Abstract

The priority that we should attach to meaningful work has been contested in both rights-based/liberal and welfare/socialist traditions. To make the case for meaningful work in these traditions is first to overcome objections from within these traditions themselves concerning the conceptual validity of meaningful work, and the impact its prioritization might have on other valued goods. For virtue traditions, however, no such obstacles obtain. Undertaking meaningful work in the company of others is necessary if we are to learn to order our desires and develop virtues. The social embodiment of virtue traditions depends on internal relationships between the type of work required of us, the range of goods such work enables us to appreciate, and the qualities of character required for their realization. This chapter outlines the importance of meaningful work to the virtue traditions and draws on recent empirical research which provides support for their central contentions.

Keywords

virtue, meaningful work, MacIntyre, practices, internal goods, external goods, character

CHAPTER 4

**Work, Meaning, and Virtue**

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**Introduction**

This chapter will consider the distinctive contributions that a MacIntyrean virtue perspective offers to enquiries about meaningful work. These enquiries have been conducted on the one hand by political philosophers interested in whether priority should be given to the provision of meaningful work by individual, organizational, and state agents (e.g. Bowie, [1998](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\A#Ref12)) and on the other by social scientists interested in understanding the relationships between the “antecedents, processes and outcomes of meaningful work” (Lepisto and Pratt, [2016](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref33): 3). While these debates have often been conducted in isolation, this chapter will outline how a virtue perspective might address contested issues in both.

In debates in political philosophy, the priority that should attach to meaningful work has been contested in both liberal (e.g. Maitland, [1989](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Rights#Ref40); Bowie, [1998](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\A#Ref12); Yeoman, [2014](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Conceptualising#Ref55)) and welfare/socialist traditions (e.g. Schwartz, [1982](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref50); Care, [1984](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Career#Ref15); Arneson, [1987](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref4)). While advocates of meaningful work (broadly understood) argue that jobs should be designed to encourage the use of skills, task variety, autonomy, challenge, contribution, feedback, and relatedness, these are contested by those in both traditions that question the conceptual validity of meaningful work and the impact its prioritization might have on other valued goods including rights, efficiency, and welfare.

The welfare/socialist Arneson ([1987](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref4)), for example, listed seventeen different categories of meaningful goods that derive from work (Arneson, [1987](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref4): 528–9). He argued that their prioritization would be so subjective that, unlike employment, housing, health, and so on, meaningful work cannot be analyzed in terms of its distribution (e.g. efficiently or inefficiently; justly or unjustly); and it therefore fails as the type of good that should or even could be effectively promoted by the state. Many liberals concur with this conclusion but on the basis of different determinate criteria: that the positive liberties encouraged by the provision of meaningful work would be bought at too high a price, namely that of undermining the liberties of market agents to trade on the basis of their preferences and resources (Maitland, [1989](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Rights#Ref40); Nozick, 1974). To make the case for meaningful work in these traditions requires that such internal objections are themselves addressed, as attempted by the liberal Yeoman ([2014](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Conceptualising#Ref55)) and the welfarist Schwartz ([1982](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref50)), among others. These debates appear unlikely to be resolved.

In the empirical literature, two related conundrums repeatedly demand attention. The first is the oft-repeated finding that jobs involving challenge and requiring skill—those considered most likely to be understood as meaningful—are not always so experienced (Fried and Ferris, [1987](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref16); Behson, Eddy, and Lorenzet, [2000](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref10)). The second is that jobs that do not share such characteristics may be experienced as meaningful by some workers who undertake them (e.g. Wrzesniewski and Dutton, [2001](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Crafting#Ref53), re cleaning; Isaksen, [2000](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Constructing#Ref30), re catering; and Kreiner, Ashforth, and Sluss, [2006](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Identity#Ref32), re “dirty work”). These conundrums have recently led Lepisto and Pratt ([2016](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref33)) to challenge the basic conceptualization of meaningful work. Their central proposition is that “scholars implicitly or explicitly conceive of the core problem of meaningful work” (Lepisto and Pratt, [2016](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref33): 6) in different ways. They suggest that these be disentangled to address the design of jobs which maximize opportunities for the experience of meaningful work in a different way, and perhaps with different tools to those we should use in discussing how people come to justify the meaningfulness of work (Lepisto and Pratt, [2016](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref33)). Traditionally those who have focused on the problem of alienation have pursued the solution of job redesign, whereas those who research the problem of “uncertainty and ambiguity regarding the value or worth of one’s work” (Lepisto and Pratt, [2016](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref33): 8) focus on:

enriching social meanings and individuals’ meaning-making such that individuals can develop an account or justification regarding why their work is worthy or valuable. (Lepisto and Pratt, [2016](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref33): 8)

On Lepisto and Pratt’s ([2016](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref33)) account it is only if there were agreement on the features that render work meaningful that we could begin to make a case for designing jobs around such features. Despite his doubts as to the reasonableness of that possibility, this conclusion parallels that of Arneson ([1987](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref4)), writing for a quite different audience and in a notably different idiom. But what if the relationship between such meaning-making and the experience of work were more intimate than this shared analytical distinction suggests? Such is the contention of the neo-Aristotelian virtue tradition, and hence the distinctive resources that it brings to our understanding of meaningful work.

This tradition holds that there is an intimate relationship between participation in practices (which include but are not limited to the context of employment) and the discovery of goods (Beadle and Knight 2012). Sustained participation is required in practices as diverse as surgery, farming, and portrait painting if the goods they produce are to be realized and enjoyed, that is, to be experienced as genuinely common goods. This process creates the conditions necessary for the development of relevant technical skills, the extension of our understanding of these goods, and of the virtues that such realization both develops and requires. Undertaking work that pursues common goods in the company of others (MacIntyre, [2016](#Ref38); Knight, [2007](#Ref31)) is necessary if we are to learn to order our desires and develop virtues (Anscombe, [1958](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Modern#Ref3)).

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, it illustrates some of the conundrums that have attended research on meaningful work. Second, it provides an outline of the neo-Aristotelian virtue tradition that accords a significant place to the design and experience of work in the development of the very virtues that enable us to judge well. Third, it argues that this account provides resources that explain the conundrums besetting research on meaningful work. Begin then, with meaningful work.

**Meaningful Work**

Meaningful work has undergone a renaissance as an area of enquiry, research, and public policy interest (Breen, 2016; Yeoman, 2015). For example, the number of papers that include “meaningful work” in their titles has grown from 51 between 2002 and 2006 to 81 between 2007 and 2011, and 161 between 2012 and 2016 (Google Advanced Scholar, 2017). This resurgence is apparent across disciplines and includes research in psychology, organizational behavior, and business ethics.

A wide array of theoretical and operational frameworks have been applied to conceptualize and measure the antecedents, experience, consequences, and associations of meaningful work. These include Hackman and Oldham’s ([1975](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Development#Ref25)) classic measure of the relationship between job characteristics and the experience of meaningful work (Fried and Ferris, [1987](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref16)), Grant’s influential accounts of relational job design (e.g. Grant [2007](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Relational#Ref19)), and accounts from eudaimonic self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Few who observe this growing literature, however, fail to note its range of conceptual disputes and the absence of “overarching structures that would facilitate greater integration, consistency, and understanding of this body of research” (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski, 2010: 91).

Researchers have regularly called for improving the conceptualization of meaningful work by highlighting distinctions between inter alia, studies of worker orientation and studies of work (Michaelson, Pratt, Grant, and Dunn, 2014); sources of meaning and mechanisms by which work becomes meaningful (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski, 2010: 91); between meaning in work and meaning at work (Pratt and Ashforth, [2003](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Fostