaita's points about vocation and functionality, it is dangerous to disengage the question of how work is important from the way work is de-skilled, banalized or withdrawn from reality: by this I mean that concepts of good work – such as vocation – are often, as we saw in my discussion about Simone Weil, reactions to bad or even oppressive conditions. Writers like Weil have described the badness of the present through concepts of good work. I am inclined to think that it is when such contexts are forgotten



that it is easier to take up an attitude to work where the only task regarded as *critical enough* is to unmask ideologies of work.

In this last section of the text (which will also function as a summary) I want to focus on the *interpersonal* aspect of how conversations about the meaning of work appear. The concern about worthwhile activities is not a general query that a philosopher could dig into and solve, even though some have certainly tried. To begin with, philosophers have been tempted to create an argument about what is meaningful not just in the sense that people find something worthwhile, but about what *is* meaningful: they assume that there must be an objective or philosophically conclusive way of deciding which ends are truly worth pursuing or which are the ultimate values of human life. An equally common position is the 'existentialist' denial of objectivity or justification in this sense: meaning is a matter of invention or choice, not objectively given purposes (for a discussion of such position, cf. Hanfling 1987). In her Tanner lectures on meaning, the philosopher Susan Wolf states that the meaningful life is one in which one "finds oneself loving things worthy of love and able to do something positive about them. A life is meaningful [...] insofar as it is actively and lovingly engaged in projects of worth." (2009, 96) Wolf doesn't hesitate to ask *what* projects are worthy of being called meaningful, but she gradually reveals how strange a delivery of philosophical 'substantive judgments' about what is meaningful appears to be. I think she is clearly right in being puzzled. Just like Gaita, she is not satisfied with giving a subjective (meaning as a private experience) or objective (meaning as a fact that can be discovered) account.

This doubt about subjectivism/objectivism doesn't make her drop the project altogether: her text continues to manifest the urge to pinpoint the specific character of the meaningful.

Like many other philosophers who have ventured into philosophizing about *existential* meaning, she craves for an answer to how futile projects can be distinguished from worthwhile ones, the ones that will endow our lives with meaning and give us a sense that we are living a meaningful life.

As an alternative to value objectivism (or naturalism) and subjectivism Wolf tentatively suggests that the philosopher could resort to an idealized subject's judgments, a subject who is sufficiently rational, knowledgeable and perceptive "to be a competent judge", even though she admits that there are problems with such a view. Regardless of her resistance to perspective-less ideas about what makes people's lives meaningless, Wolf is haunted by the possibility of subject-independent standards of judgment and her view seems to be that the philosopher *should* somehow be qualified to give an outline of an answer beyond pointing to examples like Fred Astaire's mother thinking that her son wastes his time on silly dancing instead of doing something more serious (2009, 35-6). The lack of an objectivist level of values "gives us all the more reason to be tentative in our judgments about what sorts of projects deserve inclusion in the class of activities that can contribute to the meaningfulness of life" (2009, 37). I would like to argue that tentativeness doesn't free Wolf from the insistent urge to say something more substantial: we *do* say things about what is worthwhile and she applies a traditional philosophical language of values and classification to this – I would say – valid observation. "There are values that are independent of oneself which provide reasons for the activities from which meaning comes" (2009, 42). The conclusion of her argument is that meaningfulness is intelligible only if a certain component of objective values is acknowledged. This is, I think, different from what Gaita would say. Even though I complained about his overemphasis

on reflection, his line of thinking clearly shows how a dimension of meaning *cannot* be said to reside in a realm of objective values.

What should one say if one wants to talk about worthwhile activities in a way that takes issue with subjectivism and objectivism in a firmer way than Wolf's approach? She is so busy carving out a category that she forgets what is at stake when people talk to each other about these things. Here I think Gaita's philosophical project comes to its right: how we think about meaning will also be a question about how we think about responsibility. As he writes, if we can only see a job in terms of a profession, we will *describe* it differently than if we relate to it as something that can be a vocation. To describe it as a vocation is to commit oneself to certain relations, to commit oneself to certain demands (Gaita 2002, 197). This is one of the main points I have tried to get across in this chapter. His point, similar to Weil's, is that some dimensions of a job will be distorted or made unintelligible if they are focused on from the perspective of professionalism. If we are only able to view the profession of a teacher as a knack, a career, we will, according to Gaita, have a very different idea about what will constitute *corruptions* of that job – than we will if we are attentive to other ways of understanding what it is to be a teacher (Gaita 2002, 232). However, what he says about these things makes the question about what kind of point he is making resurface. He discusses politics and the view that politics is a shady business and, not, as Max Weber claimed, a vocation:

We are more inclined to think of it as a career, partly because we do not tend to think of anything under a serious conception of a vocation, and partly because we are not inclined to think of politics as sufficiently deep to deserve to be called a vocation. We tend to think of it as we do garbage collection – it is important and must be done, and one does it either because one recognizes

that someone must do it, or for reasons and motives we would discourage in our children (Gaita 2004, 248).

I find several things suspect in this quote, among them, again, Gaita's preoccupation with the distinction between a vocation and 'what is important and must be done'. In 'it is important and must be done' Gaita once again seems to evoke the image of functionality, a non-moral, *purely practical* 'must'. Now, I wanted to say that a distinction between vocation and something else cannot be derived from features of a job that meticulous reflection could enumerate, or conceptual relations that could be resolved once and for all. As I said, it is not clear where Gaita stands. Reading the quote I am inclined to ask myself to what extent Gaita realizes that what he says about politics could also be applied to garbage collection: the univocal verdict of the 'we' may be *challenged* and it often is. Whom does the vague 'we' in the quote to which Gaita refers comprise? Here it seems proper to return to the question of what it means to say that 'we' can make sense only of *some* occupations as being a vocation.

It seems to me that Gaita ignores the interpersonal and contextual entanglement of remarks about what a job is like, at its core or in a corrupted form,. Here Kierkegaard's invocation can be brought up again:

Whether your occupation is great or mean, is it of such a kind that you dare think of it together with the responsibility of eternity? Is it such a kind that you dare to acknowledge it at this moment or at any time? (Kierkegaard 1956, 198)

'Eternity' does not, I think, have an exclusively religious meaning. Kierkegaard talks about the existential significance of engaging in a specific occupation. For him, the future is always connected with responsibility and commitment. What I want to bring to the fore here is people's questioning of and puzzlement over the role of work. Rather than sticking to the

philosophical query about the subjective and the objective - or a sociological survey of cultural patterns - it is the *place* of such questions and puzzlement, the role they have in how people engage *with* each other that could be focused on. This can be seen in cases in which I am at a loss to grasp how you can devote your life to a particular job. The relation between parents and children tend to trigger statements - more commonly perhaps: insinuations, vexed outbursts or worried, well-meaning questions - where such limits appear. Furthermore, these limits are rarely static, as they are immersed in the changing relations between people. I return to the point I made at the beginning of the chapter, in which I wanted to remind the reader of the ways in which discussions about work as a vocation cannot be understood in terms of fixed conceptions about the meaning of a job. Instead, I wanted to say that fixed conceptions or attempts to *stabilize* conceptions - descriptions that further entrench the understanding of a specific job as simple or that further seem to legitimize offhand references to 'something that we just have to do' - typically have the role of *dismissing* worries about work and contributing to a neutralization of work in the sense that it does not seem important to investigate what having a specific job amounts to, existentially speaking.

Conversations about what is a worthwhile occupation rarely revolve around cool articulations of the Meaning of a job. To return to the example: the parent's background, sore points in hir relation to hir child, hir own insecurities come to the fore in hir questioning of the child's choice of occupation. We can also imagine cases where a parent patiently tries to have an open mind about the child's future, s/he is trying to overcome hir own hang-ups or suspicions, perhaps reminding himself that the child must decide for himself: it is *your* life! Similar relational articulations of what a job means are manifested in the responses to a person who resigns from hir

perfectly secure and rather well-paid position. S/he says to his friends that the job *destroys* him. Some of the friends cannot see why the job could be something 'that destroys you'; having a job is a precious thing and one should not let go of it if it offers that kind of security, they argue. The discussion might turn into a justificatory rant: it is a *perfectly* decent job; the salary is good; you had a great time with your colleagues....So *why* aren't you satisfied? You should be: others don't have the privileges you do.

Such examples indicate (against Gaita) that the meaning of work can't be purged of the role such discussions have in personal relations, the economic circumstances that they are immersed in and people's often half-conscious, half-stated prejudices with regard to work. There is no pure meaning of work: distilled images of work make one forget the interpersonal relations work is embedded in. So, I agree with Gaita that questions about meaning can be understood not on a subjective, nor on an objective level. But even though he is on the right track here, Gaita's emphasis on 'what it is to be an X' fails to take account of the dimension of *becoming* in interpersonal relations. A discussion about the meaning of work that loses sight of the temporal also risks losing track of the way these questions about good work are urgent questions in our lives, *here and now*. This takes us back to Weeks and Kierkegaard's 'responsibility of eternity': how do we perceive our future? What hopes and fears are our relationship to work saturated by? The challenge is to locate how concerns associated with the meaning of work arise between people and this in its turn has to do with the practices in which people engage: looking for jobs, relating to their colleagues' tasks, referring to one's rights as a paying customer, etc. This means that *descriptions* of work are not primary in any sense, they are immersed in relations. To take but one example: that a specific job is often understood as a maintenance structure

that supports other, more creative or fulfilling functions is connected with the spirit in which people talk about this job and those doing it – of course people very rarely *say* that such-and-such jobs are maintenance structures, but that this is how they think is expressed in how they treat people and things they say about them.

## 4.8 Concluding words

When reading Gaita it is tempting to think along the following line: a teacher's, a doctor's or an artist's work experience has the potential to undergo a form of deepening. But the vocabulary for talking about the importance of the assembly line worker's or the grocery store cashier's job is different. They may like their colleagues, and they may be satisfied with the working conditions. What is meaningful from this perspective seems to be external to the job itself. Consequently, one is tempted to assume that there is a clear sense of what it means for something to be external to a job and what makes up its core, what its meaning boils down to. How can a person, except in a psychological and accidental sense, find any meaning in piecing together components of a particular manufactured product? In this chapter, I tried to digest this question by looking at what would follow if one were to take such a distinction for granted, as something that could be reached by means of reflection. Through Simone Weil, I argued that the risk is that such a distinction makes it hard to acknowledge the ways in which a job is degraded or corrupted: if one does not see how work can be meaningful or joyful, it is hard to see its negative transformation. Even though Gaita's concept of a vocation opens up an indispensable view of work, I want to reject a general distinction between jobs that can deepen and jobs that are practical or technical functions. The conclusion was *not* that all

jobs can be vocations, as if everything could be a vocation, given the right attitude. What I wanted to do was to acknowledge the pull of Gaita's distinction, and the way it might work, but also the sorts of challenges that can be posed against it. The danger I saw is that his view neutralizes some types of work in a morally problematic way. Throughout, I tried to be very clear about one thing: these issues – which job can be a vocation? How do we talk about the meaning of a job? – are more than philosophical queries. Controversies concerning what a worthy occupation is are (inter)personal and political.

In the next chapter I will focus on an issue that has been present in this chapter as well: from which perspectives is it no longer evident that work can be degraded, which sorts of perspectives makes one blind to that aspect? I will look at ways in which work is neutralized and naturalized when it is transformed into labor power, and how outrage against degradation of work drops out of the picture if work is transformed into and understood to be a commodity.



# Chapter 5: The abstraction of work

## 5.1 Introduction

Finland remains a high-capacity economy with a highly skilled workforce and generally favorable business environment, but labor participation rates have declined as a consequence of population aging. Structural unemployment is high, reflecting, among other things, matching inefficiencies and constraints to labor mobility, such as a limited supply of affordable housing in urban growth areas. Productivity growth has dropped as economic activity has shifted to less productive sectors despite still sizable R&D spending. Furthermore, high wage agreements just prior to the global crisis have severely limited the competitiveness of an already ailing tradable sector.<sup>65</sup>

This is a quote from a report issued by IMF in 2014. The aim of the report is to review the general economic state of the country and the measures that have been taken to address the structural problem in a crisis-ridden economy. The report also devises a number of advice: the health care system must be more productive, real wages must be adjusted to the overall productivity growth, the level of unemployment protection should not be an obstacle to entrance into the labor market, and pension reforms that boost the labor force are recommendable. The work-related questions placed at the fore in this context are the following: can the Finnish labor force be competitive? How is unemployment to be tackled? How can people enter the labor market faster? How can the structural environment and the labor force be adapted to a highly competitive global market?

This is a completely workaday document. The language does not seem extreme or out of the ordinary in any way:

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<sup>65</sup> <https://www.imf.org/external/np/ms/2014/031414.htm>

work figures as a resource, an economic factor and a population problem. Wage labor is accounted for in terms of competition and supply and demand – work as a *commodity*. My aim in this chapter is to distance myself from this ordinariness by suggesting that the commodification of work can be studied as a process of *neutralization* and *naturalization*. The role work has when it is labor power can be critically assessed when it is acknowledged that this role is constantly, in the most various contexts, *challenged*. Even though work is transformed into a commodity, I will argue that it can be conceived as a *life activity*, as specific forms of *doing* and *living*, as manifestations of life – the concept of life relevant here is, like I said in chapter 3, that life is directed towards the future. I will also suggest that it is because of such neutralizations that it makes sense to talk about and emphasize this aspect of life activities.

Does ‘life activity’ have the function of an essence (cf. chapter 3), a residue of life and work untouched by commensurability, contractual relations and competition? My point is the opposite: what I mean is rather that our lives are occupied by ever-new forms of wage labor, new forms of commodification of work that prompt political and existential responses with regard to the purposes work serve and what a good life can be said to be. It is the open-ended character of the contrast that, I think, really brings out the *tensions* between work as labor power and work as a life situation. Neither of these aspects is stable: our working lives are immersed in questioning, justifications and disagreement. As the neutralization of work as labor power is criticized, aspects of life or work that are quenched or ignored are emphasized. What is more, the transformation of work into labor power did not take place at some historical point, after which paid work ‘was’ labor power *tout court*. This transformation – in the form of commodification of work – is taking place around us

every day. A central aim of the text is to point at the inconclusive and *necessarily* incomplete character of this process.

For the sake of clarity, let me briefly mention an example of how such contrasts collide, and where the relevance of such contrasts can be spotted. 20-year-old Raša is one of the workers in the salad-packaging factory that are laid off when the company has decided to scale down. She lives in a rural part of southern Sweden with her dad, who has problems with his back and who is therefore on sick leave most of the time, even though the doctor won't quite acknowledge how ill he really is. They have moved from Montenegro to Sweden when she was a baby. Raša is enraged by having been laid off. Disappointed, she tells people that she was skillful and worked faster than the others. She is enrolled in the job center's program where she and other people from the area are coached to develop themselves into employable people who are to sharpen their core competencies. They watch PR-movies about the region and learn how to talk about themselves in a sellable language. Raša, who has no high school diploma, wants to work, whatever it takes: she roams around the village and asks whether there is something for her to do. She wants something to do, to be of service, but she also needs a job that can pay for the rent and the heating. Her father decides to travel to Norway, where he can get some well-paid gigs. Her daughter is worried about his health, and asks him not to go. This is the story of *Eat Sleep Die* (2012), a Swedish film directed by Gabriela Pichler. Raša is eager to work, but the salad-packaging company (that the manager offers a few kind words does not change anything) treats her as one of several superfluous workers. In the job center program she meets people who have already been spiritually broken by the life as unemployed. The story of *Eat Sleep Die* unfolds in an existential situation that involves both hopes

and fears. Raša has aspirations and dreams; she is energetic and headstrong, but also caring and considerate. She fights against what life might slide into: a state of economic hardships, a state of mere getting by, a state of eat, sleep, die. The film ends on an unsettled note: *what will life become for Raša and her father?*

By 'life activity' I have in mind precisely this kind of setting, *the open-ended and unsettled lived-life contrast to work as a commodity*. Talking about 'life activity' might help one catch sight of the acuteness of questions and controversies that occur in the midst of contexts in which work appears as a resource, a commodity, a necessary component. The economic order is surrounded by struggles. In the same way, work can be regarded as an essentially *contested* concept (cf. Introduction).<sup>66</sup> In this text, by means of concepts informed by a reading of Marx, I seek to bring out that one important form of contestation concerns in which *setting* work should be placed. I will argue that a neutralization of work as a commodity can be challenged by reminding ourselves of the difference such settings make. In the Introduction I said that one of the central aims of the thesis is to re-entangle and re-politicize work. What I hope to do in this chapter is to look at the role of work as labor power from the point of view of its relational setting, thus critically scrutinizing the conceptual constellations that transform work into an isolated element.

A thread that has been running throughout the thesis is the question 'what is work?' In this chapter, my question concerns the process of *abstraction* work goes through when it appears

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<sup>66</sup> Patrick Cockburn's approach in his thesis (2012) has inspired me here. By means of examples (begging, selling street papers) Cockburn discusses in which ways the economic order is defended or rejected in how people talk (defend, accuse, reject, legitimize, insult etc.) about a specific phenomenon. Cockburn looks at cases that indicate broader disagreement and struggles over the economic order.

as a component of economic value-creation. My contention is that a transformation of work into labor power can, besides being a historical process, also be studied as a transformation that takes place whenever the aspect of work as a commodity on the labor market is distilled so that other concerns, other aspects, are not taken into account. Wage labor is changing, but so are also the many *contrasts* to wage labor: study, being retired, sick leave, volunteering, freelance work, living on interests, unemployment, grey economy, gifts, substitute work, unpaid overwork (cf. Standing 2011). Wage labor is thus not a fixed concept. It evolves and changes historically, taking on new traits while losing others. A few examples: the use of child labor, the piece rate system, the expectation that an employment should be for life or part-time jobs – all of these are historically specific. To analyze wage labor is thus to analyze the particular historical circumstances, and even when for critical purposes one would like to appeal to contrasts to work as wage labor, it will not do to invoke a notion of work-as-such. My aim has been to look at different aspects of wage labor, and it is only in this present chapter that I focus directly on wage labor in the form of labor power.

Arendt wrote about a society of *job-holders* (cf. chapter 1). The risk is, as she argues, that the aspect of being a job seems self-evident and that the language of labor power and subsistence puts very different activities on the same level: they are jobs. In this sense, *having* a job is primary, and it is intelligible that we can talk this way about a job without knowing anything (or without a *need* to know) about the specific activity that the job involves. The bank officer assessing a customer's credit risk is not interested in whether s/he is an overworked kindergarten teacher who cannot sleep at night or a lorry driver who has worked 20 years without tiring of his work. It is also intelligible for a person to say that s/he dedicates many hours of his day to what to him is 'just a

job', or that his job is 'as good as any'. This language of work as labor power is a part of the political rhetoric, it appears in people's self-understanding and it is also a real transformation of the very conditions of work as an activity. My intention is show how this *seemingly* stable, *seemingly* neutral role of labor power is challenged when other aspects of work are highlighted and I suggest that they can be regardless of how hegemonic or pervasive the role of work as labor power has become.

Thus, there is a tension between these two aspects, work as *any paid job* and work as existentially and politically non-neutral activity, work as a life situation. We can imagine almost anything as a job on the labor market: washing dishes, looking after kids, baking pizza, helping a company to evade the national tax laws, comparing costs and incomes, writing reviews for a progressive rock magazine, teaching literature, dressing up as a stuffed animal on a cruising ship, monitoring the quality of jars that roll by on a conveyor belt, fixing roads, helping a person suffering from post-traumatic stress, tuning a piano, doing research on a new cancer drug, performing a sermon, giving somebody a ticket for parking in the wrong space, being responsible for the PR at a company, selling magazines to people over the phone. At the same time, we constantly ask, in the context of daily life: what is it like to do that job? What difference does the job make? How does the job affect me/you/the practitioner? These concerns express perspectives that challenge the role of work as commensurable labor power.

So far I have been talking about neutralization of work as labor power, transformation and work as a life situation. Another concept that will figure prominently in this chapter is *abstraction of work*. This concept helps me elucidate what I mean by a hegemonic neutralization of work as labor power. *When I talk about abstraction of work, I refer to the structural*

*transformation of work into commensurable commodities.* As I have already said, it is important to pay attention to what the role of work as labor power leaves out, or what is actively suppressed when work becomes a commodity inserted into relations on the labor market. Dependencies and power relations disappear from view. I will argue that the abstraction of work into labor power can have consequences for all types of positions that are wage labor: quantification and commensurability is a possibility because of the societal relations in which wage labor is embedded. All jobs are commensurable with regard to their capacity as economic value.

The abstractions I have in mind are not mere mental constructions or ideological mist. Work becomes labor power in a *practical sense* which is seen in how our lives are shaped by the labor market, the capitalist process of production and a globally operative system of work. The following quote by Marx hints at what I have in mind. Before this, he has criticized Hegel for thinking that the real is fundamentally a dimension of thinking. He describes how abstract categories like population, property and labor as inscribed within real, societal relations (Marx 1973, 100-5):

As a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all [...] On the other hand, this abstraction of labor is not merely the mental product of a concrete totality of labors. Indifference towards specific labors corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labor to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance to them, of indifference (1973, 104).

This is what Marxists have called *real abstractions*, which were defined by Alfred Sohn-Rethel as an abstraction related to the commodity form that cannot be seen as a mere product of

thinking. This abstraction is a social relation characterized by an absence of quality (Sohn-Rethel 1978). To talk about labor power is thus no mere one-sided generalization. Furthermore, it must be said immediately that the problem is not abstractions *as such*. Given a certain context, as I will go on to show, departing from a concrete level can be useful. When I talk about abstractions, the problem is hegemonic relations and descriptions in which struggles, dependencies and controversies in relation to work are ignored: *work is normalized as a commodity*. From this perspective, work can never be degraded: *there is no room for acknowledging such degradation when people who work are understood as labor power, when the character of their specific labor is not important*. What does it mean to resist the abstraction of work? I am *not* making the simple point that concrete work – cleaning, care work etc. – is undervalued and unrecognized (even though that point *can* be important). My task is to show how the *tensions* between commodification and work as a life activity disappear if labor power is taken for granted as an economic asset. As I will show, it is insufficient to present these tensions as a result of ideology. The tension adheres to the fact that people *really are* labor power competing on a market.

I articulate this neutralization of work by means of Marxist concepts, but this should not be read as an attempt to outline an exegetical exposition of Marx's use of the term abstract labor. There are thus many aspects of his understanding of abstract labor (and work) that I will not touch upon at all and many intricate interpretations I will leave aside. The concept of abstract labor will thus not be treated as a technical term. My use of this concept is a part of an exploration of the neutralization of work. For Marx, abstract labor is the result of a process in which economic values and commodities shape society and in which all forms of work are made commensurable. This commodification concerns people's



daily existence in a number of ways. A key aspect of a society of commodities is that people have no other choice but to look for a job that from this point of view counts as work only in so far as it is paid, and can function as economic value. The abstraction of work is built into people's very existence and Marx shows the methodological challenges of revealing these drastic changes of a society that revolves around economic value. I will address a temptation to limit oneself to a dichotomy between the abstract and the concrete so that the task appears to be a return to the concrete. This is, as I will show, also a political temptation. Towards the end of the chapter I return to the existential tension between work as labor power and work as a life situation. An example about home cleaners illustrates the controversies that arise when the description of work as a commensurable resource is challenged. I want to point out how such an example can make us attend to the transformations of working life in its shape of labor power.

## **5.2 Labor power**

In the following, I will track Marx's concept of abstract labor in order to shed light on the tension that occupies me in the present chapter and thereby I try to formulate my own idea about wage labor as commensurable work. One of the main aspects of work Marx highlights is the process of a life activity being *transformed into* wage labor, commensurable work – the form of a commodity. In my reading, this transformation is not a historical process that at some point is completed. Marx describes a historical development in which wage labor becomes a fundamental aspect of social being, but this does not mean that work has now simply become a commodity, bought and sold. Wage labor is all the time in a state of becoming where challenges, struggles, forms of resistance

appear along with ways of upholding and strengthening the commodification of work, that is, upholding and strengthening the transformation of work into a resource.

Economic value is the target of investigation in Marx's writings. From the very first sentences onwards, Marx describes the task of revealing what this value is and how it is related to commodities.

The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as 'an immense collection of commodities'; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefor begins with the analysis of the commodity (1990, 125).

Capitalism and the commodity are internally related, this is the axis around which the first volume of *Capital* revolves. But what is the commodity, and how is it related to Marx's ideas about a transformation of work? All commodities possess value, and value has a dual form as use value and exchange value. The latter means that 100 pencils are worth, can be exchanged for, 1 pair of trousers. These are different things but being commodities, they can be compared in this way. A commodity must possess both use value and exchange value. But the word 'possess' may lead the thought into a dangerous direction. Value is easily seen as an elusive *essence* that the commodity simply possesses. With Michael Heinrich, I would say that Marx's intention is the opposite: he talks about values and commodities as *relations*. It is these relations that make commodities comparable, not some essence they have in common. Heinrich writes: "That the chair is a commodity is not a characteristic of the chair itself as a thing, but rather of the society in which this thing exists." (2004, 41) What does the form of the commodity presuppose? This question is relational as well. For Marx, this question is linked to the evolvment of what he calls abstract labor, which expresses a separation

between use values and exchange values. The form of the commodity presupposes that all commodities are exchangeable and commensurable – they have value. One of the major questions for Marx is why commodities have value. This was the question he accused earlier economists of not having grasped properly because they have “never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is, why labor is expressed as value and why the measurement of labor by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product.” (1990, 173-4) For him, the answer is the transformation of work into quantitative units. Commodities are commodities because they are objectifications of quantitatively measurable units. Capitalism, labor power, commodities and markets are thus unthinkable without the separation between exchange value and use value. To quote Sohn-Rethel: “The economic concept of value [...] is characterized by a complete absence of quality, a differentiation purely by quantity and by applicability to every kind of commodity and service which can occur on the market” (Sohn-Rethel 1978, 20).

When transmuting into a value-creating force in the production of capital, the utility of the working activity is unrelated to what it creates or what service is provided. The aim of production is valorization of capital, that is, to generate a surplus. This subjection of work under one standard is all-important for the possibility of economic value and commodification of work (Marx 1990, 134-7, 159, 166). The fact that labor power produces things we, in some sense of the word, need or want, is a *limiting concept*. Marx writes: “The commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference” (1990, 126; cf. 131, 293).

A central Marxist point is that during a historical process comprising division of labor and development of the capitalist process of circulation, wage labor has been detached from content. This is Marx's account of the development of value. The economic aspect of work is distinct from what a certain job is concretely about and the multitude of purposes it serves. Work in Marx's sense of abstract labor is not as such a specific activity (writing, punching a card, driving, hammering, baking), but rather, it is a societal *relation* that presupposes that commodities are produced for sale. Marx examines how this is expressed in the emergence of the money form that makes possible a general measure/expression of value and he also looks at the emergence of a distinction between labor power and means of production. Again, on a logical level, this presupposes that the worker does not own the means of production (cf. Marx 1990, 166). Marx describes how labor power becomes a predominant form of work. In the more historically orientated part expounding what he calls 'primitive accumulation', he shows how wage labor evolves so that the ownership of the means of production, the conditions of work, is separated from the worker. In contrast with Locke and Smith, he writes about the violence, power and juridical frameworks by means of which earlier communities and forms of life were dissolved and transformed into capitalist relations (cf. Thompson 1972; Braverman 1974).

To sum up: work acquires a two-fold character: it is concrete work and abstract labor.<sup>67</sup> For Marx, abstraction is no small detail. Capitalism *is* an abstraction of relations. His examination of the commodity form challenges the reader to think about what specific changes capitalism brought and brings into the world with regard to what is often taken as

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<sup>67</sup> Marxists quarrel about the meaning and importance of abstract labor. For one overview of the debate, see Bonefeld 2010.

trans-historical concepts such as work, production, consumption and exchange.

### 5.3 Labor power and capacities

So what does Marx say about this abstract side of labor power? I will talk about work and capacities – and the section will end with some remarks about what bearing this has on the relation between work and life.

Capitalism is a system where labor power is bought and sold on the market. The worker sells labor power, not labor, which is bought by the capitalist. (When Marx writes about ‘the capitalist’ he is not talking about an empirical human being.) The worker does not sell himself, nor does s/he sell a specific product. S/he sells hir *capacity* to work – s/he sells *time* (cf. 1990, 270-3, 675-7). As Marx writes, the concept of labor power can be described as a process of realization, in which the capacity to work is put to use by the buyer of labor power, i.e. the employer.

The use of labor power is labor itself. The purchaser of labor-power consumes it by setting the seller of it to work. By working, the latter becomes in actuality what previously he only was potentially, namely labor-power in action, a worker (Marx 1990, 284).

This is obvious when workers are laid off because their labor power, for some reason, is no longer needed. On a structural level the commodity, the capacity to work, is useless when it has no buyer. On an everyday level this means that if nobody will hire you, your labor power is useless. The worker sells hir labor power and in principle, what s/he then gives up could precisely turn into *anything*. What defines labor power is thus that it is put to use in a way specified by the employer. Strictly speaking, this is what use *means* in the world of wage labor. Compare this to a situation in which my guitar playing or my

ability to drive a boat proves useful, they are useful in whatever situation such skills are called for: when they are not needed, it would be strange to say that these capacities are redundant or useless *as such* – even though it makes sense to say that this social gathering has no need for guitar players because there will be a DJ, or my navigation skills are not needed because somebody else is driving. In the world of wage labor, not only is it intelligible to say that the computer coder's capacities are made obsolescent when s/he is laid off from hir work, it is even intelligible to say that people's *capacity to work* has been made redundant when s/he is laid off. Furthermore, and this is perhaps one of the most crucial points, I think Marx would say that it is *specifically* in capitalism, in a setting of commodification of work, that a *general capacity to work* is made possible and even *necessary*.

I don't mean that this character of work is present all the time, but that this is a possibility when work is reduced to labor power can be seen for example in disgruntled debates about how unemployed persons are too picky, too spoiled to accept the jobs they are offered – the message is then precisely that they should be prepared to sell their labor power as an 'anything', a flexible, general capacity. In this sense, it makes sense to talk, as Marx sometimes did, about work as externalization, renouncing of property. More specifically, this means that capacities are made to look like – become, in a certain sense – *economic assets* so that these appear to be goods that the human being *hirself* exploits at hir best interest. The asymmetries between the employer and the employee who sells hir labor power are striking. Marx's fundamental point, without which his entire economic critique is unintelligible, is that the worker has *only* hir labor power to sell. When considering the concept of employability, one realizes the force of this fact, and the huge difference in positions that this asymmetry entails. The capacity is strictly defined according

to the demand of the labor market and for an individual the goal is to maintain and enhance his competitive advantages.

Let me point out how this takes us straight to the tension I am concerned with, the tension between work as labor power and work as a life situation. The exhortation to accept any job exists in the same setting of commodification as does the exhortation to make oneself 'unique' by having a 'unique' set of skills.<sup>68</sup> The sociologist Beverly Skeggs writes about people being treated as, and treating themselves as, alienable capacities – capacities that one can disengage and use in a job. The individual is imagined to be an *optimizing creature*. What happens then, Skeggs maintains, is that capabilities are partly disengaged from the surroundings of work so that they come to look like an essence, what the human being really is: capacities to work. One then forgets that not everybody can or wants to become this optimizing individual. Nor do all 'capacities' fit into this scheme; not all capacities are interesting from the perspective of wage labor. Let us return to *Eat Sleep Die*. The job-seekers at the job center program are asked to list their qualifications, 'what they are good at'. Raša tells them that she can expertly estimate the weight of a box of salad. The job coach sighs and tells her that it is *not* the type of skills that are sought after. The image of the optimizing

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<sup>68</sup> For Marx, who is describing the fundamental aspects of the capitalist system, the point of departure is what he calls 'simple labor power', an average of labor power (1990, 135). His analysis is not based on the different levels of skills and education, but rather the way value is created as abstractions. For Marx, skills complicate the picture, but the analysis starts from an average (which is historically and culturally determined.) – The reason why I bring the subject up here is that I think a critique of Marx that has often been made, that he depicts a world of manual, industrial labor, but that his analysis is unable to account for today's world of specialized skills, is untenable. My point has been to show that the structure of abstract labor can be illustrated by *several* roles that skills have: skills as treating oneself as a unique commodity and the exhortation to accept any job.

individual builds on an idealization that turns a blind eye to aspects of reality that do not align with alienable capacities (Skeggs 2004, 68-75). The essential point, I take it, is that abstract labor can be understood from the point of view of idealizations that turn away from the way human capabilities are embedded in contexts where it is important to learn things for a specific purpose that is considered worthwhile. Therefore, one should be skeptical of treating all aspects of a human being as capital, as if this is what the human being is: social capital, emotional intelligence, etc. – descriptions that strengthen the hold of commodification.

Labor power, then, is a promise of working capacity, but this capacity is realized as labor power only if and when it is *sold* – this is the cruel truth of capitalism (Marx 1990, 277) – cruel, because it creates the possibility of obsolescence I referred to above and in the initial example from *Eat Sleep Die*. For Marx, this capacity is realized in the form of labor time on which economic value depends. However, this is not *real* time, real hours spent doing a particular thing that requires a particular amount of effort, not the hours per day spent in the workplace by a particular worker, but a form of historically specific *social generalization*, the average of how long it takes to do certain things, socially necessary labor time. For example, the power-looms reduced the socially necessary labor time for producing fabrics (1990, 129, 677). Given this specific concept of time, it becomes possible to compare the work that I do to the work that *everybody else* is doing – ‘everybody’ thus not only people working in the same branch of industry. “Abstract labor has the paradoxical status of a fact that is lived in its effectivity, in terms of the demands it imposes to produce according to the speed and rate of this average.” (Read 2003, 69) This can even be illustrated (despite the difference in logical level) in the individual company’s quest to produce more efficiently than the competitors – by investing in new



technology or changing the organization of work, etc.. The socially necessary labor time and the abstraction of labor are two of many preconditions for work figuring in this globally comparable way. The abstraction of work manifested and presupposed in this global race for profits can be seen in work as different as factory work, farming and building. This is the view of work as a factor in the production process.

In all of his writings, Marx describes capitalism as fuelled by *living* labor power, but the system of labor power encompasses far more than the hours sold to the capitalist.<sup>69</sup> This can be illustrated on a practical level: one part of the worker's life is sold to the employer, while the other part is transformed into recuperation and reproduction of the working class. One could even say, like Thoreau, that "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run." (Thoreau 1953, 24) As I have already pointed out (which is very clear in an example like *Eat Sleep Die*), the worker's life-world is formed by the capitalist process of value creation.

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<sup>69</sup> The character of wage labor is that it produces more value than it costs. Marx calls this surplus value. He writes about the way the worker stands to the production process as labor power, as an element in the profit-making process – the driving element that makes machinery and tools something more than dead stuff: it is only human abstract labor that adds new value to the economic process, that furthers the process. Machinery has no value in itself, it is only when they are a part of work that machines and tools transport and realize, but do not create, value. For Marx 'value' is thus not at all the same thing as 'wealth'. It is important to keep in mind that this new value is not created by work in the concrete sense of particular tasks (boats being built, ipods being manufactured, hair being cut) – it is created by means of abstract labor – quantifiable labor. According to Marx's theory, surplus value stands in contrast to the work that covers the expenses for the worker's (historically relative) basic means of subsistence. So, again, the point of the theory of surplus value can't be that the *individual* worker produces new value with his *specific work* – it is socially necessary labor time that is relevant, not the concrete hours.

However, this need not always entail a state where companies try to extract surplus value by means of brute oppression. Marx himself talks about different ways of extracting surplus value, which is not limited to lengthening the working day or intensifying work. What Marx talks about as a society dominated by the value form can be seen in rather *different* historical situations. This should be kept in mind because it would not be right to say that, as is sometimes done, for example in Marshall Berman's book *All That is Solid Melts into Air* and also sometimes in Richard Sennett's writings, that Marx describes a process where social relations and social ties are *destroyed*. As Kathi Weeks writes: sometimes sustaining societies is emphasized to a great extent, as in the situation after World War II when unions were strong in many countries and rights for workers were increasingly secured – this is a situation in which the stabilization of work also meant a normalization of wage labor. Sometimes, she writes, the stress is more one-sidedly on creating surplus-value. “The competing requirements of creating surplus-value and sustaining societies upon which it depends form a potential fault-line through capitalism's political scenarios.” (Weeks 2011, 27) This is what I would call the elasticity of capitalism.

In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx writes:

Labor not only produces commodities; it also produces itself and the workers as a commodity and it does so in the same proportion in which it produces commodities in general (Marx 1992a, 324).

The task in this chapter is to show that what Marx talks about as “producing workers as commodities” includes a wide range of relations. As we saw in chapter 2 and 3, paid work is one thing, but we also spend much of our lives *as* workers, preparing ourselves for work, getting an education, making

ourselves presentable, travelling to and from work.<sup>70</sup> For Marx, this is what the working human being becomes in a capitalist society, a person who splits up his life, a person whose life from the capitalist point of view is that of labor power: a resource used to get the profit-making process to take off. Marx did not simply write about the world of commodities. He tried to bring to light the kind of setting that such a world of commodities presupposes. Here, he talks about how resistance is broken down:

The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition, and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws. [...] The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. [...] In the ordinary run of things, the worker can be left to the 'natural law of production', i.e. it is possible to rely on his dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them (Marx 1990, 899).

As the philosopher Jason Read writes, this world of commodities and labor power requires *normalization* – which, can also be a normalization of for example precarious work! – and perhaps even a process in which the conditions of this commodified form of life are effaced, i.e. capitalism appears as self-evident and natural, appearing “to generate its own conditions of possibility” (cf. Read 2003, 43, cf. 35-6, 41). This means that the social conditions of profit-making are made invisible, so that the evolution of capitalism appears like a story of thrifty people and trickle-down effects. In what follows, I will say more about such effacement. To sum up: Marx criticizes an image that does not take into account the kind of system that re/produces the wage laborer.

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<sup>70</sup> On this dimension of work, cf. Ehrenreich 2003.

Understanding wage labor requires an understanding of the system within which wage labor becomes a necessary element.

## 5.4 Marx on abstract labor

Below, explain how the abstraction of work can be understood only from a relational point of view. This helps me to come to terms with the question whether abstract labor refers to a *specific* type of work.

As I said, labor power, according to Marx, is the capacity to work. I also said that what he calls commensurable, abstract labor is separable from specific workers with their specific skills and specific experiences. It is work in this sense that generates value, according to Marx (cf. Marx 1990, 129). A logical extension is that the wage laborer fills a position that can (in principle) be filled by *anyone*. From this point of view, the relation between the baker, the factory worker and the hair-dresser appears very clear: they all provide wage labor. The rather difficult presupposition is that the central concepts of this analysis – commodity, abstract labor, socially necessary labor time – only make sense if the point of departure is *not* (as in neoclassical economy and its concept of marginal utility) the specific commodity, or the specific transaction, but rather a complex network of societal and historical relations. What this emphasis of a relational nexus brings home is the way a world of commodities (markets, money, consumption) and a world of work (labor power, investments, companies, production) co-exist in creating standardized, homogenized measures of value to which work is subjected (cf. Read 2003, 71). The result of this process is both a normalization of the commodity system and a system in which a person's capacity to work is a product on a market.

I would suggest that the question of abstract labor is more fundamental than it is often taken to be. As Read writes:

“Marx presents abstract labor, the equalization and reduction of diverse labors and practices to the same standard, as a problem that is continually reposed” (2003, 83). According to one reading of Marx I am in sympathy with, abstract labor can be understood only when looking at the realization of value in the *exchange process* (cf. Heinrich 2012, 55). Such a reading rejects the view (often ascribed to Adam Smith) that abstract labor creates values as a supposedly autonomous productive activity, so that the consequence would be that if this productivity were somehow to be turned in another direction, perhaps owned and controlled by the workers themselves, it would create general societal wealth instead of exchange values. An aspect of abstract labor is illuminated if, as Heinrich writes, one sees it as a relation of validation, i.e. that something *counts* as abstract labor. It does so only within a specific nexus of other relations and conditions – the most important thing being that the commodities are exchanged. In order to have value, a commodity must stand in relation to other commodities, that is, to other products of abstract labor (Heinrich 2012, 49-53).

So this is not about an individual commodity being sold, rather than remaining unsold in a warehouse somewhere, but rather: the act of exchange is an *aspect* of what commodities are, what it means that they are commensurable. If commodities are not sold, crises appear. Heinrich writes: “The substance of value, and thus the value-objectivity, is something only obtained by things when they are set into relation with one another in exchange.” (2004, 51)

As we have seen, for Marx value is not intelligible from the point of view of one single commodity. Heinrich’s remark also latches on to a very central aspect of the commodity that I have already mentioned: it is produced in order to be sold. It is from here that the abstractions of labor take off. If this were not the case, it would not make sense to talk about abstract

labor being 'congealed' or 'crystallized' in a commodity. Things made for other purposes (my friend makes lasagna and offers a bite to all her colleagues) are concrete things with a use, and work then has *another* role: there is no 'socially necessary labor time' for example. In conclusion, this means that what Marx has to say about value and commodities, is also related to that there are people who buy these commodities.

Again, this relational approach to abstract labor counteracts the inclination to think about abstract labor as (quasi-physical) expenditure of labor power, so that abstract labor would, after all, be a matter of a mental abstraction of the manifold of work into the simple acts of physical exertion – or so that Marx's theory of value would be interpreted in an empiricist way: every hour of expenditure of labor power adds new value to the commodity in a supposedly 'materialist' way. The aim here is to stave off a temptation to try to locate a specific *point* at which abstractions enter the scene, the point at which the concrete becomes abstract – how does this specific hamburger become a commodity? Is it when it is grilled or when it is sold over the counter at McDonald's? As I said in 5.3, Marx reminds us of the world of relations that makes the commodity as a thing that has economic value *possible*. Again, Marx suggests that these conditions should be brought to the light.

What such a reading adds up to is also that it is slightly misleading to talk about 'abstract labor', as that easily evokes the idea of a specific *form* of work with a set of characteristics that, were these characteristics to be taken away, could be brought back to 'concrete work'. My intention in talking about abstractions of work is the opposite: this is an aspect of work given many other relations into which work is inserted. In other words, my reading focuses on the *process* of transforming work into labor power, a commodity and the

relations that the capitalism system relies on, but which are neutralized so that they are not conspicuous.

Therefore, the abstractions of work are *not* tantamount, for example, to fragmented Taylorism. There are ways of extracting surplus value that would not allow for such organization of work: a firm that permits plenty of independence in order to increase efficiency can still reduce its employees to economic assets. *All forms* of wage labor are imbued with abstract labor *in* their being a part of the capitalist system. This dimension is revealed when we remind ourselves of the conditions of working as a nurse, rather than helping one's elderly parent whenever one can. In the earlier case, we can imagine the setting of a company and there occurring a situation in which some nurses are made redundant as an attempt to make business more productive. In the latter case (which, as I said in 2.7, should not be idealized), an abstraction of work in the sense of labor power as quantitatively commensurable units, is *conceptually* impossible to imagine. It is true that wage labor and unpaid work overlap in many ways (the content of the job can be identical etc.), but a distinctive feature of wage labor is that it *can* be rendered as labor power, competition and supply/demand. For instance, in an accountant's wage lists, the job of a janitor has basically the same function as the job as a university lecturer. Regardless of whether we are talking about a priest, a kindergarten teacher, a truck driver or an accountant, it *can* make sense to talk about work as labor power, as supply and demand. This does not make sense in the case of voluntary work, where the relational nexus that sustains the abstraction of work does not figure, even though there are areas of overlap where commercial relations sneak into voluntary work.

However, I would also say that abstract labor can figure in a description of changes in *how* we work. As Marx sometimes

writes, abstract labor is a *value-forming* transmutation. This practical side of the abstraction of work is internal to power relations.<sup>71</sup> Harry Braverman's book about degradation of labor, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (cf. chapter 2) is an important contribution to this discussion, even though, as I said, the abstraction of work cannot be reduced to specific fragmented jobs or deskilling. His book is not only an analytic account, but also a moral and political examination of degradation of human activities. Braverman states that the capitalist doesn't discriminate between different types of work. He portrays a development in which work is not organized according to skills, but according to the need for surplus value, profits. Work is reduced to one function: to produce value and generate profits, or to be supportive functions. Laborers with different skills are transformed into labor power, a mere function of an overarching process. The specific activity of washing, feeding, processing or writing is not important. Again: the meaning of 'capacity' undergoes a radical transformation and as I've said many times, this transformation is on-going. This abstraction cannot be understood without looking at how work is organized; looking at changes in the work process is thus one way in which one may talk about a transformation of work into labor power. Even though it is possible to imagine a specific area of work that turns into wage labor without the work being changed much it is not strange that changes occur when something is inserted into new relations.

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<sup>71</sup> These questions are controversial within Marxist theory. Alfred Sohn-Rethel claims, for example, that "the abstraction does not spring from labor but from exchange as a particular mode of social interrelationship, and it is through exchange that the abstraction imparts itself to labor, making it 'abstract human labor'" (1978, 6). My rendering of abstractions is different as my argument is, as I said, that the abstractions do not spring from *any specific source* but rather from a tangle of evolving relations.



In *Grundrisse* Marx writes that abstract labor presupposes a highly developed division of concrete tasks, but where no type of work is more important than any other and where it is easy to move from one type of job to another. In the following section, he goes from pointing out the abstractions of work that already Adam Smith had a hunch of, to explaining why this insight is *not* that work is the simplest element and the most ancient relation of production. The abstraction of work is based on significant historical changes and takes place in a concrete development:

With the abstract universality of wealth-creating activity we now have the universality of the object defined as wealth, the product as such or again labor as such, but labor as past, objectified labor. [...] Now it might seem that all that had been achieved thereby was to discover the abstract expression for the simplest and most ancient relation in which human beings – in whatever form of society – play the role of producers. This is correct in one respect. Not in another. Indifference towards any specific kind of labor presupposes a very developed totality of real kinds of labor, of which no single one is any longer predominant. As a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all. Then it ceases to be thinkable in a particular form alone. On the other side, this abstraction of labor as such is not merely the mental product of a concrete totality of labors. Indifference towards specific labors corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labor to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference (Marx 1973, 104).

According to Braverman, the professional world has been actively disintegrated. Capacities and skills are dangerous because they imply ideas about how things are to be done and consequently, attempts to minimize their role are an aspect of the commodification of work. What we have now, he writes, is degraded and fragmented abstract labor, tasks delegated to

the worker by management, a group with little contact with those who execute the orders (1974, 160). Again, these points should not be misunderstood so that abstract labor is considered to be manual and repetitive assembly-line work, even though Braverman is sometimes interpreted that way. One should keep in mind that he also talks about the development within offices. The emphasis should be on how the abstraction of work – work as meshed within commodified relations – is immersed in and also shaped by the *organization* of work. Continuing on this point, the analysis need not be limited to an account of the relation between exchange values in a restricted sense and the abstraction of work. Similar examples could be found in the regime of New Public Management, where the job descriptions of a nurse, a teacher or a social worker take on a life of their own that do not have much to do with the meaning of these jobs. The human beings these employees are supposed to tend to are transformed into quotas and the friction of reality has no bearing on what the employee is supposed to carry out in his job. As Braverman would say: given that the job is about maximizing results, realizing the yearly financial aims and striving towards efficiency, judgments about what is proper to do in the particular situation are rejected as unimportant or even destructive. The point above about how an activity changes can be applied here. New public management affects the meaning of nursing, teaching or administration. The concept of abstract labor could, I think, provide a framework for understanding this type of example, which would go against the very common idea that Marx's ideas are outdated because they are supposedly completely structured around industrial work and mechanization.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Some Marxists (cf. Sayers 2011, 39) talk about a historical process in which work is more and more mediated and the relation between worker and

## 5.5 Real abstractions

For Marx, abstract labor is not a mental construction, even though the concept has sometimes been understood that way (cf. Read 2003, 68). The point is rather that the social relations of capitalism – that commodities are commensurable with regard to their being values – are not immediately conspicuous. More seriously (in practices entangled with ideological views on what work should be) such relations are *made* inconspicuous. Anselm Jappe writes that Marx’s fundamental concepts (value, commodity and abstract labor) can only be elucidated *indirectly*, that is, they do not emerge from a purely historical account (Jappe 2005, 26, 77-80). As we saw above, abstract labor should not be rendered into an elusive substance that explains what all commodities have in common. It is rather a way to spell out a web of relations. It is important for Marx that economic relations and social relations are not opposites. Economic relations *are* social relations, even though we often do not look at them that way when economy is described in a language of law-like relations. Marx looks at the tensions between forms of descriptions: analyzing wage labor as a *social relation* or describing it as an economic entity, a segment in a process, an isolated, individual element. Even though Marx may have overstated the case of how the commodity contains labor as a form of secret (1990, 163), I agree that it is a challenge to get clear

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products becomes more and more distant. “Work becomes increasingly distant from the direct production process as such, and the product is no longer related in a direct way to the satisfaction of particular needs.” (ibid) Administrative or commercial work then seems to be the peak of this development. These writers attend to work as a relation that historically goes from direct to distant. This is *not* what I have in mind when I talk about the abstraction of work. This image leads astray in ways I tried to demonstrate in chapter 2. What is lacking in this analysis is the role of exchange value.

about the relation between the individual's work, production, the commodity and capitalism. This quote from the theologian Philip Goodchild illustrates what I have in mind:

It would seem that no one could be more free than an economic agent in a marketplace with unlimited opportunities to exchange, make profits, and satisfy demands. In reality, such economic agents suffer from an immense discipline. For the freedom to exchange is a freedom to command labor; such freedom can be realized only if labor is available to be commanded. The freedom of the wealthy can be acquired only at the expense of the servitude of those who work. Market society, while appearing to promise liberty, imposes itself as a rigorous system of discipline. One is always under an obligation to acquire money. [...] While appearing to offer the promise of the security of wealth earned through the division of labor, market society imposes a condition of general insecurity, facing each of its members with the threat of exclusion from relations of interdependence (2009, 107).

Labor power has to be *available* to be commanded – which does not at all rule out the *formal* freedom of employment relations. This *systemically* required discipline, the tremendous energy people dedicate to looking for jobs and worrying about keeping their jobs is not conspicuous if work is thought of simply in terms of a particular contract on the market, or as individual employment. Marx writes similar things in volume 1 of *Capital* (1990, chapter 25) about labor power as a reserve army, “a relatively redundant population of laborers” that belongs to capital even though it may appear external to it in consisting of unemployed people outside the labor market.<sup>73</sup> What Goodchild is talking about makes sense *only* if work is

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<sup>73</sup> Labor power must “incessantly be re-incorporated into capital as its means of valorization, which cannot get free of capital, and whose enslavement to capital is only concealed by the variety of individual capitalists to whom it sells itself, forms, in fact, a factor in the reproduction of capital itself” (Marx 1990, 763-4).

looked at from a *structural* point of view: people are dependent on employment.

As I said Marx focuses on the web of relations that is presupposed by the commodity form; in doing so he also sets out to show that commodities should not only be understood as tangible things (bread, tables, trousers) but that the capitalist economy is built around the commodity form and the commodity as *abstraction*, that is, as commensurable with regard to their exchange values. It is the transformation into the commodity form that he talks about in the famous sections about *fetishism*. Marx suggests that one of the difficulties is to catch sight of the social relations as these relations between commodities are not immediately conspicuous as being a relation between people and their working activities. It is rather the buyer's money, the specific desired thing s/he sets out to buy and its price that are immediately present – an immediacy Marx strongly criticizes by means of the concept of *political economy*. He charges the classical economists of having taken this immediacy for granted. These economists' categories, as Marx sees it, are all the more problematic as they reflect the *naturalization* of relations that exist in our everyday lives. His critique of economy is in other words a critique of everyday life in a society dominated by capitalist relations (cf. Heinrich 2004, 34-35). His own approach consists in explaining economic relations not from the standpoint of the individual (like economics based on the *homo economicus* figure of thought) but from the perspective of the *total production* in society (Marx 1990, 165-72).

The challenge is to pinpoint what is going on here. Is it a matter of something hidden, something forgotten, something invisible or something that is *made* invisible? Marx himself talks about inversion, *Verkehrung*: the relation between commodities have taken the place of the relation between people. Expressed in other words, this means that production

is geared towards valorization and that concrete work is subjected to the abstract (cf. Jappe 2005, 30-2). One of the crucial things going on in Marx's writings is that he shows how the economic and the social should be thought separately – and *also* together.

Here is one typical example of Marx's dialectical moves. He starts off the *Capital* by asking what the commodity is. It is a thing, with physical qualities: it is a thing that is used. However, it is also a commodity with a price, in which abstract labor is congealed in commodities with 'phantom-like objectivity'. Marx shows that the commodity form is a manifestation of social relations, of work and production. The economic side makes it seem as if the social has disappeared: the commodity is simply the thing bought and sold. Marx claims that capitalist value-creation makes work 'disappear' into the product or into money. What is not apparent from the point of view of labor power as a commodity on the market is that the worker's entire life is shaped by capitalism, as we saw in the quote by Goodchild above. This is clear if it is acknowledged that the roles of the wage laborer evolve historically, which is revealed when one takes a look at the changing meaning of being 'accessible to the labor market' as a potential wage-earner or employee. The meaning is historical and it involves everything from migration and education to systems of unemployment benefits and pensions. This tension is hinted at in the *Capital* (cf. 1990, 273, 638, chapter 25). One sense of mystification in his analysis is thus that elements of the economic system (work, consumption, commodities, money) are separated, so that their interrelation is not clear.

One form of 'disappearance' of the social that Marx takes some interest in is the quotidian but telling encounter with commodities in a shop: work is not immediately apparent there. A crucial observation Marx makes about the commodity

is that its appearance as a concretely existing thing with a specific price makes it hard to see its dimension of economic value and a product of work. It is this disappearance that one most often comes across in discussion about Marx's ideas about mystification of the source of value. I would say that he also extends the remarks about mystification to work – not primarily in the sense that the concrete work of a commodity is invisible (in his dialectical way, he sometimes says it is *too* visible), but rather that the relation between two commodities can in fact be grasped as a relation to the *totality* of commodities in society because of their commensurability. When seen under the heading of wage or contract, work is individualized. In everyday life we encounter work as an individual relation, as my job, your job, as this specific task. We are bewitched by the appearance of the worker with his own contract, his own income and so on. As Marx writes: “The wage form thus extinguishes every trace of the division of the working day into necessary labor and surplus labor, into paid labor and unpaid labor” (1990, 680). He challenges the idea that the wage builds on a fair exchange between equals, the employee and the employer – even though he also states that it *is* fair in the sense that the laborer gets duly paid for *his commodity*, labor power. The wage form, like the commodity form, obscures what takes place when economic value is *created*.

Marx indicates that the legal fiction of the contract takes the worker as an isolated individual free to dispose of his or her labor power, thereby excluding the material and social conditions that constrain and force this exchange as well as the power and productivity of the necessarily collective laboring subject implicated in this exchange (Read 2003, 100).

Marx paints the image of a historical development of work, production, exchange and the development of the money form

through which the commodity comes to have exchange value. The challenge is to remind oneself of the shift from human *activity* to economic *structures*, the shift from the individual wage earner to the social character of commodity-producing abstract labor (Heinrich 2004, 47).

That the work of the baker and the pharmacist become 'of the same kind' takes place on a particular level of abstraction. However, this is not Marx's last word. The abstraction is engraved in our lives, in social relations, in the role work occupies in present-day capitalist society. This is in *in a certain sense* independent of how we think. Abstractions of work are independent of thought in the sense that these points can't be rejected by for example showing that the buyer regards a commodity in terms of its use (etc.) or by pointing out that the individual worker thinks of his job as a concrete activity. Secondly, these abstractions will not disappear were we to *think* differently. Thirdly, changing how *I* think would not solve things, as these abstractions are *relational*. On the other hand, talking about an abstraction of work is always also talking about how human practices are related to our understanding of them. I would for example disagree with a description that contends that people's understanding, as the world of commodities and money expands, 'grows more and more separate' from what they are doing (cf. Sohn-Rethel 1978, 26). My purpose here and throughout the thesis has been to point out the *dynamic* relation between practice and understanding. Hence, I do not agree with the idea that "the abstractness of their action is hidden to the people performing it" (Sohn-Rethel 1978, 30) if that means that it is hidden in an *absolute* sense: that would of course take away even the possibility to *talk* about such abstractions.

Marx often writes about how processes evolve 'behind the backs' of producers and workers (cf. 1990, 135). The danger of this way of putting it is that it creates the Blob that I have been



criticizing. Still, there is something right in this expression as well. Let me illustrate. We can imagine a coffee shop owner who dislikes the consequences of competition and who tries to create a good environment for workers. S/he wants to sustain the business because of the role it serves in the community. Hir aim is not to maximize profits. Still, this does not mean that hir business is spared from competition. In the end, higher rents, higher interest on the loan s/he has taken to open the coffee shop, along with galloping expenses force hir to quit the business and to fire hir two employees, who must look for new jobs. What this example shows is the complex relation between economic actions and people's individual intentions, desires and ideas. There is no elusive hiddenness there, just a complicated tangle of relations and practices. The small company owner in the example is placed within relations based on competition and there is no simple way for hir to act as though this was not the case. It is intelligible to say that s/he is rendered powerless in some respects. Such an example can show the robustness of the abstraction that a world of commodification entails. Even though the global market of wage labor *can* function as a lofty abstraction so that the image can be criticized for its reductions or skewed perspectives, these abstractions of work are an everyday aspect of the way we live in the world now. It is what Marxists call a 'real abstraction' (Sohn-Rethel 1978).

Marx's insightful point about how such patterns can be said to evolve 'behind our back' is just as true as to say that these abstractions are created by us. What is peculiar here is that the language of labor power makes them appear like given, self-evident entities. Marx rephrases these abstractions so that we see how they are rooted in praxis (this can be taken as a point about language, about a complex relation between words and actions). Real abstractions are *operative* – they are

what for example competition presupposes and requires. As Jason Read writes:

For Marx the source of this appearance is to be found in activity itself, in the ensemble of relations. It is not so much that value is believed to be in commodities but, rather, that one acts in the process of exchange as if commodities, despite their distinct and different natures, were all reducible to some abstract equivalent that constitutes the possibility of exchange (2003, 69).

In other words: 'labor power' is both a hegemonic discourse and practice; society is constantly understood and governed through a concept of labor power, and then society itself is mystified and split up into the isolated elements I have been talking about. This mystification is maintained when we start to think about ourselves in terms of 'expensive and well-educated labor power' having to adapt to the requirements of the market. The description of cheap or expensive labor power is, as I said, what capitalism presupposes. 'The labor market' can be a bewitching image (to use Wittgenstein's language) around which our thinking starts to gravitate but this abstraction is also actively built into practices such as job applications, outsourcing and private employment agencies. In these practices, the abstraction of labor power is maintained, and it is also, one could say, *strengthened* by work continually *being made* commensurable and exchangeable. Labor hire and recruitment firms are a glaring example of what such strengthening of work as labor power looks like: here it is really obvious that labor power is a capacity to sell. I am thus not saying that we could get away from this by means of ideology critique. At least partly, we *live our lives* as labor power, which influences our hopes, our worries and our fears. Everyday life, as in the example with the small coffee shop owner, is structured around commodities, jobs and

competition. Even so, this is *not* to say that our *entire* lives are structured in this way.

To capture such tensions, 'real abstraction' may not be an altogether happy way of putting things. Expendable labor power is not problematic in its capacity of *abstraction*. In the end, what *harm* can abstractions do? After all, didn't I also admit that Marx is abstracting when he is talking about the commodity form? In bringing out what is at stake in the transformation of work into labor power, speaking about abstraction is not enough. The point is rather that this is how work is organized because of competition, agendas, interests and power relations. For me, the concept of abstract labor is helpful because it illuminates an aspect of a *process*: the emergence of the commodity form. Thus, the problem I want to get at – the ways in which work is neutralized – does not hinge on abstractness as such, but rather the *process* of abstraction and the relations it is embedded in. To illuminate which other words can be used to describe this historical process, one could instead talk about *violence* (the risk with using this word is that the possibility of abstraction in the world of the university or the coffee shop owner may not be captured this way):

Nonetheless, the violence of economic abstraction is not simply an error of the economists; it captures, in an ideological inversion, a real process of transformation to market integration, commodity circulation, and bourgeois behavior (Sayer & Walker 1993, 117).

The abstraction involved in the transformation of work into labor power is connected with what in the Marxist literature goes under the heading of *subsumption* (cf. Marx 1990, 645). Subsumption is the process in which work in its specific forms evolves into labor power, both as formally free contractual relations and as it is organized around the need for surplus value. As many writers point out, this is and has been a

process of violence and conflict. Specific forms of work – one could perhaps say, specific forms of making a living – are *subordinated* to the overarching aims of valorization, to add more value than existed before. This is not only a change that applies to economic relations; it is a deep-going transformation of social relationships (cf. Read 2003, chapter 3). Labor power is disclosed as labor power precisely in the state of *becoming* (cf. Marx 1990, 849).<sup>74</sup> To continue on a theme that has been present in several chapters, I would say that this process of becoming has an *ethical* side. In his early writings, Marx writes about work as one aspect of life activity. The horror of capitalism is that it reduces and degrades work to subsistence, to a commodity, to profits, to surplus. As Marx writes, political economy only recognizes the worker as a *wage-earner*, while turning a blind eye to any other aspect. The worker's life is treated as a commodity, but this is not acknowledged if one only has the wage-earner relation before one's eyes (Marx 1992a, 335).

So: when I speak about abstract labor this is not a simple myth sober clarification could dispel. The problem is not primarily false consciousness. That the relations of abstract labor appear as a relation between things (commodities) is no *mere* illusion (cf. Heinrich 2012, 73-5, cf. Balibar 2007, 60-1). One could say that even though talking about mystification

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<sup>74</sup> The best text on this topic I have found is a text published in *Endnotes*. <http://endnotes.org.uk/en/endnotes-the-history-of-subsumption> It can be noted that the discussion about subsumption explicitly poses the question about how the transformation of work into labor power should be described. Is this an ongoing process or was this process finished at some particular historical stage? The discussion also brings up the need to look at several descriptions at once: the transformation of work into labor power can be talked about as an emergence of free contracts (this is what Marx calls formal subsumption) but on the other hand the history of this emergence shows how this economic side of work is entangled with other relations: juridical relations, family relations and community relations.

has its place, there is no such thing as to dissolve the abstractions of labor as a mere mystification. Let me quote Alberto Toscano: “In other words, the secret of real abstraction is precisely an open secret to be gleaned from the operations of capitalism themselves, rather than from an ideological preoccupation with a true concreteness or hidden essence that the abstractions of capital may be deemed to conceal” (2008, 71). Despite Marx’s fondness for ‘secrets’ and ‘riddles’, there is nothing *elusive* about the abstraction of work even though there is a connection between this dimension of capitalism and examples of how (conditions of) work is positively hidden, as it is when work takes place in closed units and attempts to reveal the conditions of work are blocked by companies. When Marx talks about abstract labor this is, as I see it, not a gesture of revelation of an underlying, hidden structure but rather a lucid description of what is going on around us every day. What this requires is a complex and sometimes risky enterprise of moving between and discerning levels of description and how they are related.

## **5.6 Against the abstract and the concrete**

I will now continue to point out the risks associated with the concept of ‘abstract labor’. In his book *The Mirror of Production* Jean Baudrillard criticizes Marx for not extending his critique of economy far enough and for holding onto an ideal about work without alienation. Marx’s distinction between exchange value and use value is probed in the book. Baudrillard argues that production is taken for granted if it is elevated as concrete use value, an independent source standing in relation to exchange value, described as the abstract and alienating. According to Baudrillard, use value is taken to be differentiated, specific, concrete and incommensurable while exchange value is quantitative, universal and homogenous. He

protests: no, use value is *also* a part of the system of exchange value. His point is that concrete value is then only a shadow of abstract labor, and that Marxists paradoxically end up elevating the generality of work in the pseudo-gesture towards concrete labor and the nobility of work. He suggests that by referring to concrete and incommensurable labor one makes an illusionary move that is still immersed in a universalizing logic. Use value is a sort of ideological construction that makes us think that abstract value has a *real, concrete foundation* (1975, 21-38). Marx is thus charged with an incomplete critique of work that in the end results in an affirmation of work in its generality.

A serious problem with Baudrillard's conclusion is that it is based on what I take to be a misunderstanding of Marx, who, according to my reading, argues that exchange value and use value are units *within* the capitalist system. Interpreters have disagreed about this, and many would consider it self-evident that use-value is a trans-historical concept. In the preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*<sup>75</sup> Marx refers to Aristotle, and here it seems as if the concept is trans-historical: use-values are independent of the economic form. In some of the early sections of *Capital*, volume 1, he talks about use-values that do not have values, and that are not commodities – this is a concept of material wealth with no reference to a specific social setting. Work that I do only to provide for my own needs can be said to have use-value, he argues (cf. 1990, 126, 131). Even so, I think another reading is tenable. Firstly, it should be remembered that Marx continuously *objected* to uncritical elevation of the concrete. In the same first chapter of *Capital*, volume 1, one finds a fierce questioning of empiricism and the idea of immediacy (along with a critique of

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<sup>75</sup><https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/ch01.htm#2>

intellectualism). Secondly, as we saw, the concept of use value posits a generalized idea of needs. This presupposes that needs, like work, can be *anything*: anything that in economic terms can be counted as *demand*. The character of these needs does not matter in the slightest from this perspective and this generalized role could even be said to be a requirement that arises in a system of commodities and money. In this sense, it makes sense to say that use values are, as I wrote above, a *limiting concept* required for there to be exchange value. If one takes the overarching point to be that it makes sense to talk about a *distinction* between use values and (exchange) values, that is, a distinction between use and economic value internal to the commodity form, then I think it is clear that this distinction can *arise* only in a capitalist society and its economy of labor power and commodities, even though *we* may of course apply the concept of use value to other historical periods. It is in capitalist society that values appear on the horizon: a society in which things are produced primarily in order to be sold. In conclusion, when one reads *Capital*, volume one in its entirety, 'use value' is a way for Marx to clarify what a *commodity* is and what it means that it has economic value. Like other concepts, it is *relational*. This also means that there is a constant dialectic relation between use values and exchange values, which can be illustrated in the following quotidian situation: in order to go on holiday to Thailand, I need to do some extra work now: as Christmas is almost here, I can get a job at the post office; they need some extra people. In this example, the use values (the vacation and the Christmas mail) stand in relation to exchange values, mail as a commodity, the vacation as a commodity. The example shows the shift between two aspects: use value for me – commodity for somebody else. And in reality there are many shifts, constant ones. Marx looks at the specific historical

relations between consumption and production. To quote Read:

[Rather] than maintaining the simple and linear causality of natural needs and historical mediations, Marx develops a thought of the complex relations of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption in which all act on and determine each other and, to a certain extent, produce each other (2003, 50).

The reason why I mention the sinuous discussion about use value and exchange value is that I agree with Baudrillard that it is problematic to appeal to concrete work, real work, in a way that would *in itself* equip us with an alternative to capitalism. The risk is that words like 'concrete', 'differentiated', 'specific' and 'incommensurable' are filled with vaguely positive content. A trans-historical concept of concrete work takes us *nowhere*. Even though it might seem tempting to posit a solid positive contrast to the abstraction of work, I think that instead of such shortcuts, a critical analysis of what kind of transmutations work goes through is a better tool for grappling with conflicts and tensions of the present world. It should also be added that positing a positive alternative is fine, if what one is presenting is a different *social relation*, not a concept of work perceived as a return to the concrete. Because if one would be more specific, what would this concreteness be? Some jobs are only possible to imagine within capitalism (like advertisers or stock breakers). The temptation would be to imagine a more simple society that would still be built around jobs: firemen, police officers, bakers, teachers and farmers, perhaps. A stable, authentic society in which concrete work has been restored. One then, it seems to me, holds on to an idea about jobs – teaching, farming and baking as jobs – but imagines that abstractions can be gotten rid of by taking away some specific element of the present society (banking, administration or advertising).



My point above has been that abstraction of work can rather be said to be an aspect of all types of wage labor inserted into economic relations – a teacher’s, a plumber’s or a nurse’s jobs – and it is this that a dream about concrete work ignores. The appeal to the concrete is often a nostalgic evocation of what work used to be like. In this rhetoric the contrast to the abstraction of work appears as the *forgotten*: we need to remind ourselves of the essence of work, the real, hard work that is going on around us or the good ideals that have now been forgotten.

Baudrillard’s warning is worth mentioning given the *political* temptation to look for a solid foundation of ‘real work’ by way of evoking contrasts between for example financial capital and ‘real, honest work’. The structure of such arguments is most often that capitalism is represented by one class, and the goal is to replace this class with another. According to some Marxists, for example Anselm Jappe, such juxtapositions entrench a mystification of capitalism, so that the abstractions and the character of commodification are far from being noticed. The abstractions are not obvious if capitalism is described as the domination of one class of people over another – especially if the idea is that the proletariat has an inherent *right* to domination because *they* are the source of value, *they* are the ones working and maintaining the system. According to Jappe, this view of class struggles expresses a failure to understand the abstraction of work, and thereby it also, by glorifying concrete work, neutralizes the working activity and the worker: ‘work’ is taken as a self-evident good, the only trouble being the exploitation of surplus-value (cf. Jappe 2005, 80-2, 90-95). Like Baudrillard, I would question an appeal to an underlying, eternal Essence of work, and like Jappe I would say that the idea about ‘concrete’ work is *also* an abstraction:

Einer Menschen des vorkapitalistischen Zeitalters wäre es nie eingefallen, das Umpflügen eines Feldes, eine Musikdarbietung, die Leitung eines Feldzugs, die Entdeckung einer geometrischen Funktion und die Zubereitung eines Essens alle auf dieselbe Seinsbene zu stellen – als menschliche 'arbeit' (2005, 99).

The reader may ask where these remarks about concrete work are headed. After all, have I not been defending my own idea about good work and work as a life situation? For me, it is extremely important that when I have talked this way, these expressions are immersed in people's struggles, fears and hopes. They are thus also immersed in tensions, and cannot be seen as a matter of *reviving* or *resurrecting* a slumbering concept that somehow would do away with these tensions. My point was that the concept of concrete work *glosses over* or, like Jappe shows (even though I disagree with him that *every* concept of work is tied up with the abstractions of commodification) *neutralizes* such tensions.

## 5.7 Work and controversies

Antagonism is inscribed in the very heart of capital, in the commodification of labor, but it does not remain fixed as some kind of essence – it is perpetually displaced, encompassing different technological, political and social relations (Read 2003, 144).

One of the aims of this chapter has been to show the tensions within the transformation of work into labor power. This transformation continuously encounters limits and struggles. The normalization of labor power, its status as a *commodity*, meets with continuous resistance and questioning. In what follows I will provide an example of such tensions. My intention is to illustrate in what way the seemingly self-evident language of labor power is put into question in a specific controversy.

Capitalism is not all-encompassing. Many writers, not only Marxists, call attention to the fact that the scope of commodification (which is a broader concept than ‘the market’) is a field of contestation. Such contestations concern whether a particular thing – human organs, sex, education, etc. – *should* be something to sell and buy, whether they should be commodities (Anderson 1995, Radin 1996, Sandel 2012). Juridical, personal and social contestations of commodification take place practically everywhere. That more and more activities are transformed into labor power, that more and more activities are drawn into the sphere of paid work, is a historical development that reveals the *contingence* of the line between paid and unpaid work. An expanding assortment of daily activities is integrated in a system of commodification. This goes for the food we eat, the hobbies we take pleasure in, the way we move about in the world. In short, daily life consists of an overwhelming network of services and commodities, in the case of many of which we are not even aware of their role in the functioning of everyday life. This expansion of wage labor and commodification obviously has to do with the capitalist system but it is also bound up with new habits, new desires and new expectations.

At this point – because it is central for the framework of my discussion of Marx and the tension between work as labor power and work as a life situation – it should be noted that the abstractions that capitalism presupposes cannot become a *totalizing* truth. It would be impossible to understand Marx without taking into account his conception of the world of capitalism as being shaped by a number of *contradictions*. (What these contradictions are has been a subject of great disagreement within the Marxist literature, cf. Read 2003.) Capitalism encounters new barriers, new forms of resistance, new challenges and it continuously invents new ways of extracting surplus value. Again: Marx speaks on the level of

capital; the particular company and its attempts to profit on work is not his fundamental point of departure, even though he illustrates his conceptual remarks about these contradictions when he shows the historical progression from means of increasing profits by extending the working day, to intensifying work through technical and organizational innovations that make work more productive. The struggles over the working day have an integral place within this development: they created new strategies to make profits and they also created new political questions and alliances (cf. Marx 1990, 645, Read 2003, 95-7, 112). These changes brought with them new forms of struggles, new forms of cooperation and new forms of division of labor. Capitalism is dependent on continuous expansion (more workers, more consumers), but at the same time such endless expansion is impossible. Where are those profitable outlets to be found? This gives rise to incessant contradictions and tensions within a flexible capitalism that tries to adapt to new situations and surroundings. This has immense implications for how wage labor is structured globally: the movement of capital reveals strategies of extracting surplus value (cf. Harvey 2011).<sup>76</sup> To conclude this chapter, I will reflect on an example of one such expansion of commodification, and how it has met with critique and contestation.

In 2006, a Swedish tax deduction was introduced for domestic service work. The ambition with the tax deduction called RUT (a similar tax reduction for repair work had also been introduced) was to boost employment. It was argued that this would be beneficial for gender equality and that it would

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<sup>76</sup> One important aspect of the understanding of crisis developed by Marx starts from the idea that capitalism is constantly trying to get rid of the source of value, labor time; technology has increased productivity and labor time is reduced (cf. Marx 1973, 706).

provide unemployed people with opportunities to enter into the labor market. It would also free time for the buyers so that they can work more, which would be beneficial for society in general, etc. The tax deduction was furthermore said to be a means to combat widespread undeclared work. Critics of the initiative argue that it strengthens an existing class society and that it legitimizes the existence of a class of servants. The connection with increasing gender equality has also been questioned by critics (cf. Bohlin 2011, Nyberg 2014). Gavana & Calleman write that those doing the work are mostly immigrant women, few of whom are unionized. They also note that many of the customers using RUT are old people and that the limit between private cleaning services and services provided by the state are rather fluid (2013). What is striking in this debate is how the defenders of the tax deduction in question frequently bring up employment and job creation as an argument, while many critics challenge this approach by looking at the circumstances that are overlooked when employment is taken to be the most important goal: the critics discuss class society, racialized work and that housework formerly performed by women is now transformed into a commercialized form of women's work. This debate shows that the expansion of commodification is not a neutral process. Instead, the debate forces us to look at the *conflicts* that arise when *seemingly* self-evident aspects of work are emphasized: 'cleaning is a job and everybody needs a job'. Consequently, we are forced to take a stand on what it means that something is 'work', as this is precisely what the debaters disagree about.

One such critic is André Gorz, who encourages us to ask onto whom the domestic service work is loaded, under what conditions it is done and how much these workers are paid. He argues that these jobs indicate a growing social division of labor. Some are overworked, while others have difficulties finding a job. The latter situation compels people to accept any

job they are offered, the result being a class of exchangeable, flexible workers, workers that should be 'at hand' (1989, 154-5). The debate in Sweden revolves around whether the cleaners should be seen as wage-earning individuals engaged in a perfectly legitimate trade or whether this phenomenon should be analyzed as revealing something about our society and its divisions. The disagreement is precisely which sides of work should be stressed and whether referring to employment and jobs should have the role of conclusive argument. Is work a neutral service that willing, skillful and able people, *professionals*, provide; a good opportunity for employment, or is this job yet another example of an expanding class society? Depending on whether the cleaners are seen as professionals who have chosen their jobs, or as Gorz would have it, that they are seen as people who are reduced to servants, very different political implications emerge. If they are professionals – entrepreneurs – then the way forward seems to be to open up the market for these services as widely as possible. Here, it can in fact be misleading to talk about 'aspects' of work, as this easily evokes the idea that aspects are complimentary and that the most important thing is not to emphasize one aspect one-sidedly. The political and moral implications of the descriptions 'servant' and 'entrepreneur' show that one should rather talk about *conflicts*. The two descriptions 'servant' and 'entrepreneur' give rise to two very different accounts of what is meant by work, and my point is that this is no mere linguistic disagreement, but rather a disagreement about what is seen as relevant to focus on.

The life situation of accepting a job, working shifts that disrupt the rhythm of everyday life or working a low-wage job that barely pays the living expenses *is not apparent* if the perspective is that of nation-wide job creation and the securing of employment for the individual. This is one example of what Marx, on a structural level, talked about as

the conditions of capitalism being effaced. Above, I have been talking about 'a normalization' of work: commodification of a certain activity is legitimized and strengthened. When work is discussed from the perspective of labor power it seems as if the *customer* 'offers a service', 'helps' the cleaner in paying for the job. All forms of wage labor, regardless of its content and the meaning of doing it day in and day out, are then seen under the aspect of 'a service' to the person who is employed. The tax reduction for domestic service work is consequently defended by arguing that these jobs offer opportunities for migrants in Sweden (cf. Bohlin 2011). Marx ironically gives voice to a similar argument about the thrifty capitalist who is 'generous enough' to make the means of production s/he has accumulated throughout the years available and useful to the worker. The worker should be grateful for this generosity (1990, 299).

The defenders of the tax deduction appeal to what they perceive as fair exchange. *Everyone* benefits from the tax deduction. Families with a packed schedule receive some well-deserved and needed assistance, elderly people are helped out while the cleaners get what *they* need and want: a job (that might lead to other jobs later on), an income.<sup>77</sup> An employment gives a person rights and an income. What can be asked is, once again, what one catches sight of from this perspective. As I said, from a certain point of view, 'having a job' seems to be a description that trumps all other descriptions. Marx's method, looking at several levels of description, is relevant here. If the debate is restricted to a discussion about incomes and the service provided to the paying customer, structural aspects of work and commodification and how they are linked to what I called the life situations of accepting a job are not seen. And when they

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<sup>77</sup> Cf. [http://www.svensktnaringsliv.se/fragor/rot\\_rut/](http://www.svensktnaringsliv.se/fragor/rot_rut/)

are not seen, these things are not appreciated as *problems to be dealt with*. Instead, work, consumption and labor markets are treated as *isolated elements*. As we saw, Marx's critique was directed at such isolation (which is a real abstraction and an ideological mystification). His approach helps us navigate in the type of terrain that has been sketched here.

This isolation of elements can also be seen in how the critics of the tax deduction bring out the historical dimension of cleaning at another person's home. Of course, this job was not invented when the tax deduction was implemented. The critics point out a historical connection forgotten or repressed when the cleaners are described as professionals or entrepreneurs – this is the history of servants, maids (in Swedish, the debate is often called 'pigdebatten'). The role of this historical dimension is not given: a question within the debate has been what relevance historical changes or a historical continuity, a reappearance of the maid, has, and what bearing that has for how work is conceptualized. If the job is described as a historical continuation of the maid, then this challenges the image of work as a free choice.

The cleaner in a private person's home works a very different job from a person cleaning in a school where the cleaner is in the best case recognized as a member of the staff. In this case, a person's home becomes the workplace of another. The home-cleaner cleans whenever s/he is ordered to, s/he cleans whatever s/he is told to clean, and the company often specifies how the procedure is to be carried out, what tools to use and how to save time. The customers and even the cleaners themselves might find it tempting, consoling, or safe, to relate to the activity as 'just another job' – a commercial service with a strictly defined content. Another possibility is that relations are intimate in a way that makes the aspect of *business* invisible in a problematic way: as many feminists (cf. Ehrenreich 2003, Precarias a la deriva, 2009) have pointed out,



professional cleaning and care work can prolong but also displace traditional ideas about housework and gender. The ideal of women as natural care-givers or home-makers tends to appear in a way that displaces the commodified dimension of the job – make it inconspicuous. This is not to say that *all* home cleaners are oppressed or that intimacy is *always* problematic when it exists within a job.

In order to understand the tension between work as labor power and work as a life situation we must take into account more than one level of description. A significant aspect that shapes the problematic at hand is how work can be understood *ethically*. Russell Muirhead writes that work contracts can – and as I would suggest, *should* – be judged from a point of view of the circumstances under which the person accepts the job. The formal right to quit the job is not the *final* level of discussion. His view is that the discussion about work and consent cannot be raised as such, without context – it must be related to the meaning of the specific job. That somebody is doing a specific job ‘out of desperation’ (his expression) is something we say also depending on what *kind* of job it is. Like Simone Weil (4.6) he opens up for a moral perspective on what consent means when it is *not* understood as a *formal* concept, as the consent that every work contract as such expresses (2003, 75-8). Muirhead’s approach is fruitful because on the one hand it rejects a normalization of work (all employment is good) but it also anchors a discussion about employment in moral questions about what work *is* and what relations it creates between people. As I said in the previous chapter: if the question of degradation of work is not dodged, this also opens up the question about what good work is. What would it mean to say that commercial cleaning in private people’s home is good work?

The answer will, again, depend on what we take the job – the activity, the life situation – to be. The debate in Sweden has

circled around how the cleaner's job is described. Is cleaning in itself demeaning? Do those who criticize the tax deduction think that cleaning is a demeaning job? Couldn't we say that also a professional home cleaner has a sense of professional pride? Symptomatically, the meaning of the concrete, the specific task, to clean a dirty space, seems like a self-evident way of replying that takes one away from the commercial dimension. The idea is then that people need to drop their negative perception of the job (and perhaps negative attitudes towards 'women's work'): cleaning should not be looked down on: it is a job as good as any. One may respond that attitudes may play a part, but focusing on attitudes in isolation from the context is to look away from the present reality of the job and relations it involves. One would thus argue – like Marx also often does – that *concreteness can be just as misleading* as a language of supply and demand on the labor market. In other words: also the concrete may function as a way to treat an activity as an isolated element that obscures the process of commodification at play. To express it in Marx's dialectical terms: the concrete, 'to clean a dirty space', can turn abstract if it is disengaged from the real circumstances of the job. If the consequences is that the economic (low wages), social (low status, gender roles, race) and historical (the maid) dimensions are ignored, one could even talk about the concrete as a distortion. It is in this type of example that resorting to concreteness may be tempting.

This shows the difficulty of formulating a *fixed* contrast to the role work has when it is an economic asset. I would instead say that the meaning of 'work as life situation' unfolds *within* these kinds of debates, in which people talk about the stakes of getting a job, the importance of a living wage or what it is like to do this particular job, day in and day out. A Marxist analysis of the concept of the commodity may, not on the face of it, have much to say about this kind of open-ended

concept of a life situation, but I think a clear-sighted understanding of what I have called real abstractions can help one formulate an existential question against the background of structures: what does it mean to understand oneself as labor power? What does it mean that others are treated as labor power? What would it mean to resist being treated as a commodity?

The home cleaner example is interesting because of the controversy that already exists. I wanted to show what happens when the meaning and the purpose of a job is *re-opened*. As we saw, a notorious problem with work is: what *purpose* does it serve? This question will be radically different if it is asked from the point of view of value creation (labor power and employment) or whether we talk about what kinds of needs commercialized cleaning responds to and what type of relations the job involves and what it means for specific people to support themselves in this way. In this controversy both the perspective of labor power and the perspective of work as a life situation appear: on one level, the debate has been about what an insightful description of work amounts to. When cleaning is understood as 'a service' the question arises whether 'service' is reduced to a job on the market or whether the encounter between real people and their feelings of gratitude, humiliation, detachment or tactfulness is emphasized. An abstraction of work into labor power gives the appearance of all substantial questions about work being settled: labor power appears as an isolated element, an individual contract. In this way, abstractions are *misleading*. The challenge is, as I see it, to navigate between the view that abstractions *distort*, and that they are also *real* abstractions, that work *becomes* an isolated element.

## 5.8 Concluding words

In this chapter I wanted to show that political and existential tensions accrue to the seemingly neutral and normal role work has as labor power, an economic resource. By means of a discussion of Marx's concept of abstract labor I argued that work is detached from content both rhetorically and in practice. I talked about the transmutation of work into abstract labor: work is inserted into relations of commodification. Work as labor power is the capacity to work. I argued that the problem is not abstractions in themselves, but rather the asymmetric relations maintained through these abstractions – and how an appearance of equality and symmetric relations, as I illustrated with the home cleaning example, evolves when a certain level of description is seen as the self-evident one. I talked about a tension between work as labor power and work as a life situation and how a normalization and neutralization of work makes this tension inconspicuous. This tension does not concern a specific form of work but, rather, it potentially affects all forms of wage labor. I argued that struggles and controversies exist *side by side* with normalization and naturalization of work as a commodity. Ultimately, looking at these tensions between work as a commodity and work as a life situation can function as a critical tool against a depoliticization of work that makes power relations and the changes commodification give rise to inconspicuous. In the introduction I talked about using tension as a *lever*. The concluding discussion about the RUT tax deduction could be an example of the role that articulating and spelling out tensions can have.

If work is rendered as a capacity useful only as far as it is a commodity on the labor market there seems to be no room for talking about degradation – critical inquiry is undermined when work is understood only as labor power. Two points were made about possible misunderstandings of my argument. (I) When I talked about abstractions of work that

make other circumstances inconspicuous, my intention was *not* to paint a simple contrast between abstract labor and something else, Real Work or Concrete Work. (II) With Marx, I wanted to stress that these questions cannot simply be solved by means of ideology critique – work *is* a commodity, even though it is a very peculiar commodity and even though its being a commodity is surrounded by tensions. One of my aims was to emphasize the need *to keep these tensions alive*: reminding oneself of the different dimensions of work may reduce the temptation to define work as an eternal essence or a mere mirror of capitalist structures. However, there is also a *destructive* side of the tensions that appear in people's relation to work. In the next chapter, I will say more about this and the socio-economic and existential surroundings of such destructive tensions.

# Chapter 6: Work and the fear of obsolescence

If we fail to perceive the points of identity between labor practices and modes of life, we will comprehend nothing of the changes taking place in present-day production and misunderstand a great deal about the forms of contemporary culture (Virno 1996, 13).

## 6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I pondered on the commodifying transformation of work into labor power. I applied Marx's concept of abstract labor to an exploration of the neutralization work goes through when it is treated and conceptualized as labor power, and I attempted to explain why the commodification of work inevitably leads to tensions. In this chapter, the existential tensions I discuss concern how employees (or the unemployed) understand themselves in relation to work. Even though Marxist approaches to work have many merits, I here attend to aspects that aren't usually taken into account from that perspective. I look at the connection between wage labor and existential fears and anxieties; one of the points I want to make is that tensions in the roles of work in our lives come to the fore when such fears are highlighted.

In the first part of the chapter, I discuss the sociologist Richard Sennett's writings on flexible work and fragmentation. I critically explore some of the concepts central in his thinking: control, intelligibility and indifference. I take this discussion about fragmentation and work into another direction by reflecting on what it means to feel that one has become obsolescent, that one's work is no longer needed.

Drawing on Sennett, I try to articulate how such feelings show how the abstraction of work into labor power *also* expresses what could be called a form of existential disorientation: Sennett describes people's difficulties with understanding their own work and even their own lives. This discussion opens up for the issues dealt with in the second section of the text in which I continue the investigation about work and self-understanding. I reflect on how the fear of obsolescence could be conceptualized: it seems misleading to talk about *illusions*, as this fear seems to be made possible by or even seems to be *built into* the world of work. The existential disorientation that I am here at pains to articulate makes the relation between work and reality re-surface. In the course of ordinary life, we often talk about our relations to work in the language of reality, realism and maturity. Such talk takes place against the background of concerns, worries and commitment. I concur with Sennett's description of how certain attitudes to work are built into a system of fragmented and flexible work, yet there is still room to say that these attitudes reflect worries about one's place in the world: these worries make the question about what is to be taken as *real* in the world of work an acute concern. I conclude the chapter with an example from the novel *Revolutionary Road* (1961), written by Richard Yates. By means of that example, I further reflect on and tie together the main themes of this chapter: work, self-understanding and conflicting concepts of work and reality.

## **I Work and fear of obsolescence**

### **6.2 Sennett on fragmentation**

A common characterization of the contemporary world of work is that it induces not a sense of knowing one's way about in the world, but rather a feeling of fear and disorientation: it

is a fast-moving and complex context in which the decisions and actions of a single human being are entangled with mazes of structures, institutions and strategic thinking. As I warned in chapter 2, it is tempting to tread carelessly here by jumping to generalized conclusions about what this means. Nonetheless, most of us can easily recognize the fear of one's skills becoming superfluous: one loses one's job, and one starts to think about oneself as a person who has failed to offer what the labor market needs. In the following sections, I will critically evaluate Richard Sennett's arguments about work and fragmentation.

In his famous book about work in late capitalism, *The Corrosion of Character* (1998), Sennett argues that the concept of work undergoes a change in flexible capitalism, a concept loosely associated with a development from the eighties onwards.<sup>78</sup> Time, decentralization and flexibility are placed at the center in his interpretation of the new capitalism (as he calls it in a later book). His main argument, here and elsewhere, is that employees (and entrepreneurs, etc.) are forced to create an individualized (privatized even) temporary space in a fragmented and confusing world. Instead of occupying the same job for thirty years, instead of having a clear-cut career path, people now do 'lumps' and 'pieces' of work (he derives the word 'lump' from what is allegedly an

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<sup>78</sup> Something I cannot do here is to criticize the *historical accuracy* of Sennett's presentation. Historians of labor have pointed out that the period of stable and secure jobs was very short and even then, 'standard employment' was far from all-encompassing, even in the wealthier parts of the world. A general bias in the history of labor, according to some, has been a one-dimensional focus on wealthy countries and a certain type of worker (male, occupied in traditional branches like the docks or the mines) (cf. Linden 2008). Sennett's perspective can be charged with both these problems. My philosophical approach to his view starts from the idea that even though his analysis may be historically or sociologically flawed, his conceptual analysis may still be illuminating.



old use of the word job: a lump that could be carted around). Workers are encouraged to take risks and to think in short terms (1998, 9). In another book, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, he develops a view that can be encountered in a number of books on work and organizations: work, or what is considered to be *ideal* work, no longer takes place in bureaucratic pyramid-like organizations; to an increasing extent, work is done in fluid networks within flexible organizations where employees are discarded or added in accordance with the needs of the immediate future. Sennett depicts a period where money is restless and organizations change quickly: stability becomes a weakness, a sign of rigidity (Sennett 2006, 41, 48, 78). He stresses that this trend does *not* apply to all kinds of contemporary work, but the important thing to note is, he says, that some images of work become *ideals* (2006, 12). Rather than trying to chart specific statistically verifiable trends, Sennett can be said to talk about how people experience work. As Dale Tweedie writes, he can be interpreted as revealing tensions in how people talk about their lives (cf. Tweedie 2013, 98). In this reading, Sennett extracts the implications of flexibility and short-term thinking becoming ideals and means of legitimization of political policies.

So what's the trouble here? Should the fact that more and more job contracts are temporary, rather than for life, be lamented? Sennett delivers no easy answer. He sets out to show the existential malaise of short-term work, and he tries to show the consequence of (what he sees as) significant changes in how we experience the world of work for how we understand ourselves. His sound observation is that short-term work is not only a surface phenomenon but also something that shapes the fears and hopes connected with working. As jobs are no longer meaningful units (as we will see, he seems to subscribe to the idea that jobs once existed as

meaningful units), commitment remains short term. Like the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, Sennett characterizes the new capitalism with the word *fluidity*, a state characterized by flexibility and lack of solidarity and communality. In his book *Liquid Modernity* Bauman argues that work has become self-enclosed episodes and I think he makes an interesting point when he sums up one discourse in which work is depicted as strategic movements within a *game*. Bauman shows that this makes it harder to speak about the purposes work serves and makes the idea of work as epitomizing the way the world is rationally ordered (increasing wealth and minimizing misery) less tenable. In other words: according to Bauman (and Sennett) work can no longer function as 'a secure axis' (2000, 137-9). Mostly, Bauman's arguments are very similar to Sennett's: an increasing individualization of work, stemming from changes in the relation between capital and labor, labor markets and the logic that govern production of things and services, has taken place and this affects how we think about work. He perceives this individualization to go hand in hand with a general hopelessness with regard to agency (Bauman 2000, 133, 138-51). Throughout this chapter, I will evaluate what Sennett has to say about such helplessness. My critical questions concern whether he manages to shed light on what is truly destructive about what he sees as a fragmentation of work.

### **6.3 What is good work?**

Sennett argues that the new capitalism creates its own modes of meaninglessness that haunt most people, a form of meaninglessness different from the deadening boredom of the factory: the fear of being thrown out of the loop, of being made redundant and replaced by a machine or a worker abroad, or the fear of becoming old (2006, chapter 2). One of

Sennett's interesting claim is that evaluating what doing a good job amounts to becomes harder in the new organization of work: other things seem to matter. He contends that it has become increasingly hard to pin down what a good performance is. A woman working in an advertising agency tells him that "there were no objective measures which applied to doing a good job" (1998, 79). In several of his writings, this is contrasted with crafts and a desire to do a job well, which he sees as a combination of skills and judgment. In *Corrosion of Character* he writes about the interviews he made in the seventies with employees working in a bakery, which he revisits in the late nineties. The bakery of the 70's is characterized as a smelly and noisy place. The bakers used their hands and noses to check when the products were ready, skills that took some years to refine. Even though the bakers claimed that they did not enjoy the work, and Sennett believed them, still, their work was characterized by a sense of honor, connected with a form of ethnic pride: doing well at work corresponded with what it was like to be a good Greek. He notes that the bakery in the old days was not paradise. The bakers often threw up because of the heat, the security of the union could also include a system of corruption and the ethnic pride implied that some other people were despised.<sup>79</sup> Nowadays, the place is owned by a conglomerate and the personnel is of a transitory kind; few people work there more than a few years. The bakery is clinical and work is done in a flexible way, so that one day they make bagels, the next day French bread, the entire process being smooth and automated. The only contact the workers now have with the bread is a computer screen (1998, 65-70). The job no longer requires the skills to bake bread. Sennett speaks about a fragmentation of

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<sup>79</sup> He does not problematize this 'ethnic pride' in *The Corrosion of Character*. He says a little bit more about these things in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*.

work that makes the work surrounding less intelligible than before. "The work is no longer legible to them, in the sense of understanding what they are doing." (1998, 68) As he writes: the job no longer requires that they know how to bake bread. The computer system often breaks down, and somebody else fixes it; if it breaks down, the bakers do not possess the skills to intervene and control the process manually. There are plenty of waste products as a result of such mishaps. Interestingly, Sennett notices that these contemporary workers feel personally *demeaned* by their work even though the technical surrounding is smooth. He adds that this feeling is not understood by the bakers themselves (*ibid.*).

His intention is *not* to romanticize lost craft. Later on, he dedicated an entire book to crafts, where different aspects of work as craft were scrutinized. What he rather seems to point at is that the seemingly smooth and automated process is revealed for what it is when it breaks down and is interrupted: the bakers are rendered helpless and their jobs are reduced to supervising a predestined process they have little insight into. Their own range of action and intervention has been minimized. As we saw in chapter 2, many work critics (starting from Arendt, continuing with Gorz and Marcuse) have critically evaluated the meaning of work when it is reduced to maintenance of a process. Sennett explains that the workers' demeanor is not characterized by anger or visible alienation. They are *indifferent*. Over and over again, they told Sennett: 'I'm not really a baker' – they experienced the job as mindless tasks, pushing buttons. There was no attachment to the specific occupation, baking. Nonetheless, when asked about what they consider important in their work, their reply was: being a good worker. Work was still seen as important, but Sennett found it hard to pin down what exactly this amounted to in their present situation (1998, 70-1). It is this difficulty that exemplifies the type of problem that interests

me in this chapter, the difficulty of articulating one's relation or attachment to a job, or to employment.

How should the bakers' indifference be interpreted? Sennett drew the conclusion that the reaction didn't seem clear to the workers themselves. What I find lacking in his otherwise useful account of their situation is a reflection on what it means to say that a worker is unable to articulate his relation to the job. Of course it wouldn't make sense to say that the worker does not provide a sociological account of his job, and that s/he therefore does not 'understand' his own relation to it. Furthermore, I think it is a mistake to think that the *normal* case is that we 'understand ourselves', as if this understanding were something direct and self-evident and as if we were transparent to ourselves.<sup>80</sup> Sennett's promising claim is that the present world of work makes us unable to understand ourselves. Let me try to flesh out what he says, and which questions his analysis leads to.

As we saw, Sennett registers the user-friendliness of the technology in the bakery.

It is, I came to realize, the very user-friendliness of the bakery that may account in part for the confusion the people baking feel about themselves as bakers. In all forms of work, from sculpting to serving meals, people identify with tasks which challenge them, tasks which are difficult. But in this flexible workplace, with its polyglot workers coming and going irregularly, radically different orders coming in each day, the machinery is the only real standard of order, and so has to be easy for anyone, no matter who, to operate (1998, 72).

Elimination of challenge breeds indifference, Sennett argues. This is a good observation. Nevertheless, I would like to point out that it is just as easy to imagine a case where the employees are pleased when new technology has been

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<sup>80</sup> For an excellent account of this, cf. Winch 2002.

brought in that relieves them of some burdensome tasks. The question arises: what is it that matters in the example? An interesting fact that Sennett noted was that the workers were indifferent about their job, but they still cared about getting things done. When a machine broke down, or when electricity suddenly went off, they were frustrated and angry at the system engineers who did not fix a recurring problem. So, as in most places, the indifference expressed by the employees is *not* the whole story, there are other feelings and reactions as well. Sennett does not say that improved technology *must* have this role. I would say (with Marx): everything hangs on the kinds of *relations* machines are embedded in, and the kinds of relations that machines uphold.<sup>81</sup>

Sennett claims that it is hard to imagine anyone caring about their job *if they don't have a sense of what they do*. The illuminating point I think he is making is that some types of work makes *caring* impossible: there is nothing to care about. Work is nothing but execution as it requires very little in terms of trained judgment or context-dependent intervention. The job has been drained of everything that can be meaningful for the worker. This point, as you see, is quite similar to Weil's, even though her context and mode of writing is very different. It is hard to imagine anyone caring about a process that appears opaque, for example, when one is only familiar with the process in a shallow way, being able to operate it so that

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<sup>81</sup> In *Corrosion of Character*, he says nothing about the bakers' relation to technology as a reflection of power relations. One could easily imagine that being helpless due to technology can be interpreted in connection with power – this is for example what Marcuse and Gorz talk about in their writings: machines can become a materialized form of power relation. In his later book *The Craftsman* (2008, 250), Sennett re-visits his example by looking at it from the point of view of the division between experts and people who don't possess the knowledge the experts do, and the resentment that may give rise to. Here, power relations do emerge.

the desirable results are mostly achieved: one pushes, as it were, the right buttons. As he writes: engagement becomes shallow when one has very little understanding for what one does (1998, 74). An important aspect of the example, I think, was this: user-friendliness proved to be a surface phenomenon. In many situations, the bakers were rendered helpless (of course this is true for most gadgets which are easy to use: I have no idea how to fix a mobile phone and it may be hard to hunt down people who can).

I don't think Sennett is wrong when he says that it is important to have 'a sense of what one does' in a job. One should keep in mind that this seems true for work in a wider sense even though the negative contrast, to *lack* a sense of what one does, typically appears in fragmented wage labor. In his essays about forms of life, "Two Landscapes of Northern Norway" and "Remaking a Form of Life", the Norwegian philosopher Jacob Meløe looks at the way humans, active and goal-orientated beings, are able to discern an intelligible surrounding. He criticizes detached and positivistic notions of what a 'world' is. A world is a world only in the sense that objects and environments are something we *interact* with: the world is a dwelling-place, it is not primarily observed with a disinterested gaze. Meløe writes about the landscapes of Northern Norway. The landscape *is* a landscape because it is seen by an active gaze, a gaze shaped by doing. He takes the example of the fishing boat.

A fishing boat, with each of its parts, is an intelligible structure. Its intelligibility lies in the work operations that it is designed to fit or to serve – perhaps in heavy weather. The more you come to learn about what it is to work on board a fishing boat, the more intelligible that structure becomes. And as it gains in intelligibility, it gains in visibility (1988, 389).

Perception is embedded in intelligibility, and intelligibility is intertwined with doing: when I learn how to catch fish in stormy weather, I learn more about what a good boat is. For the fisherman, intelligibility is thus the familiarity s/he has with the boat, the sea and various tools. As Meløe writes: “The fisherman sees what he sees in terms of what he does” (1988, 390). This form of dwelling-in-the-world shows the complexity of agency: the fisherman could not be regarded as an intention-driven subject who acts on raw material. The fisherman responds to the boat, the sea and the wind. “When the boat is under way, the agent is the-boat-with-its-skipper-at-the-helm....” (1988, 391) For the fisherman, the sea is no mere external working material. This shows a level of ‘having a sense of what one is doing’ where intelligibility is connected with a form of life, a web of concerns and care. Meløe’s essays are propelled by a fear that the forms of life in Northern Norway will disappear and this concern also makes it important to express what it means that for example fishing is immersed in a form of life. Talking about what it means to have a sense of what one is doing, talking about intelligibility, is thus no mere observational, descriptive task. It is a matter of acknowledging what role an activity has within a larger context. Or to express the point in other words: to emphasize what it means to have certain skills, to have a sense of what one is doing, is often tantamount to stressing that the activity of which skills form a part is *worth* upholding, fighting for, saving etc.

In other words, Sennett is on to something very interesting when he talks about the damaging effects of no longer having a sense of what one is doing. However, I am skeptical when he writes that the *more* understanding about something one has, the more one cares about it (2006, 105). Much depends on what is meant by ‘understanding’ and I think Sennett doesn’t realize this complexity, even though it is clear that



understanding, for him, is infused with *existential* meaning. We sometimes talk about understanding in ways that makes it synonymous with care. This is a very different language game from descriptions of understanding as technical mastery. As I said above: care is not an all-or-nothing affair. A job may be soul-crushing, and one may feel indifferent about many things, but suddenly find oneself frustrated when a specific step goes wrong and one finds that this will delay the work of one's colleague. New forms of care appear. It is of course clear that this care need not take direct *verbal* form: most often, it is expressed in what people do. Talking about care here also depends on these expressions being *acknowledged* as care (something Sennett does not discuss): as I said in chapter 4, under a certain description of what a job is, it is very hard to take something seriously as forms of genuine care. If a job is described as simple and mechanical, it is hard to imagine anybody caring about it. As I wrote, such descriptions are sometimes offered without an effort to really pay attention to the job, and how the job is described by people doing it, or which attitudes they express in their work. Thus, the helplessness of the bakers is not conspicuous on some levels of description. To repeat my argument from the last chapter: if the bakers are treated as a resource, as flexible labor power, then this aspect will certainly *not* be appreciated. The bakers are then considered as factors in the production process, not as people for whom it is important to do the job well. The significance of people's frustration or disaffection is only understood given that people's existential need to engage with what they do is acknowledged. This is why it makes sense to talk about jobs that have been impoverished or drained of meaning.

For all this, when one reads Sennett, it is sometimes quite difficult to see what kind of remarks he is making. Sometimes it is as if he is invoking a psychological urge: all humans tend

to like to be challenged, and that is simply how we humans are wired. At other times, he seems aware that there is far more at stake in a discussion about impoverished jobs than such a psychological concept of challenge. Again (cf. 4.2) I think it is useful to ponder the multiple ways in which we talk about *meaningfulness*. We talk about meaningfulness to signal that we understand that something has a purpose (rather than it being a random act the intelligibility of which we cannot fathom), but in other cases we take a *stand* when we say that something is meaningful. In these cases meaningfulness and goodness are not clearly separable. As I said, I don't think 'subjective' and 'objective' are exhaustive categories: 'meaningfulness' is immersed in interpersonal quests to make sense of life. Even though our lives cannot be said to be caught up in a constant state of meaning-crisis we cannot control the role such questions have in our lives by saying that in the course of everyday life, we must simply do without such concerns (cf. 3.9).

Sennett attends to the complexity of 'meaning' when he encourages us to think about the example with the bakers as a sort of puzzle: he characterizes the bakers as being indifferent, but still concerned about doing the job well, as being frustrated when the concrete possibility of doing a good job is reduced due to automation, lack of technical insight into the instruments at hand and a division of labor where some employees are reduced to executing a process. To sum up what I have wanted to say above: it seems strange to suppose that people should have a clear-cut relation to their work, that questions about the meaningfulness of their job would be equally clear-cut. It is an open question whether Sennett presupposes that in a good society, work would constitute a stable and intelligible identity – something that, as we saw, Gorz and Weeks warns against dreaming of. After all, for most people, work is a multidimensional affair – feelings,

impressions and thoughts are articulated in relation to specific worries or specific challenges – and this is something Sennett captures rather well in all of his writings:. In addition to this, as I said in chapter 4, when thinking about what makes a job meaningful or meaningless, a job should not be understood as a strictly defined set of tasks: a job is a wide web of relations and situations that we may have a range of different feelings about, all of which may have a bearing on how work is enjoyed, endured or detested.

One of the overarching themes in this thesis is to describe degradation of work. I have been criticizing writers for undermining their own critique by neutralizing or moralizing our relations to work. I think this critique can be applied to Sennett as well. He provides an interesting analysis of an existential predicament, but his concept of fragmentation, along with the contrasting image of intelligibility, are problematic if they are based on the idea that the more we understand about the world, the more we care about it. I would also suggest that if this is a valid interpretation, he can be charged with moralizing work because what he says seems to imply that what is wrong with our society is that work is isolated from relations. Work would be good, were it only to be integrated into an intelligible network of relations. Advertising, baking and computer programming would be good work, were it only to be intelligibly inserted into a network of relations. Work is presented as a natural totality torn apart by the new capitalism. To me, this comes very close to the idea of ‘concrete work’ I criticized in chapter 5: abstract and concrete are placed against each other, and the concrete figures as a promise of relations (as if all relations are *good*) and intelligibility. This idea about intelligibility is the subject of my following remarks. As I will go on to show, Sennett’s approach takes too little account of care as a *fundamental* and *ethical* dimension.

## 6.4 Control, intelligibility and insecurity

Everyday life is defined by contradictions: illusion and truth, power and helplessness, the intersection of the sector man controls and the sector he does not control (Lefebvre 2008, 27).

In *Corrosion of Character*, Sennett looks at how the idea of a coherent career in which the individual forms himself, and in which work forms a narrative rather than unrelated fragments or episodes, is a symptom of the present world of fragile job markets. A career, Sennett writes, enables us to define what we are and it also provides us with a sense of mastery and responsibility (cf. 1998, 120-1). He also makes a further point: the coherent character is no longer a meaningful alternative within the new capitalism. I take him to say that what is missing from the present world of work is a sense of *personal authorship* connected with long-term commitment and loyalty.<sup>82</sup> To this perspective he adds a point that was already hinted at above: he ties control to intelligibility. Work no longer makes up the basis of stable and intelligible life-stories. Intelligibility is expressed in the form of *narratives*; coherent, intelligible narratives that can set one straight about one's life. One needs an anchor, something that holds life together (1998, 26, 30, 2006; 183-4). In several books, Sennett seems tempted by the image of work holding life *together*, making life *intelligible*. In *The Craftsman*, he writes about 'linear stories', for example so that one builds one's life on learning how to do one specific thing well. Life in this sense is more than a series of random events: Sennett emphasizes training, deepening of knowledge and habits that evolve throughout the years as

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<sup>82</sup> In other books this connection is not so clear. In *The Craftsman*, Sennett describes a certain attitude to crafts as tolerating and even accepting temporary lack of control – due to the need to experiment and to renew techniques. Lack of control then means a necessary element of not knowing exactly how things will turn out (2008, 113-4).

features of an integration of work in a life (cf. 2008, 265-7). He contends that work in the new capitalism splits up a person's life into fragments with the result that the person has a hard time understanding his place in the world. His main aspiration is to show what happens to people – existentially speaking – when the need for sustaining life narratives is not fulfilled.

Work in the days of Fordism (mass production and mass consumption) may have been hard and soul-crushingly boring, but at least it provided workers with a solid identity and a feeling that they were in charge of their lives in the sense that they could plan ahead (cf. Sennett 2006, 23). This is Sennett's overarching point. Bauman writes: "Work can no longer offer the secure axis around which to wrap and fix self-definitions, identities and life-projects" (Bauman 2000, 139). The refrain of my chapter is that it is hard to spell out what truly *matters* in Sennett's account. I interpreted his primary target to be a change that concerns ideals, a change in how people think about their lives and their jobs. I will repeat the question that I addressed to Weeks in chapter 4: given that one describes certain ideals pertaining to work, how are these ideals (solidarity, security, predictability, loyalty) to be understood, in what *sense* did people have them? In what sense can predictability be said to be an ideal *at all*?

To put it crudely, cannot the ideal of loyalty or predictability also contribute to 'an intelligible world' in a *self-deceptive* way? A self-deceptive longing for intelligibility could perhaps also be discerned in present longings: remarks about 'what works used to be like' often reveal more about the present than the past. The past becomes a projection surface for contemporary longings.<sup>83</sup> In Sennett's texts, descriptions of

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<sup>83</sup> This mournful account of the loss of work often manufactures its own idealization of the Worker. Strangleman writes that it is typical that the 'real

a bygone era of secure jobs appear as contrasts to fragmented work. One should be careful about what one takes such images of past work to *say*. As Tim Strangleman writes:

If we cast our net more widely than simply social theory this concern could be interpreted as the nostalgia for permanence, the search for stability in work, the sense in which permanence is 'good' and that modernity has somehow disrupted an equilibrium that should ideally be restored. [...] The stability and ordered predictability of 'traditional' labour is juxtaposed to the rootless impermanence of 'modern' employment (2007, 88).

An even more troubling issue that I am not sure what *moral* lesson to draw from is the idea that the new world of work no longer provides people with solid identities. The eulogy for long-term work easily tips over into nostalgia (even though Sennett reminds himself that he wouldn't like to restore work as it was in the old days). It is unclear how the *merit* of 'work as a coherent life narrative' should be viewed.

As we saw in 3.3-4, Sennett also has some understanding of the fragility concepts such as dignity and respect are fraught with. 'Real work' and 'dignified labor' are contested concepts. As we saw in that chapter, the image of 'the good worker' is

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proletarian' is discovered just as they are to become obsolete (2007, 91). Gorz, a writer who would not agree with Sennett about the centrality of work, criticizes the idea of past work infused with meaning: "Even in the heyday of wage-based society, work was never a source of 'social cohesion' or integration, whatever we might have come to believe from its retrospective idealization. The 'social bond' it established between people was abstract and weak, though it did, admittedly, insert people into the process of social labor, into social relations of production, as functionally specialized cogs in the machinery." (Gorz 1999, 55) Other writers attack Sennett directly for making the connection between work and character in a way that is at the same time inconclusive and nostalgic (Shershow 2005, 47-9). Many writers have set out to show that the idea of work as solid identities is an *idealization*. Skeggs (1997), among others, argues that the image of the coherent life story is an image that resonates with the middle class, male life.

often linked to the ideal of social cohesion in a way that hides class differences. In these ways, he detects a considerably more complex side of work as a source of identity. Those portrayals of work do not evoke the idea that there was once a coherent work identity that made people's lives intelligible in an empowering way. In other writings, however, Sennett assumes that work *can* be considered as a potentially solid aspect of human life, a fundamental part of an intelligible life story. I would say that this reveals a tension about identity, work and society within Sennett's own ideas. But what about the ideal about intelligibility, character and control?

This idea of life as an organic whole or a coherent narrative has a long history within the literature on work. The fragmentation of work is often paralleled with a fragmentation of man – as we saw in chapter 2, this point is made as early as in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, and the young Marx picks up the thread when he writes about the separation between the worker and work when labor power is surrendered to the employer. One classic example of the ideal of a non-fragmented whole is the formulations in *The German Ideology* where Marx talks about the communist life in which all occupations have ceased to exist and in which life is not fragmented into specific occupations. In the quote below, division of labor is evaluated as a restriction on the multi-dimensional human being:

For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, or a shepherd or a critical critic, and must remain so if he is not to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the

morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic (Marx & Engels 1972, 53).

The ideal of a total human being can be traced to several traditions: the Hegelian tradition in which Marx partially appears is one example where unity and fragmentation are central elements in accounts of human development and the relation between individuality and the social (cf. Schacht 1970, chapter 2). It is important to keep this long tradition in mind when reading Sennett, even though his ideal is in one sense not at all similar to Marx's. Sennett *idealizes* occupations. None the less, his thinking can be situated within a tradition that celebrates the *unbroken life*.

What is also interesting is that Sennett's ideal of control is strongly present in at least some strands of Marxist thinking. A central Marxist tenet is the idea that freedom consists in power, a progressive, dialectical and more and more conscious power over nature (Lefebvre 2008, 171-2). In the same way, a very common notion of alienation is that the worker surrenders his control over the product of his labor to the capitalist. As s/he sells his labor power, s/he has given up the control over labor, Marx argues: the worker is dominated by an alien power. The idea that once the means of production are owned and controlled by the workers the most significant change has taken place can also be traced in Marx's writings, even though other things he says are not easily squared with that hope. The idea is that alienation is overcome when the means of production have finally been brought under collective control (cf. Sayers 2011, 92; 99-100; Schacht 1970, 83, 85). At least as it is often phrased, this idea seems to imply an ideal of rationality. The means of production are to be controlled rationally. The primary concern is control, rather than what production should be *for*: "The associated



producers must [...] govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power" (1991, 959). As we saw in chapter 2, Gorz and Marcuse were both critical of this image even though neither succeeded in distancing themselves from it. This tenet of Marxism, a celebration of control *in itself*, is troubling, if understandable: Marx seeks to formulate an alternative to the dispossession of the worker (that wage labor is the only alternative) in capitalism.

Even though Sennett is no Marxist, he also evokes the idea of control as a central element of human life and work. What I am critical of is the tendency I find in Sennett to treat control as a general ideal or as in some sections in Marx, as a goal for the society at large. However, I have no problem understanding people talking about the lack of control in relation to for example changes in the job: 'powerlessness' may mean that people are now unable to do what they perceive to be a good job. Such examples are common when talking about skills. In his books, Sennett insists that skills and crafts have their home also today, not only in 'traditional' societies, but a vast array of organizational, ideological and economic doctrines and practices threaten these skills: co-operation is exchanged for competition and there is less organizational stability to back up important skills. One of the insights to be commended in Sennett's writings is the reminder that it takes time to develop skills. As we saw above, it is important for him (as it is for Gaita) that skills, a very different concept than talent, can *deepen* (cf. Sennett 2008, 38-9). In his book *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, Sennett argues that in many modern organizations, professional knowledge in its robust forms of people insisting on doing things the right way is treated as more or less hazardous because such commitment threatens the ideology of the flexible and

innovative organization. The fact that it takes many years for knowledge and skills to deepen is not acknowledged. This can be a diagnostic remark about a destructive trend, but Sennett also emphasizes it as an existential point about what it means to learn to do a job well or what it means that a structural development in the system of work deters such deepening. Young people are seen as replaceable, and easy to deal with: older workers have developed an idea about how things are to be done, what a good procedure would be, new methods are compared with methods used in the past etc. Sennett constructs a bleak image of work when he says that in some firms, virtue means that the employee easily surrenders to *a new reality* (2006, 98). Commitment to a job and how it is to be done well are easily seen as a threat to the slimmed-down organization (this erosion of commitment of course stands in contrast to the elevation of work as endless commitment and self-realization). In this type of organization, dedication to the meaning of the job (in its *existential*, not its *contractual* sense) will look like a *hang-up*. Even though the book was written in 2006, Sennett draws the same conclusion as Braverman (cf. 2.5, 5.4) did in the seventies: the degradation of skills generates *powerlessness*: professional judgment is disregarded.

I would suggest that control becomes a suspect ideal when it is disconnected from other things that are considered desirable. Most of the time, Sennett connects control with the importance of understanding what one is doing, for example, technology and work instruments becoming smoothly user-friendly but the process often breaking down so that the workers are rendered helpless. He is on the right track when the bakers' indifference to their jobs is shown to be linked to the lack of control. However, I would argue that this makes sense only to the extent we can imagine that somebody, in his own way, *cares* about the job. As I said above, care is no clear-cut affair; people disagree about what is worth caring about

and which aspects of a job are worth caring about. As I also wrote, these disagreements show that care is an ethical and existential (rather than merely psychological) concern.

Without care, a concern about control would be unintelligible, or dubious.<sup>84</sup> When control in itself is emphasized, it tends to become destructive. One can imagine cases where control becomes an obsession, a yearning for perfection perhaps, that has no grounding in what matters in the job. Achieving the perfect result becomes a goal in itself, regardless of its meaning (cf. Sennett 2008, 254-7).

There are cases that clearly illustrate that people make different sorts of judgments about control. The computerized tool called CAD, a computer program with which the user (architects for example) designs graphic interactive representations of models, has been evaluated very differently in the literature on work. While Sennett praises its practical merits in *Craftsman* – the CAD program instantaneously lets architects look at a site or a model from many angles – he also asserts that there is a risk attested to by people in the relevant field that the program is automatically regarded as superior to manual drawing and thinking. The risk he describes is that the program impedes the architect's judgments about texture and real buildings. The simulations easily live a life of their own that trumps the complexity of reality: heat, noise etc. His reasons for articulating this risk are similar to what he says about the bakers above: the architects may lose a sense of what they are doing in switching from step-by-step and trial and error learning, to leaning on models produced by a machine (2008, 39-41).

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<sup>84</sup> Gorz, who as we saw in chapter 2 is at risk of mystifying control, makes a valid point when he writes that humanizing work (making the tasks more flexible or letting the workers feel that they are part of the decision process) is of no value for example if the purpose of the job is shady (1989, 78-80, 83).

A quite different picture of these changes is given in Stanley Aronowitz & William DiFazio's *The Jobless Future*. They take issue with Harry Braverman's concept of deskilling (see chapter 2 & 5) in their description of the introduction of the CAD technology. *Knowledge* has taken the place of skills and this makes it difficult to speak about deskilling in the way Braverman does. The positive aspect of knowledge is that it breaks with the exclusivism of skills (they paint the familiar picture of guilds and the desire to keep skills to a limited circle of people) (2010, 94-5). The authors visited a New York City department of environment protection and transit authority in the 80's, at a point when the CAD program was still new. Standard tasks take less time when the program is used. The positive side according to some engineers they interviewed is that one's imagination is augmented by the computerized models; the programs make the process of visualization easier, for example. CAD shifted the load of work onto other tasks: in some offices, people were delighted because the job had become less tedious (less manual drawing and math). Other engineers felt that the program was not used to its full potential. The architects disagreed about whether the use of CAD would make mistakes more fatal (2010, 110-3, 119). My conclusion is that this sort of controversy about skills versus knowledge and deskilling will remain, and that they spur ever-new accounts of hierarchy, the labor process and social relations at the workplace. The question often concerns precisely what deskilling means and what good work or a sound organization is. Here, control and care are situated within everyday job situations. The disagreement and risks the authors attend to reveal several aspects of care: caring about the real consequences of the job (not merely a perfect computer model), caring about getting the job done on due time and caring about not making fatal mistakes.

Control should not be described as desirable in itself. There are cases in which a person is fascinated with having power over other people, which can be expressed both as a clinging to rules or to arbitrary decrees. This need not be a personal quest for power: it is easy to think of examples of how such tendencies reflect destructive organizational patterns, destructive management styles or economic precarity. In such organizations, control can be about *preventing* people from doing a good job. In most cases, however, the emphasis on control (also collective control) is related to something being considered to be important, as in the CAD example. When people are annoyed with inefficient procedures swallowing time it is important to stress the difference it makes that people have no influence over the work process in the sense that they wish that these procedures could be eliminated, had they been able to do so. People's commitment to a job stands in relation to the circumstances of the job, organizational aspects and the content of the job. It is in connection with such circumstances – for example shortage of staff that creates a situation in which people must constantly help each other out and come to the rescue – that questions about the extent to which people care about their jobs arise. Such questions easily become *infected*: think about a group of older employees grumbling about their younger colleagues: 'they just don't care...' These are the everyday situations that require ingenious tactics and improvisation in order for things to get done despite the ways in which one has been rendered powerless.

Compare this situation to a case where people see their jobs as so meaningless that they no longer care about inefficiencies. They accomplish what is minimally expected of them. However, subordination or destructive organizational relations does not seem to bother them. They are what we could call *demoralized*: they have given up, or have perhaps

become cynical about their jobs. This is indifference in a more worrying sense than in Sennett's example. There is a difference (which is of course not an absolute one) between being frustrated and being unable to fix things and having stopped caring as a reaction to having been rendered utterly powerless. But, again, it should be remembered that care may emerge in unexpected way among people that *seem* cynical or demoralized. Like Lefebvre I would here say that it is extremely important that powerlessness should not *legitimize* that people stop caring, for example, a cynical attitude (cf. Lefebvre 2008). This dimension is lacking in Kathi Weeks' critique of work (cf. chapter 3): for all her emphasis on hope and the future, she does not realize the hazards of cynicism with regard to the world of work. It is more fruitful, I think, to describe cynicism as the *problem*, as an *expression* of powerlessness. In a recent interview, Roland Paulsen notes that cynicism is often expressed by people who adopt a critical attitude towards their own job, the meaninglessness of which they are clear about:

One can absolutely understand the problem about one's job and the system generally, and can be open about how wrong it all is, but one continues nonetheless. This is very common in our culture: we are very critical, but it is almost as if the critique of society, or the realization that one has seen through the system, becomes a consolation when one is to uphold the system, so that, after all, one can feel that one stands outside of it.<sup>85</sup>

Of course powerlessness can in a certain sense be said to be one thing that leads to this kind of critical cynicism. I would concur with Jennifer Silva: that people develop an attitude of mistrust and cynicism is a symptom of a world of precarious work and a world in which work is connected with

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<sup>85</sup> <http://www.etc.se/inrikes/att-skapa-mer-jobb-ar-en-absurd-tanke>

humiliation and submission. Silva interviews young people who have learned not to expect loyalty, fairness and commitment from the employer – they have hardened themselves, she writes (2013, 95). Here I think Sennett would agree: he also describes a sense of betrayal and bitterness.

To sum up the discussion so far: when people talk about lack of control and powerlessness, one should *not* immediately assume that they then invoke a general ideal of control. This sort of talk is often an expression of exasperation, anxiety: a disconcerting reality is evoked and it need not be clear what an alternative would be (of course people *do* often know what is missing and they can formulate alternatives). Celebrating control as an ideal is dangerous because it evokes either a strange image of human beings (the ultimate aim of everything we do is power) or a one-sided notion of agency as a state of 'being in control'.

Sennett offers many valuable descriptions of fragmentation of work, like the multi-layered example from the bakery. In *The Culture of New Capitalism* he talks about the results of subcontracting and consultant firms commissioned to re-organize a specific organization. People do not really feel accountable for what they do, they are just hired to do a specific amount of work that is not that real to them (2006, 55-7). However, the worry articulated for example through terms like 'corrosion of character' or 'social distance' (Sennett talks about how it is increasingly difficult to feel committed or loyal to the organization anymore, cf. 2006, 60, 64) fails to take issue with the questions I see as fundamental: ethical questions about what kind of people we become as employees and what relations to others we come to have.

Arguably, Sennett's concept of 'character' is linked to an Aristotelian tradition that has paid attention to other aspects of moral life than the prevalent themes in moral philosophy, such as utility and principles (cf. MacIntyre 1981) and has

thereby offered (comparatively) fresh angles on moral agency. A generous characterization of this tradition is that it looks at issues related to the moral process of *becoming*. MacIntyre, for example, writes about his concept of a practice:

So when an institution – a university, say, or a farm, or a hospital – is the bearer of a tradition of practice and practices, its common life will be partly, but in a centrally important way, constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university is and ought to be or what good farming is or what good medicine is. Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict (1981, 206).

One could perhaps say that Sennett employs a thin concept of character. Even though he aptly points out how people are formed by the present system of work – how fears and perception of self are generated by this system – the thinness I am thinking about is displayed for example in how rarely he reflects on what *kind* of meaning work used to have a few generations ago, and what it really means to see loyalty, predictability and intelligibility *as* ideals. Instead, he is content with declaring that work meant much for people's sense of a coherent identity. Within that approach, one does not see relations of tensions. A dichotomy between the solid and security-providing old system of work and the new ideals of flexibility and rapid changes is embraced. The major weakness of *Corrosion of Character* is that its argument leans on a juxtaposition of *flexibility* and *character*. A sound work-based character modeled on the world of work in welfare states after World War II is thus implicitly assumed.

My worry is related to a further issue. Even though Sennett has written several books about work, I never get clear about what according to him is so damaging about fragmented work. He is alarmed by the indifference that the people he interviews express. One reading in line with what I have said above would be that a corrosion of the ability to commit to a



job in combination with a stunted understanding of skills and trained judgment is fatal. Several writers, among them Sennett, have discussed the way the space for an employee's trained judgment is undermined through a division of labor that leads to fragmentation. The question remains on what level this should be discussed and what kind of worry is addressed. In her book *Ethics of an Artificial Person*, the philosopher Elizabeth Wolgast discusses a very fundamental aspect of work: a person acts on behalf of somebody else. This can be read as yet another version of Gorz's worry about autonomy. I rather think she is critically evaluating a train of thought or an attitude that *legitimizes* a sort of moral division of labor in which responsibility is split up among people so that we can intelligibly say that responsibility for what somebody has done can be transported from one person to another. This is an understanding according to which a specific task can be defended by referring to the capacity in which I act, based on my professional position. This is an instance of a job making up, as Sennett said, its own reality. Wolgast outlines a system of acting for another that "encourages moral frustration and agentless deeds" (1992, 34). What happens, she asks, when actions are reduced to functions within a specific role – what happens to moral judgment if work is thought of as *execution* conforming to strictly defined instructions? The possibility of moral critique seems marginal if roles are thought of as unproblematic functions according to which moral responsibility is distributed. Wolgast attacks the idea that morality is situated in a complex system in which we *cannot* have a perspicuous insight into every little detail. This form of *moral division of responsibility* is aggravated in a specific view of institutions as making up functions with their given purposes (1992, 72). She thus addresses a form of alienated activity where the person who acts sees his actions as somebody else's, or sees himself as

a part of a larger system s/he has no insight into or that she does not 'need' to be concerned about. I am aware that these questions are situated in a huge discussion about responsibility, professionalism and organizations. I can by no means enter into that discussion here, but I think, as I said, Wolgast's provocation is crucial to mention as it attends to a key aspect of what I have called the neutralization of work, a neutralization that Sennett does not respond to adequately because his main object of critique is not neutralization, but *de-stabilization*, which leads him to the ideal of stability, predictability, intelligibility and character.

Wolgast's account is clearly related to Sennett's worry about fragmentation, but for her it is not, at least not primarily, the person's *character* that is corroded, that is, our perception of ourselves as people who have a wholesome and intelligible life narrative, but, rather, our entire *moral world* and our capacity to act and take responsibility. Sennett's argument is in danger of ending up as a defense of loyalty and commitment and thereby eschewing more fundamental questions about responsibility and work. A conclusion one is tempted to draw from his perspective is that *all* kinds of tightly knit working communities are good. Hence, I would argue that Wolgast's approach *radicalizes* the question about responsibility. "Thus it appears that moral responsibility can't be so easily passed around, can't be held and transferred like a proxy [...]" (1992, 61). Even though I don't agree with what appears to be Wolgast's general thesis – that acting in the name of another is *always* morally compromised (cf. 1992, 132) – she draws our attention to the troubling situations that occur when a job contains clear instructions of what is to be done and where the moral shadiness of the execution of these instructions is defended by references to the task being 'my job'. The *moral insulation* she talks about is in some cases encouraged by organizations, and this is something that no

codex on corporate ethics can solve. Wolgast's worry about occupations appearing to be isolated spheres in which the meaning and role of responsibility is displaced can apply to lawyers and nurses as well as builders and mechanics.<sup>86</sup>

To sum up: in my reading of Sennett, it is the moral hazard of fragmentation, an isolation of jobs from their moral meaning that is truly worrying. Wolgast's provocative question is what *reality* our actions are immersed in. She opens up for the idea that responsibility is inescapable and that the institutionalization of moral simplification is hazardous on many levels, which does not primarily concern (as in Sennett) control and identity. In the next two sections of the text, I will investigate what it means that our sense of what is real may be skewed by a world of work. In these two sections, I hope to return to some of the central themes of the thesis. Sennett's discussion about fragmentation and fear of obsolescence confronts us with what we consider as truly important in life. The challenge of such discussions is to articulate the fears fragmentation elicits. It is all too easy to discuss these matters from a detached point of view. But what would an alternative way be? The tangle of existential concerns and structural relations resurfaces.

## 6.5 Who needs my work?

In several of his books, Sennett touches on the existential difficulties connected with work. What I have said about control and having a sense of what one does already hints at

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<sup>86</sup> For one attempt to tackle the idea that some actions are justified if they are performed within a professional role, cf. Applbaum 1999. For a literary discussion about moral insulation associated with professionalism, cf. Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day* (1993). Ishiguro's novel brilliantly meditates on the relation between a sense of responsibility tied to a professional role and self-deception and even a sort of annihilation of personal judgment.

this. This is also an undercurrent of what I called critique of work in chapter 2. Even though Gorz's, Marcuse's and Sennett's analyses of the work society are radically different from each other, they express a *common worry* about the role of work in our lives. Gorz and Marcuse focus on the distortions work gives rise to in how we relate to ourselves and our place in society. Marcuse went as far as claiming that work society breeds a form of un-reality, an irrational preoccupation with administration, productivity, progress and, as the other side of the coin, leisure and consumption. Gorz criticized the idea of jobs for jobs' sake and he attacked the division of society in which some work a lot while others remain entirely outside the range of wage labor. The relations of dependency in this type of society are messy and they are often made opaque by ideology. According to Gorz, this division makes it harder to think straight about what kinds of work are necessary. This worry about the role of work for self-understanding is foregrounded by how Sennett tackles the issue of superfluity, 'the specter of uselessness' (cf. 2006, chapter 2). What I say about superfluity leads up to the points about self-understanding later on.

Much of Sennett's critique boils down to the new regime of work having severe deficits in intelligibility. Here, I want to probe into how work (as employment) is related to people's ways of understanding their own lives (which, as I said above, doesn't mean that I agree with Sennett's emphasis on *what* is important for our self-understanding). My example in this section is unemployment. I develop Sennett's reflections about the feeling that one has become superfluous as a worker. In wage labor, my capacity to work becomes a commodity. This was the concept of labor power I unpacked in chapter 5 and as I said there, the practice of wage labor in capitalism presupposes that workers can become obsolete if the labor market no longer 'needs' my capacity to work. I have the job

as long as the company needs me and then I have to look for another. This dependency on the labor market is often made invisible so that one starts to think about work as a *personal achievement*. Sennett is on the same wavelength at the end of *The Corrosion of Character* where he talks about the idealization of independence: we tend to think about our lives in terms of independence and dependence and this affects how we think about society and the state – freedom is freedom from bureaucratic rigidity; freedom means freedom from dependence. A typical feeling when one has become unemployed is thus that one is needy and obsolescent both in one's own eyes and in the eyes of society. An equally typical social reaction to unemployment is shame, awkwardness and silence: in public, one would rather avoid the subject of one's predicament. Sennett says that these are no mere psychological reactions, they are intelligible given certain political and administrative structures – the destruction of welfare nets as one prominent aspect – where suspicion of the 'dependent' stands at the fore. The problematic conceptual nexus is the opposition between dependence, seen as weakness and parasitism, and independence, viewed as initiative and responsibility (1998, 139-40; 2006, 100-1).

A remarkable observation he makes is that people can no longer rely on the skills they have (see above about what existential weight Sennett lends to skills). Having skills might not be enough to keep a job: if cheaper labor power is found elsewhere, or a machine makes the skill superfluous, one's position may be under threat (2006, 84, 86) How does this affect people's self-understanding? A charitable reading of Sennett is that he is not developing a psychological theory about intelligibility, but rather, that the task is to understand the roles work has in our lives. In *The Corrosion of Character*, Sennett mentions a group of former IBM employees who were laid off in the middle of the nineties as the company was

transforming into a flexible, competition-oriented organization. The programmers gather in a café on a regular basis, talking about why the company 'was out to get them' or they declare that the Indians (or someone else) are to blame. It is only after a while that they began talking about the job itself, what it required, what they could have done differently, what they should have done in order to remain in the company. Their attitudes and feelings go through several changes, and according to Sennett the articulation of feelings is one aspect of this change: when he started talking to the group, their discussion conjured up the image of themselves as powerless victims and their anger focused on the bosses. After a while, they turned to analyzing their own behavior, and they started to acknowledge how much their work meant to them, how much they liked it (this, by the way, can be connected with the point I made above about control and care). Sennett points out the intelligibility of the angered reactions, but the direction the anger took (the bosses, the 'Indians') was confused. The feelings of insecurity, however, were shared by many: Sennett notes that people who remained employed felt they lived on borrowed time and that they survived in their position for no good reason – they felt unable to give good reasons for why *they* could keep the position. Good performance didn't seem to be the explanation (1998, 123-9).

The risk, I think, is that the last stage of their self-understanding, the stage of self-analysis, is seen as a general ideal: the men turn from external blame to introspection, from confusion to intelligible life stories. I want to ask: isn't a typical image of failure that the essential or at least manageable problem is in *me*, so that a sharp contrast between external and internal is still upheld? Sennett's conclusion is not necessarily that the last stage of self-scrutiny was ideal. After all, he says that the programmers are *resigned* and

inward-centered. One of his central observations is that the IBM programmers tried to make sense of their failure, rather than burying it in awkward silence or resentful outbursts. This is also the best I can make of Sennett's emphasis on narratives: he recognizes the difficulties along with the constructive changes involved in a shared way of trying to make sense of one's situation. However, I am *not* convinced that narratives as a form, "as a striving for coherence and a solid authorial 'I'" (1998, 134) provide a self-healing cure against the poisonous ambiguity of precarity. Drawing on a recent book by the sociologist Jennifer Silva (2013) whose analysis bears many similarities with Sennett's, I would rather say that the turn to self-help and therapeutic empowerment can be connected with the similar issues as the ones Sennett is concerned with: an age of insecurity and precarity. Silva investigates how feelings of powerlessness are expressed in a language of self-discovery and a longing for creating one's own framework of life as a way of managing precarity. She interprets the young interviewees' wish to create their own narrative as a symptom of *abandonment*. The quest for 'identity' is an expression of a certain societal predicament and her conclusion is that this leads to detachment from the world, a turn towards the inner. I would not be surprised if Sennett would agree with this. My point here was that his way of phrasing the role of narratives is ambiguous.

The example encapsulates a noteworthy tension in what it means that wage labor is 'needed'. The programmers were frustrated to find that good performance isn't necessarily enough to keep one's job. Sennett returns to the question of indifference and intelligibility:

"Who needs me?" is a question of character which suffers a radical challenge in modern capitalism. The system radiates indifference. [...] Lack of responsiveness is a *logical* reaction to the

feeling one is not needed (1998, 146, my emphasis).

Sennett is right when he says that the unclear answer to the question 'who needs me' breeds indifference, or resentment, at least if this means that I start to look at myself as somebody who has to persevere and renew myself on the labor market – or, referring to what I discussed in connection with the IBM example, that the ultimate goal is to find a reassuring life story or a personal sense of meaning. The truly damaging side of this, Sennett argues, is that being treated as a disposable person is connected with a loss of responsibility. This is a point where Sennett's and Wolgast's arguments intersect. Let me spell out the background for this.

On the level of wage labor (as labor power), there is no clear answer to the question 'who needs me?' The question may appear to be perfectly *obvious*: when work is wage labor, the immediate need for my work is *not* primarily the needs of other human beings, but a company or paying customer that needs my hands or my brain power for an hour, two months, two years or twenty years. This is what I meant when I have talked about *abstractions* of work: 'work', in this sense, displaces the necessity of a specific task or the urgency of a specific need. As I said in chapter 5, that a commodity is useful to somebody (in some, extremely open-ended sense of the word) is a mere *condition* of the most important circumstance: that it is in fact sold. The agony in the unemployed person's question of 'who needs my work' indicates *one* tension in what I called work as labor power and work as a life situation. Even though there are many parallel discourses about work and needs, from a *labor power* perspective, the sole determining factor is that the *labor market* buys my capacity to work; all other concepts of need are bracketed. When I step into the unemployment office, *it simply does not matter* that there is, regardless of the labor markets, a



need for more teachers, better healthcare, better housing or road reparations. An example of the paradoxes this engenders are the interventions and programs the state creates to activate unemployed people. What exactly should these people do? One possibility is that the task is *meaningless*, and serves no need at all, remaining a purely formal 'occupation', another is that these programs turn into a way for a company or state organization to get things done with cheap *labor power*.

Obviously, a tension appears here between being needed in the above *abstract* sense – as labor power discarded or welcomed into the labor market – and being needed in sense that an organization (a library, a hospital, railway company) needs a person because of evident staff shortages, due to which some are overworked, or due to which some important tasks are neglected. In the latter case, work is needed *regardless* of what is counted as work on the labor market, *regardless* of the economic relation between supply and demand, and *regardless* of whether any economic gains can be extracted from a person's work. This of course creates extremely tangible tensions in the workplace, conflicts even, which radicalize questions about the meaning of work, need and responsibility: in which sense am I responsible if I am treated as a dispensable person? In what way am I obliged to work long hours and weekends because the company cannot afford more staff? What do I consider important here, loyalty to the company or to do a good job when it's really needed? The question will be very different depending on the kind of job this overworked person has, if s/he is a teacher, a financial analyst, a middle manager for a cleaning company, a bus driver or a cook in a small village school. Neglecting some tasks will have different meanings in the various cases. Two concepts of work clash, and this clash is often surrounded by pressure and fear of losing one's job. It is important to keep this kind of example in mind, the unemployed and perhaps

over-skilled person's exasperated question 'who needs my work?' or the overworked person who ponders on what drives him to work so much, in mind if one found my earlier exploration of the tension between abstractions of work and work as a life situation mystifying.

Similar tensions reappear in the idea that we are all in need of 'occupation' – in an *existential* sense. In this rhetoric 'the need for an occupation' oscillates between a psychological need that all people *in fact* have, often 'backed up' with empirical studies about the correlation between depression and unemployment, and a moral exhortation about what each person *should* feel – if they do not, they should be trained to be included in the work. When work is disconnected from all needs other than the needs of the labor market, 'an occupation' can, with regard to its content, be anything, but it must be possible to relate to the labor market. Employment, vocational training or education – *preparations* – will do, but practicing with the local band, helping your mother with the accounting or taking part in the Red Cross' friend service network do not count, when 'occupation' is understood as wage labor.

I would say that the use of 'occupation' above is a real abstraction (5.5), an abstraction engraved in our lives: this is what work as labor power *is*. Even so, what I said about the need for occupation does not imply that I don't acknowledge that many people are crushed under the weight of unemployment. The reasons may be other than overdue bills or moralizing discourses about unemployed people.<sup>87</sup> People

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<sup>87</sup> Due to the moralization of work and activation, the *multitude* of attitudes towards unemployment and 'having an occupation' is easily forgotten or disregarded. Some may worry about finding a long-term job, others think more about what activities are meaningful in their lives, regardless of whether they are paid for doing it, some are eager to find the next job opportunity and have nothing against short-term jobs or having many types of jobs at the same

sometimes talk about the need for work in ways that go *beyond* the idea that all forms of work are equally worthy in their capacity of work. At this point, the concept of vitality in the sense that work can make us attend to the surrounding world, may be illuminating. In 4.5, I mentioned the example of plumbers who learn to pay attention to certain things from the point of view of their jobs and how this cannot be accounted for just in terms of factual or practical knowledge (cf. Meløe 1997) – one could talk about familiarity, a world revealed through the plumber’s expertise and experience. The plumber’s story opens up a noteworthy perspective on what work in a very open-ended sense *can* be: again, the focus lies on what it means to devote oneself to a specific activity. The plumber describes her active engagement with the requirements and challenges at hand. In this kind of example, I think it makes sense to say that work ‘takes us out of ourselves’, without this necessarily implying a moralization of the above kind. For this reason it is intelligible that we may worry about somebody having become too depressed to be devoted to anything; it may strike us that this person has lost touch with what s/he used to care about. This is *not* to say that ‘productive’ activities make up the core of human activity. After all, what matters, rather than an invocation of a general need for work (which is suspect), is to spell out *for what purpose*, in *what context*, this need is appealed to and in which ways the dimension of *work* is stressed. This is a difficult issue as concepts about inactivity and activity are neutralized and moralized. The *real tragedy* is that the present society is ordered in a way so that the system of work gives rise to

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time. And also: what people find to be difficult in being unemployed (say, in a country like Finland) varies: s/he may miss hir former colleagues, s/he may detest the humiliating bureaucracy that s/he is faced with in hir new situation, s/he may worry about what others think about hir situation, s/he may worry about the economic situation.

anxieties about what one should dedicate one's life to, anxieties that can become so tied up with the system of labor markets and supply and demand of labor power that the question about what is a worthy occupation (regardless of its being work) is lost along the way.

Remember, the overarching theme of this chapter is Sennett's reflection on a loss of *a sense of what we do* – as workers or, as in this example, as unemployed. Loss of activity is disconcerting, but what *sort* of inactivity (if any) is unemployment? For people who have always had a job it may not be easy to figure out other meaningful activities when having become unemployed – a life situation where there is much economic and perhaps also social pressure to seek out a paid position. This is especially true when the job-seeking activity is monitored by the unemployment agency. For many, this form of *enforced* leisure is hard to handle. It is often hard to get clear about what *kind* of loss of activity the unemployed person suffers, what kind of life crisis unemployment has triggered, and what this crisis reveals. In the Spanish film *Mondays in the Sun* (2002, directed by Fernando León de Aranoa), a group of unemployed men hang out in a bar owned by a friend. The shipyard for which they all worked has been closed down. They feel miserable about their situation, experiencing all the free time they have as a burden, rather than as a relief from toil or as a chance for self-fulfilling leisure. The men in the film are bitter and they hold a grudge against the friend or the girlfriend who does have a job. They seem reluctant to deal with their anger. None of them has much hope about the future. They drink and kill time. The man who still shows up at job applications is rejected because he is too old or lacks the skills required for the job. The men in the film not only felt disappointed with work, they were also disaffected with *society*. The film ties their attitude to the representation of work as respectable occupation, as

masculine independence and as a source of income. In addition to this, there is also something else going on: their despair seems to revolve around a lack of a *worthwhile occupation*, in opposition to seeing one's life drift away, or experiencing time as a burden. Although 'having something meaningful to do' is by no means internally related to paid work, I would argue that it misses the point to describe the characters' feeling of desperation or the despair the enforced idleness engenders as a *mere* appendage to the destructive ideologies of work even though it is easy to think of *typical forms* of resentment and bitterness. With a slight variation of the story, the men in the film could have been employed, seeing their lives drift away in a monotonous rhythm of work and leisure. Wage labor does not always live up to the promise of a meaningful occupation. Wage labor, then, does not and *could not solve* what I have called a fundamental question: what is a worthwhile occupation?

The life situation of being unemployed actualizes questions about what work means in one's life, what kind of employment one sees as desirable or which aspects of employment one is relieved from when one does not have a job. The unemployed person's feeling that the labor market is an external, uncontrollable mechanism, the feeling of no longer exercising control over one's life – these are *revealing* attitudes. When one starts philosophizing about this attitude, it is easy to go astray – if one for example takes for granted, as Sennett sometimes does, that control is a constitutive ideal. Then it might be tempting to once again erect the ideal of stable jobs that could occupy the core of a person's identity. The crux is whether wage labor *has ever granted* such sense of being in control of one's life. Below, I will continue my discussion about what promise work bears for us and how this can be critically reflected on without resorting to a detached, philosophical level of unmasking.

## II Work and self-deception

What the system does to the subjugated is to destroy his sense of reality (Baldwin 1965).<sup>88</sup>

### 6.6 Paths, orientation, disorientation

Sennett's discussion ultimately leads up to the possibility that the world of work distorts our sense of what is real. This 'sense of what is real' is what I will focus on below. When Sennett looks at the problematic role of work in the new capitalism he simultaneously attends to a number of disconcerting aspects of how people understand their own lives in relation to their jobs: indifference, longing for control and respect, or the feeling that one has failed to develop a career or the feeling that one hasn't made something of oneself (2003, 46). As we saw, he reflects on the unnerving fear that nobody needs my work anymore, that I have become superfluous, out of the loop, deadwood. He says that 'the specter of uselessness' is not a *mere* specter – it comes to haunt people because of how work is organized, how skills are evaluated and how the global labor market is structured (2006, 98-99). In what follows, I will try to show why the metaphor of 'specter' is somewhat misleading. In a continuation of the discussion conducted in chapter 3, I deal with existential dimensions of the fear of obsolescence that cannot merely be ascribed to *ideologies* of work. These fears reside in relations, in life situations, in how we think and feel.

Attitudes to work – as we saw in connection with Sennett's points about having a sense of what one does: what a person's attitude to his job/to employment amounts to is a messy affair! – are not predestined by structures, but talking about structures can shed light on *what* we are talking about. Sennett

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<sup>88</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-dream.html>

writes about the feeling of humiliation and how it appears in experiences of being laid off (the ex-IBM workers' indignation) and in experiences of being treated as 'deadwood', too old for the challenges of the job. "It could be said that this is just a matter of one person's injured pride, but I think not. The acid tone of current discussions of welfare needs, entitlements, and safety nets is pervaded by insinuations of parasitism on one side met by the rage of the humiliated on the other." (1998, 142) One of my aims has been to show that such rage or humiliation cannot be countered merely with exhortations to think clearly or to take up a more constructive attitude. The feeling of humiliation when being made redundant is not just a personal feeling; it is a *telling* reaction. Shame, humiliation and indignation are responses to practices that seem to be designed to elicit precisely these responses. It is possible to say, I think, that the fear of parasitism is *built* into the system.

The quote by Sennett reveals how emotional responses express the contradictory roles work occupy in our lives. However, as I said, such emotions appear in often unacknowledged forms. For example the desire to be 'in charge' of one's life can appear as a feeling that is difficult to put one's finger on, as several of Sennett's examples demonstrate. He is right that analyzing these emotions is a way to elucidate a system of work and how it affects people existentially. Sennett and his colleague Jonathan Cobb analyzed the wounded feelings of people who 'have made something of themselves' (cf. 3.8). The people they interviewed talked about the feeling of being judged, of never really being able to feel safe: the way they described their lives revealed a deep sense of vulnerability. They always felt, somehow, *inadequate*. The 'success story' of class climbing didn't take away this feeling. Despite their material prosperity, and despite the fact that they lead a more comfortable life than their parents they felt that they were 'not

in control' of their lives (1972, 33-4). This example shows that it would be a strange reaction to conclude that these people with a blue-collar background are simply *confused* and that they should learn to adopt a healthier attitude towards their own prosperity. The best aspect of Sennett's work is that he shows that the world of work frequently makes it *hard to understand our place in the world*. That is the reason why I have dedicated so much of the chapter to his thinking. As he says in *Corrosion of Character*: "[in] our circumstances, [confusion] is an accurate reflection of reality" (1998, 146).

In my thesis, this theme – the fear of obsolescence – has been brought up in almost every chapter, as an undercurrent. What I said about the contrast between independence and dependence above is precisely one of these fears related to work and as was indicated in my example about unemployment, it is a fear that appears both with regard to ideas about society and ideas about personal life. This fear is no mere personal hang-up. One description would be that it belongs to the multitude of existential problems people find themselves confronted with. However, as I wrote in chapter 5: the appearance of work as predicated on the shifting demands of the labor market cannot be dissolved simply by clear and sober *thinking*. The conceptual navigation is not easy in this area. Let me explain, and I will now take a slightly different route than the one taken in the last chapter when I discussed real abstractions. Why can't sober thinking dissolve the idea about work as for example individual achievement on the labor market?

There is an on-going discussion of sorts about a similar theme. The tradition of communitarianism has challenged liberal individualism. This challenge has taken different paths. Sean Sayers criticizes one such path he finds in Michael Walzer's thinking. Even though Walzer soundly argues that a social dimension cannot have disappeared even in an



individualist society, he is *wrong*, Sayers claims, when he contends that individualism can be battled by means of ‘a change of consciousness’ (2011, 50). Sayers sides with Marx who, as we saw in chapter 5, operated with a very dynamic understanding of the atomistic individual and the historical situation. The self-interested individual and social interdependence are *both* aspects of this society, Marx argues (2011, 52, 58-60).

To a *certain* extent, the world of wage labor *forces* me to think like a competing individual on the labor market, to look at others as competitors. As I wrote in chapter 5, this kind of abstraction of work can be applied to any type of wage labor. Imagine this case: I aspire for promotion but I know that my colleague is also a good candidate. In this situation, when I am in fact struggling to get that promotion (and we’re assuming that only one can be promoted), I am immersed in relations of competition and it is here unintelligible to say that I could simply *choose* not to think of people as competitors, when I am in fact striving for that promotion. This attitude is created and upheld by a certain system of work and careers, even though I am at the same time personally responsible for how I tackle what it means to be employed, or a colleague, how I worry about my career moving on too slowly, rather than worrying about the concrete tasks at hand, or in what spirit I worry about losing my job. One could say that it is when I start to regard a career as important in my life that I end up in this situation of competition, and that this reveals that I have staked out an existential path in my life. I have started to live my life in a certain way. Yet this is often intertwined with material circumstances that shape my life: I have held a position for a while, but suddenly my life is changed; I now have two kids and a house mortgage to pay, and it is all-important to get a position that pays the bills and that provides a secure future for me and the kids. This is *also* an

existential path, a path where some things emerge as necessities, possibilities or alluring choices. The image I want to evoke is precisely the ways in which a world of work binds us but not always so that it is easily rendered into a language of adaptation, integration or internalization (cf. chapter 2 and 3). Most of all, it is the perspective from which I speak and the *attitude* internal to that perspective that is different if I describe something as a matter of 'adaptation', or whether I talk about a person who has started to live his life in a certain way. Step by step, I will articulate what this difference consists in.

It would be wrong to describe for example the fear of obsolescence as an *illusion* in the sense that one could say that there is something to *see through* or *dispel*. A very strong dichotomy would then be posited: reality on the one hand, 'how things really are', and illusions on the other hand.<sup>89</sup> Nor would I here talk about 'ideology' in the sense of an intellectual superstructure under which a solid material basis of exploitation can be uncovered. Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pignarre try to articulate the difference between talking about ideology and blindness and talking about the *capacity* to think, to feel and to see:

Ideology connects with the image of a screen, of ideas that screen out, that block access to the "right point of view". But the minions [...] are not blinded by ideology. It would be better to say,

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<sup>89</sup> Philosophers and psychologists talk about 'illusions' in diverging ways. Illusions are often thought to be states of temporary confusion, or a temporary distortion, or distortion where one could still talk about the real state of things (think about optical illusions). Another example of how 'illusion' has been used in philosophy is in the critique of religion as an 'illusion': "The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness." (Marx 1992a, 244) But for Marx, illusion is not easily counteracted with 'reality'; dispelling illusions can only take place if an entire world that breeds illusions is changed. The next sentence goes: "To call on them to give up their illusions about their conditions is to *call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions*" (ibid.).

borrowing from the vocabulary of sorcery, that they have been 'eaten up', that is to say, that is their very capacity to think and feel that has been prey to the operation of capture. To be blinded implies that one sees 'badly' – something that can be corrected. But to be captivated implies that it is the capacity to see itself that has been affected (2011, 42-3).

What I think they get right, even though the language they use (sorcery) unwittingly invites the image of a blob that affects our capacity to feel and see, and even though they emphasize the metaphor of *seeing*, is the way they put forward the contrast between ideology as something that merely 'screens out'<sup>90</sup> and a much deeper level of *being entangled* in something – one is 'captivated'. To express this in my own way: in the promotion example above, it could be said that one is not blinded by some elusive external power that screens out the right point of view (the most important things in life, etc.). It is one's capacity of feeling and experiencing that is affected by the relations within a world of work: one's entire life may be shaped by the experience of one's life as trying to provide for a secure future or 'trying to get ahead'. The aspirations of the job become a part of *how I live my life*. I further agree with the way Stengers and Pignarre continue: when one is captivated, when one starts treading on a certain path in life, this "gets a hold over everything that matters, that makes whoever is captured live and think" (2011, 43). So, instead of the (often) *epistemological* language of illusions, they employ a language of being situated, being *captured*; something starts to hold sway; something starts to make sense, or even appear to be necessary from the place where one is. Raymond Williams seems to make a similar point when he writes that hegemony cannot be grasped as mere ideological constructions.

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<sup>90</sup> This view of ideology has been challenged by many, cf. Zizek 2009, Eagleton 2007.

Hegemony “is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living; our senses and assignments of energy; our shaping perceptions of ourselves and the world.” (quoted in Silva 2013, 98)

However, demonstrating how rhetorical patterns or practices are entrenched in ideology may still be useful. As Terry Eagleton shows, one strand in how writers have characterized ideology takes experiences, relations and practices into account, rather than false or distortive representations of reality. In this view, talking about ideology is done at the level of tangled social reality and modes of feeling: fearing, willing and hoping. Furthermore, the ‘falsity’ or ‘distortion’ of ideology need not refer to an epistemological rift between ideology and factual reality. ‘Falsity’ can also be a way of talking about a skewed *reality* along with the ways in which this reality is legitimized. In this sense, ‘ideology’ is the legitimization of an unjust system (cf. 2007, 18-31, 44).

Stengers and Pignarre remind us of the danger of positioning oneself at a level where everything can be described as if from the outside, so that we could talk about our lives in terms of having ‘a true representation’ of it or there being an ideology that ‘screens out’ the right point of view. Stengers and Pignarre are far from the language of illusions because they want to address and investigate, contemplate and ask questions not from a point of view of detached denunciation (‘rejecting the system’), but from a point of view where one acknowledges fragility, being at risk of being captured by for example the fear of obsolescence, which, they stress, is not the same as cynically proclaiming: we are all caught up in the system. Stengers and Pignarre do not offer such an all-out explication. They try out tentative descriptions, formulations, images. Their project aspires to self-understanding, and they explicitly relate self-

understanding to political action. The task is, I take it, to reflect on *where one is*.

I think Stengers and Pignarre would agree that there are different scenarios here: somebody starts to take delight in a certain path of life, while another bows down to it in resignation. Regardless of which scenario we pick out, the point is *not* to put illusions, enchantment on one side and clarity, reality and disenchantment on the other. The argument comes to this: it is impossible to write and think about the fear of obsolescence without reflecting on how one is dependent on employment and the specific life situations this dependency shapes. These ways of thinking are immersed in ways of being captivated, of seeing something as meaningful, necessary or 'the realistic life path'. In this sense, when talking about the meaning of work, there is no safe – safe because it is supposedly *theoretical* – perspective. Stengers and Pignarre compare the predicament of critique of capitalism to critique of gender. There is no safe ground there either, what is needed is sensitivity to people's life stories and lived experience – these are not representations we can relate to in a theoretical, detached mode. One should thus not hope for an ultimate form of demystifying critique, neutral ground, a five-point program or technique for putting oneself in the other's place – the challenge is to learn and be moved by others (2011, 47-8).

The critical project Stengers and Pignarre sketch goes in another direction than opening one's eyes and revealing what subjection is truly like. If one talks about illusions one talks about the truth being hidden behind appearances. Our lives are then at risk of being reduced to these 'appearances'. They seek to find a language for how capitalism takes a hold on and becomes a part of people's everyday lives (2011, 52). But these remarks are situated *amidst* tensions. To return to a point I made in chapter 3: the question 'how do people internalize the work ethic' may be a problematic instance of trying to *reveal*

what is really going on in a way that assumes that a radical critique of work must somehow *transcend* everyday life by occupying a vantage point from which our lives can be adequately interrogated. This underscores the need for the existential questions with which I ended chapter 3 and 4: what is a good occupation? The risk with the project of demystification and ideology critique is that our everyday lives are understood to be so totally molded by hegemonic structures that every attempt to ask what a good occupation is seems to be at risk of strengthening the status quo, the existing ideologies of work. To describe the future as open-ended and impossible to settle, and to remind ourselves of our own responsibility in everyday life, is a way to battle an inclination very different types of philosophizing tend to inadvertently fall prey to: cynicism. Critics of work like Arendt, Marcuse, Gorz, Marx and Weeks set out to show in which way a radically different world is possible. They urge us to look at the present world with new eyes.<sup>91</sup> For them, to do this, to catch sight of the absurdity of the present system of work, requires a sort of distancing, a disidentification with the present – to take a step back, to question what seems familiar and commonsensical. Such distancing can have the function of a much-needed wake-up call. The task is, I think, to identify and characterize the ways in which people's lives are dominated and structured by work, without falling into the trap of cynicism by attending to everyday life exclusively in the spirit of 'unmasking'. In the end, the endeavor must be to understand ourselves and our own difficulties.

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<sup>91</sup> This reflection is inspired by Antony Fredriksson's article "Är filosofin cynisk? Problemet med blacken utifrån."

## 6.7 Work and reality: Revolutionary Road

Sennett can be placed within a tradition that criticizes work in capitalism for displacing our sense of what is real. This line of critique can be found in thinkers as different as (the young) Marx, Weil, Marcuse and Weeks. Below, I want to illustrate the way in which 'reality' is appealed to in everyday discussions about the role work plays in people's lives. The setting of the example is the world Sennett describes in terms of stable careers, security and long-term planning. What the example shows goes against the grain of many of the positive connotations that character (work as character-building) and security has in Sennett's texts, especially if these are taken as *ideals*. The example points at the role work as security can have in people's lives, and how it is connected with a sense of what is *real*. I discuss Richard Yates' novel *Revolutionary Road* (1961) and the way two concepts of reality express an existential crisis for the two main characters, a middle class couple. The views of work presented in the book are embedded in the difficulties two people have with each other and the suburban life. The novel deals with the way they project their hopes and their fears onto one another, trying to formulate a solution to the problem of how they are to live. Above, I said that people often disagree about what a proper attitude towards work is. *Revolutionary Road* provides a good example of what this kind of disagreement may look like. Parallel with a critique of 'grown-up maturity' is a questioning of the idea that one is to find one's 'inner essence' in meaningful activities that match one's inner potentiality. Ultimately, the conflict between the main characters is expressed as a conflict about what is real to them, how they relate to necessity and hope. *Revolutionary Road* is a grim tale about a discourse (or a number of discourses) about work: work as self-realization and work as sacrifice and necessity are

placed in relation to each other as two poles that create an unhappy dialectic. In chapter 3, this unhappy dialectic was hinted at: work as self-realization and work as a societal obligation, 'hard-work', co-exist as two dominant discourses about work.

The story is set in the mid-fifties. Frank and April have settled down in the suburbs. They have kids. Frank works as a salesman. He finds his job dull. After a period of difficulties, April starts talking about leaving for Paris, a dream they had when they were younger, so that Frank could take some time off and figure out what he wants to do with his life. Yates ironically describes this view as a conventional way of thinking – in wealthy, young men in the East, “[when] college was over, you could put off going seriously to work until you’d spent a few years in a book-lined bachelor flat, with intervals of European travel, and when you found your true vocation at last it was through a process of informed and unhurried selection; just as when you married at last it was to solemnize the last and best of your many long, sophisticated affairs.” (Yates 2009, 139-40) April does not want him merely to refine some artistic talent: he is to find (what she sees as) his *essence*. April could support him for a little while:

“[...] you’ll be reading and studying and taking long walks and thinking. You’ll have time. For the first time in your life you’ll have time to find out what it is you want to do, and when you find it you’ll have the time and the freedom to start doing it.” [...] He had a quick disquieting vision of her coming home from a day at the office – wearing a Parisian tailored suit, briskly pulling off her gloves – coming home and finding him hunched in an egg-stained bathrobe, on an unmade bed, picking his nose (Yates 2009, 109).

The vision of soul-searching nose-picking in an empty Parisian apartment frightens Frank. How will he *know* what to do then, in leisure, *when he doesn’t know now*? Or *does* he know? What



does it even mean to 'know', is it a matter of knowing at all? For all this, they intend to go through with the plan this time. Frank is flattered to be treated as a man with *potential*, even though it requires that he would have to be provided for economically by his wife. 'My God, are artists and writers the only people entitled to lives of their own?' he calls out to his colleague Ordway, who wonders what Frank intends to *do* in Paris, will he write books, or what? Frank replies that all he wants is to find a job he likes but his problem is that he doesn't know what he likes (Yates 2009, 168-9). Things change when Frank is offered promotion and April is pregnant with their third child. He gives up the idea of Paris and settles down in the role of dependable Breadwinner, justifying the change of plans with April's pregnancy; he has started to doubt and regret the whole thing anyway. April is disappointed with him. She wants to have an abortion. She thinks he has given up, that he has resigned to a life that they never wanted, a life they considered as a temporary solution and that something else makes up what is truly important in life. Frank retorts with 'reason', maturity and realism. He is – secretly – relieved: life is back to normal. Only juvenile dreamers think that they can do what they want. Real people have no choice but to face grim reality; ordinary jobs and a solid, no-nonsense marriage, and well, deal with it, Frank's wildest years are through; grim reality might earn you a comfortable house. What is more, Frank's new job is far more demanding than the last one; he has started to feel a bit more important at the office. That's certainly *something*.

According to April, 'the present situation' doesn't necessitate Frank's actions. Rather, her perception of Frank is that he has made a *choice*, a choice not to go to Paris, a choice to stay in the suburb. It is not very clear what *April* wants (and putting it like that, in terms of wanting, is symptomatic of the trajectory of their relation). It is not clear why Paris was

important for her in the first place, except to relieve a sense of guilt; she secretly thinks that her pregnancies forced them into the suburban life. She tells herself that she, the woman, epitomizes Mediocre Reality and that he, the man, at least has a choice to do what he wants. She looks with dread at a life with Frank-the-breadwinner, sipping cocktails with boring friends. If *she* were to be the breadwinner, at least the feeling of guilt would disappear, she thinks. Frank sees no room for choice. It is no paradox to say that from April's perspective, he has chosen not to view his actions as a choice; according to her, he has *adopted* the perspective of resignation. It is important that this is someone's perspective and not a general claim. By appealing to 'the only mature thing to do', Frank makes it clear that it is his understanding of the situation that is the responsible, grown-up one and that April's perspective is nothing but a childish desire to run away. He wants them to settle down with a sensible conviction that they are no more special than anybody else. He takes her to restaurants to look at people who have "turned dull jobs to their advantage, who had exploited the system without knuckling under to it [...]." (Yates 2009, 217) All he has to prove is that a salesman doesn't have to be spiritually dead, or wait, that is *not* how Frank puts it; he wants to convince April that a Knox man "can still be interesting" (Yates 2009, 219). Because isn't that what April's dream of Paris is all about, that Frank would grow into an 'interesting person' the way he was in his college years, when he excelled in entertaining her with intellectual talk?

This example sheds light on what it means to describe work as an existential path – some things emerge as possibilities and necessities, our lives are shaped in a certain way that we are not always conscious of and that is rarely the result of very clear intentions. This applies to what I wrote about in chapter 3: even if people think about their lives in terms of control and management (life-family balance) the

existential consequences – what life becomes – are open-ended and *must* be open-ended. The idea that one could *decide* how one's life is to unfold is, I think, unintelligible. Or to express the same thing in another way: to imagine that one could do this amounts to a form of self-deception.

Does this mean that one could say that Frank is under an *illusion* concerning necessity and the suburban life, having an office job where one gets to feel a wee bit important? Or is it April who is stuck in deluded, idealistic dreams that she doesn't even believe in herself? The perspective of the novel indicates that they are *both* so entrenched in the conflict and the ensuing bitterness that the only remaining option seems to be Romantic Paris, conventional dream as it is, *or* submitting to a comfortable life in which everything proceeds at a steadfast pace. Yates' point seems to be that Frank's and April's difficulties are expressed not only in Frank's cynical view of his work as a salesman – I call it cynical because Frank thinks his work is 'beneath him' and he relishes this feeling of superiority; after all, he is a man who has the potential to be *interesting* – but also in their momentary dream about a more authentic life in Paris. Frank's cynicism also expresses a troubling form of self-contempt. From this perspective, it is not surprising that he takes some pleasure in the prospect of buying a bigger house as his salary fattens. In fact, this is much nicer than living in dreadful leisure in Paris, among cockroaches. It all boils down to this: April wants to move to Paris for his sake. Frank wants to stay 'because that's the mature thing to do'. This is, I think, a good illustration of what I meant above when I talked about 'being captured', that treading along a certain existential path means that certain possibilities and certain options appears on the horizon, while others fade away. That this path is captivating is something both April and Frank tries to deal with in their own ways.

April holds Frank responsible for his view of work as sacrifice. She knows he did not always think about his job this way. There are two notions of 'work as necessity' at play here, differentiated by *reactions*, and that is one of the reasons I have spent so much time on this particular example. Before, Frank perceived work as necessary toil, but he didn't glorify the role of Breadwinner, the Family Man who takes his work seriously because that is the most mature thing to do. Frank used to smirk at the dull routines at Knox, his company. Now he takes quiet pleasure in these routines and in some sense he is intent on *becoming* the Knox Man, embracing a life of one necessity after the other. Frank always seems to have thought that this is what most jobs are like – dull routines – why should *he* be special? Despite his earlier outspoken derision of a bourgeois lifestyle, he was not prepared to seriously question why he and April are so unhappy, nor was April. The change Frank undergoes can be characterized in this way: the expression 'I need this job, it's a question of money, really' has taken on a new meaning. If the first view of work as necessity is that work is something one has to put up with somehow, the second view is that work is toil, and toil belongs to the very conditions of life, and one should not smirk at this predicament, because one cannot flee from it. Every adult must make the best of it. As I pointed out in 3.3, such distinctions are not steady. From April's point of view, Frank's appeals to reason and necessity are not earnest ones – this whole 'responsibility deal' is a charade that, for her, only proves that Frank has given up, on everything. It is evident that April feels contempt for Frank because he has 'chickened out', he has settled for comfort, instead of a more uncertain and adventurous Parisian life. In feeling contempt for Frank's bowing down to the Knox life, she does not confront her own ideas about freedom, her own feelings of guilt and self-effacement.

Yates again ironically dwells on the intense *feeling* of reality that the plan of moving to Paris evokes for Frank and April – *elation*. The twist is of course that it was just an *appearance* of decision, reality and voluntariness (even though putting it this way takes us dangerously close to the language of illusion). What they want is not real and can never become real – partly, because they are so fixated on wanting and ‘knowing what one wants’. The loss of reality can be tied to the two notions of necessity I detected in the novel. The first one is the image of external necessity towards which we, well-educated, forward-looking careerists as we are, can take a cynical attitude: ‘I know I have this job *for now*, it’s a temporal thing, but you know my colleagues, they are just *so....stuck*.’ We find the *other* use of ‘necessity’ in Frank’s appeals to the mature life to which everyone must submit with a business-like matter-of-factness. In the first view, necessity is a mere condition of life, a condition to be minimized. The other view reverses necessity as reality, as the place one has finally settled down to after having gotten rid of childish illusions and fancies. If traces of the first image of necessity can be found in Arendt’s thinking, it is the latter view that she rejects: *The Human Condition* can be read as a way of taking issue with the idea that the primary dimension of human life consists in ‘getting by’. *Revolutionary Road* brilliantly shows the tensions built around these two conceptions of necessity, along with understandings of reality, control, maturity and self-realization.

## 6.8 Concluding words

In my thesis I have discussed various ideas about freedom, necessity and work. In *Revolutionary Road*, these concepts reflect the dystopia conjured up by critical theory, an unhappy dialectic: people are crushed in the secure relations of wage labor, but they also fear freedom from it. Should one cling to

the dream of freedom and endless potentiality or should one opt for an unhappy, secure life? The images of freedom and the ordered life seem to be connected in the book as attitudes that strengthen each other and express the two main characters' fears and inability to see other possibilities, other ways of relating to each other as spouses, human beings, lovers, providers. As we saw in chapter 2, Marcuse's writings highlight a kind of existential deadlock: work is repulsive, but when leisure becomes the shadow of work it provides no solace either; we abhor work in capitalism, but we also fear freedom from it. His own solution might not be satisfactory, but the question is striking when it appears not as a generalized idea about 'our predicament', but, rather, as *one* existential path that is intelligible given a system revolving around wage labor.

*Revolutionary Road* latches onto a classical dichotomy between freedom and necessity, where work is either an expression of the free personality (or free expressions of creativity) or work is placed among social obligations to society or as the individual's and society's way of 'getting by'. As I've shown in this thesis (especially chapters 1-2), both the concepts of necessity and freedom are sometimes neutralized so that the existential stakes in talking about freedom and necessity disappear from view. In the novel, ideas about freedom and necessity are symptoms of existential problems and these are revealing of a culture in which a destructive dichotomy I have touched on throughout the thesis figures. Either work is neutralized as necessary toil, Necessity to which all people must submit as responsible adults and members of society, or work is moralized as personal self-fulfillment where I am to realize my personal potentials. *Revolutionary Road* illustrates the damaging impasse such a dichotomy entails on an *existentially speaking*.

I have talked about two roles tensions can have. On the one hand, the example expresses the *destructive* side of tensions: this is what Sennett talks about when he talks about the loss of a sense of what one does. On the other hand, as I wrote in the Introduction, tensions can be a lever: by articulating the ambiguous roles wage labor has, we also simultaneously reflect on what work *could* be or what work *should* be. If ambivalent ideas about work and necessity (or work and freedom), along with the practices in which these ideas operate, are articulated, it is also possible to get a hold of possibilities and avenues of change, or at least to acknowledge the urgency of such avenues of change. How such tensions are articulated will have a bearing on how we think about for example full employment, 'jobs for life', a general income, and the role of labor power in capitalism. One of the challenges is to discern when it is relevant to talk about work as a life situation or when it is important to attend to the dynamics of labor power. The challenge is also, as I have said in this last section, to navigate between talking about work from a perspective of demystification and ideology critique, and talking about work as immersed in existential problems. This shift is important for understanding what it means to criticize work. After all, critique of work is not constricted to academic papers and conferences. Ultimately, I would say that critique of work is worthless if it is not anchored in interpersonal relations. This marks the limitation of a perspective of demystification or ideology critique. We do not – or, rather, *should* not – relate to each other as bearers of 'rhetoric' or 'ideology'. The task has therefore been to emphasize the constant shift of levels that a discussion about the role of work requires.

The connection between a critical discussion of work and more positive remarks also re-introduces the challenge to think about what a good life is, what is important in life, what

makes life worth living. My own aspiration has not been to define or prescribe what work, ideally, should be or what a good life 'should contain'. One of my aims has rather been to look at the different ways in which the question of work and the good life is posed in the face of neutralizations of work as an activity to which one must simply submit or as a commodity one has no choice but to sell, or in the face of moralizations of work as the core of life, as the ultimate aim, or as creativity and personal self-realization. In this way, I have approached the roles of work in our lives through ambiguities, disagreement, controversies and tensions.



## Concluding remarks

In this thesis, the task has been to open up the discussion of work to contestation and to remind ourselves about the forms of contestations that already exist: these contestations alert us to fundamental questions: What is good work? What do we consider to be worthwhile activities? What destructive roles can work have? Is employment for all really the most important social issue? The main aim of this thesis has been to *repoliticize* the discussion about work. Repoliticization here means to highlight entanglement, tensions and struggles over our everyday lives. Such repoliticization is urgent because of the tendency to *neutralize* work so that wage labor is seen as a commodity on the market or so that work is seen as an entirely personal project of self-realization. Closely connected with this attempt to highlight the controversies surrounding work is, for me, the importance of attending to work from a perspective of change that is irreducible to societal trends. This is change in the sense of ethical and existential concerns about the future. Worries about fragmentation of work and colonization of our lives by work could be seen in this light: the worry is future-orientated. Contestations in relation to work are frequently seen in people's reactions to the changes in work and employment. The challenge is, as I have pointed out, to *radicalize* these worries so that they really address and question the status quo, rather than neutralizing work for example so that work is seen as a sphere of economic rationality to be limited or so that the answer is seen as a resurrection of a society in which people identify as workers.

At the same time, by looking at these controversies I hope to have critically assessed consensus about work, what I talked about as 'clichés' in the Introduction, in politics and everyday life. I want to suggest that the consensus about work

we see all around us can be understood as a *response* to critique and contestation. Such 'consensus' is therefore not at all the bare fact of people agreeing: the critical writers I have discussed show the processes and changes in thinking by which *something comes to seem* necessary. I talked about the moralization and neutralization of work to paint the contours of this very unstable, yet widespread, consensus: all of us must work, society needs our work, work is every adult's responsibility. Let me take three (often interrelated) examples of such consensus that are both prevalent and continuously challenged.

(1) The idea that work, in general, contributes to the wealth of society is often invoked when employment or jobs figure as the aim that cannot be criticized. In Finland this argument has been evoked in relation to the fur industry, new mining projects and the expansion of nuclear power. 'People get their incomes from these jobs!' is then a way to legitimize a certain position (the fur industry should be legal) and simultaneously a way to dismiss critique (the fur industry is ethically problematic).

(2) The ideal of job-creation (in, say, Finland) is embraced by all mainstream parties in the Finnish parliament as *a general interest of the state*: before every election, parties from the left to the right offer their own programs on how to battle unemployment. When politicians talk about unemployment it is done in a language of minimization. At the same time, there seems to be a consensus among mainstream economists about the impossibility of eliminating unemployment within this economic system – unemployment is structural. These economists' theorizing about what a 'necessary' level of unemployment is runs side by side with politicians who compete with each other about which economic policy will generate the greatest number of jobs and best eliminate

unemployment.<sup>92</sup> The constant appeal to job creation is also, as I have shown, challenged by critical writers who talk about work in a very different way than mainstream economists. Weeks (chapter 3) and Gorz (chapter 2) are two such critics who reject the idea that the aim of society is to maximize the number of jobs, but they also strongly oppose a society in which some people, for structural reasons, are thrown out of the system. Their conclusion is that the present ideology of 'job-creation' leans on a schizophrenic idea about jobs: the minimization of unemployment is dressed in a language of help and self-help, but the ideology of job-creation is also dependent on fear tactics that make people more dependent on wage labor (e.g. workfare programs). These writers stress that the ideology and reality of scarcity of job ultimately weaken the bargaining position of the workers.

(3) It is often said that work is a shared burden. Russell Muirhead, among others, argues that there is an eternal tension of work and life. Work furthers social purposes and contributes to the common good but it is not always what we deserve as individuals, it is not always intrinsically interesting, he claims. "Society in every age need certain things done that are not fulfilling to do." (2004, 170) Muirhead suggests that the problem with work is not a mere problem of capitalism and the fragmentation of work instilled by the capitalist system of work. The problem goes deeper, he says:

It is not simply capitalism but the nature of work that issues in a basic and recurring problem: what the work society needs its members to do is not always (and perhaps is only rarely) aligned with the full powers we bear as human beings, or for that matter with the particular tendencies we possess as individuals. This tension is true not only for societies devoted to productivity but also for those devoted to piety, or self-defense, or personal liberty

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<sup>92</sup> For an overview of which tensions this gives rise to, cf. Weman 2013.

or some mix of these and other goods. Social fit, or the alignment between individual talent and social need, and personal fit, the alignment between work and an individual's best purposes, are not easily satisfied simultaneously (2004, 159).

The problem with such generalized conceptions of work that simply *must be done*, for all Muirhead's sensitivity to problems of work, is that they risk lumping together very different kinds of work under the heading of 'the burden of work'. Housework is lumped together with the monotony of the assembly line and the toil of picking salad. In chapter 1 we saw Arendt's version of this image of primordial, pre-political necessity. Strangely, she also advances a critique of that idea: in this society, a jobholder's society, the concern of society is now precisely to govern the shared burden of labor. She sees that as a dangerous levelling of activities that makes all activities seem alike and that ties all activities to society in the same way. In chapters 2, 3 and 4, I provided several examples of attempts to make more meticulous distinctions *within* the concept of work. One such example is the rhetoric of hard work that, according to Kathi Weeks, gives rise to incessant distinctions between who earns recognition as a responsible, hard-working citizen, and who doesn't. A noteworthy instance of such elastic distinctions is the present debate about the skyrocketing bonuses of CEO's. Bonuses are frequently defended by invoking the CEO's hard work and the heavy burden s/he carries. *On the one hand*, this rhetoric of burdens puts the CEO on a par with all other workers: s/he works, like everybody else, and hir responsibility is an exceptional one but basically, s/he should have the same right as 'anybody else' to get rich by working. On the other hand, hir special privilege (the skyrocketing bonus) is legitimized by suggesting that s/he is *not* a worker like everybody else: hir position does not contribute to the shared burden, but, rather,

hir position is a *precondition* for there to be a shared burden of work. In other words: as a job-creating CEO of a big company, s/he must be considered an exception. But when the discussion is turned around like this, work is no longer depicted as a burden, but, rather, a *gift* from or an *opportunity* offered by the company.

My aim has not been to resolve tensions. Instead, I think it is good to *re-articulate present worries*. This was one of the primary aspirations in all the chapters: my reading of Arendt, Marcuse, Gorz, Weeks, Gaita, Marx and Sennett was aimed at this project of re-articulation. Their worries (to sum up rather crudely) involved fragmentation of work, dependency on wage labor, an expansion of the jobholder society, the expansion of commodification and, lastly, an impoverishment of the language of work that does not enable us to see how work can deepen. I have tied all of these worries to the importance of keeping in mind the open-ended character of the concept of work. Let me, one last time, give an example. Scott Shershow, an author with critical views on work, was constantly asked who will see to it that we will take responsibility for the shared burden of work in a society where work no longer is seen as a primary duty or a primary social bond:

I am asked, for example: in the coming community for which you argue, who will pick up the garbage? Who will care for the children and nurse the sick? Even in the most extravagant fantasy of a technoparadise, who will mind the machines? I am always at first tempted to reply with equal simplicity and to say merely: now you're talking! For such questions, of course, will not *end* but, rather, begin, as though for the first time, precisely when we have released ourselves from our self-imposed lives of hard labor, and when work no longer appears without question as the only possible human vocation and the absolute figure of self-fulfillment (2005, 7).

The conceptual moves we make with 'work' and related concepts reveal how we understand what we are doing. Shershow talks about a future in which it is important to talk about what is needed, which activities communities truly needs to get done, rather than, as critical writers argue that it is now (cf. chapter 1, 2), necessity is understood through what we see as possible within the economic relations of wage labor. A connected point has been to show the political dangers of generalizing work in terms of a common obligation or an eternal predicament. One such generalization is that work, *all* work, attends to 'society's needs'. I have pointed to the danger of such a purportedly neutral image of what society needs. My argument has been that such neutralization of society's needs brings with it a neutralization of work as wage labor: all jobs are seen as responding to needs. I would agree with Read who writes:

What is foreclosed by such a conception [of society's needs] is not only history (as a history of production, consumption, and distribution) but also the differences that this history inscribes at the center of social existence, differences of hierarchy, conflict, and separation – differences of class (2003, 50).

Throughout, I have tried to show how disconcerting neutralizations about the concept of work can also be traced in critical texts about work. I started the thesis with a lengthy discussion of Arendt's concept of labor and necessity. In chapter 2 I reflected on problematic ways of conceptualizing work as domination. Chapter 3 dealt with my misgivings about a critical vocabulary that stresses internalization. In chapter 2 and 4 I wrestled with a neutralizing account of functionality. Lastly, chapter 6 grappled with an analysis of fragmentation, that risks entrenching a longing for an intelligible work-centered society. I have argued that such neutralizations are hazardous as they compromise the

acuteness of the concerns that drive the authors. My main suggestion has been that the *stakes* of the concerns are lost: the worries – What is so damaging about fragmentation? Why is it important to give an alternative to the language of professionalism? – are drowned in neutralizing accounts. To illustrate a way that the stakes can be brought back into view, in chapter 5 I talked about the conflict and tension between work as labor power and work as a life situation.

‘Work as a life-situation’ may seem tantalizingly obscure, but I have tried to show why it is spurious to posit a general, trans-historical concept of ‘good work’ or ‘real work’ (especially, cf. chapter 3, 4 and 5). To turn to such a general concept on a philosophical level would be, I think, of very little help and sometimes it is positively dangerous to do so, as Weeks shows in her critical account of the often hidden hierarchies such normative concepts bring with them. The thesis thus contains no attempt to formulate the core of meaningful and good work. My intention was instead to trace how existential and political concerns about good work are easily trivialized or repressed. I think Shershow is right, then, when he writes that critical analyses of work invite us to re-think necessity in the sense that we scrutinize the world *in which we already live*. As I argued in chapter 4, the question about good work is rooted in praxis, in relations. I challenged Gaita’s remarks about a vocation because they tempt us to make a categorical contrast between what is external and internal to a job. Instead, I wanted to look at how the concern about good work arises *within* our jobs and our relations.

In several chapters, my aim was to highlight the acuteness of the question of what good work is. This acuteness is lost not only when work is treated as an eternal essence, but it is also lost when individualization and privatization of work and employment take the place of an interpersonal quest for meaningful occupations. An extreme expression of a distance

from such a quest is when work is strictly defined according to the needs of the labor market. If the language of competition, supply and demand takes over, meaningfulness can be nothing more than a private hunt for a fulfilling job. I referred to Göran Torrkulla and his challenge of what we *dare* to think: do we dare to think that we are worth more than badly paid and/or meaningless jobs? I think what his contention involves is far more than a privatized wish for a personally fulfilling job. This is a question about the relation between work, meaning and life – *our* lives, the lives we share. When work is individualized into a contract or a career, or when it is normalized as a commodity, strict limits are set on how the world *concerns* us in work. Torrkulla's challenge invokes responsibility in an ethically open-ended sense. I argued that Sennett's critique of the fragmentation of work, a critique that brought out how fragmentation implies a loss of care, can be extended to a critique of the relation between work and the world that our jobs maintain, form and create. The same could be said about Marcuse's and Gorz's approach. Their indictment of 'work society' draws our attention to alarming aspects but their worry about freedom gives too little room for questions about responsibility. I have suggested that work have the role of bracketing and holding fundamental concerns in human life at bay. The idea about ceaseless economic growth is perhaps the most damaging form that takes. For all my critique of her ideas about necessity, I agree with Arendt that the structure of such bracketing needs to be revealed so that other possibilities are disclosed. Like her, I think that some conceptions of work and society inhibit critical reflection on what is truly important. In this way, Arendt's philosophical proposal is indispensable: "What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing" (1998, 5).



## Svensk sammanfattning

Mitt avhandlingsprojekt tar avstamp från det samförstånd som lönearbetet tycks omges av. I den politiska retoriken florerar tal om arbete och arbetslivet, och målet är att så många som möjligt ska jobba så länge som möjligt i arbetslivet. Utmaningen som framställs är att skapa fler jobb och att minimera arbetslösheten. Utbildning, hälsa och fritidsintressen beskrivs ofta i arbetsrelaterade termer: det centrala är att få ett jobb och att orka jobba. På ett mera existentiellt plan framhålls lönearbete som en möjlighet till personlig utveckling: arbete är kreativitet och självförverkligande. I avhandlingen pekar jag på hur samförstånd av det här slaget samexisterar med och står i relation till olika typer av *spänningar* som omfattar lönearbetets roll i samhället och i våra liv.

Jag diskuterar flera kritiska texter om arbete som på olika sätt utmanar grundläggande synsätt och som också artikulerar egna ståndpunkter kring alternativa sätt att tänka kring arbetets existentiella och samhälleliga mening. Mitt eget projekt går ut på att genom dessa texter ta fasta på de olika sätt på vilka arbete *neutraliseras*: arbetet behandlas som en resurs som är samhälleligt värdefull oberoende av dess innehåll, syften eller de livsomständigheter arbetet är förbundet med. Detta neutraliserande, som också tar sig formen av *moraliserande* av typen "allt arbete är värdefullt", kan utmanas. Genom en sådan neutralisering förskjuts befintliga spänningar och kontroverser kring arbete och arbetslivet. Det finns en mängd debatter om olika yrken och näringar: pälsindustrin, gruvnäringen och köttindustrin är tre sådana exempel. Arbetslivet och arbetets roll ifrågasätts i samtal och debatter om nedskärningar, uppsägningar och utbrändhet. Det som sker när arbete neutraliseras är att

sysselsättning framstår som ett mål i sig, samhällets och det enskilda livets primära uppgift.

I avhandlingen använder jag mig av ett flertal kritiska texter från olika tanketraditioner (jag går bl.a. i dialog med Hannah Arendt, André Gorz, Karl Marx, Simone Weil och Richard Sennett) som verktyg för att komma till större klarhet kring neutralisering av arbete – jag visar också hur flera av skribenterna själva reproducerar ett neutraliserande av arbete trots att deras övergripande projekt går emot just denna tendens. Diskussionen i avhandlingen syftar ytterst till att visa hur neutraliseringen av arbete och lönearbete i synnerhet gör att moraliska och politiska frågor – frågor som hela tiden ställs i samhälleliga debatter och personliga samtal – avvisas eller kommer till uttryck endast genom att vissa grundantaganden om arbetets roll godkänns. Neutralisering av arbete såsom exempelvis påståendet att "allt arbete är värdefullt" eller beskrivningar av arbete såsom arbetskraft på en marknad styrd av utbud och efterfrågan glider undan det slags utbredda oro som finns både i enskilda människors liv och i samhället: vad är gott arbete? Vad är ett bra samhälle? På vilka sätt är vi beroende av arbete och arbetsmarknaden? Vilket syfte tjänar lönearbetet? Vilken är relationen mellan det arbete vi gör och grundläggande mänskliga behov?

Med andra ord försöker jag genom att ta fasta på neutralisering av arbete också visa på vilket sätt det är viktigt att få fram arbetet som moraliskt och politiskt förankrat. Jag vill visa att den självklarhet genom vilken vi talar om jobb som sysselsättning och personligt självförverkligande lever sida vid sida med en mängd *spänningar* kring arbetets mening och syften. Dessa spänningar *döljs* när arbete ikläs rollen av gemensamt samhälleligt intresse eller den enskildes stimulerande jobb.

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Mari Lindman

## Work and Non-Work

It may seem self-evident that employment is crucial to a happy life and that job creation is a central societal concern. However, this dissertation suggests that work is neutralized when it is understood simply as a valuable societal asset, while its concrete significance in a specific life situation is ignored. One example of such neutralization is when the importance of work is reduced to the importance of "having a job", whatever its practical content or purposes. To challenge such neutralizations, the author looks at the tension within the conceptions of work which underlie them. The danger of such neutralization is that political and existential worries are swept under the rug. The book aims to repoliticize work by looking at it as an essentially contested concept. The author suggests that important aspects of work are revealed within such contestations of the role of work in our lives. All chapters are structured around dialogues with critical accounts of work, including those of Hannah Arendt, André Gorz, Kathi Weeks, Simone Weil, Karl Marx and Richard Sennett. What does it mean to say that society has been invaded by necessity? What does it mean to imagine a society beyond wage labor? Is it a utopia or a dystopia to think about work as a limitless activity? What is at stake when work becomes a commodity on the market? What are the hazards of fragmentation of work?



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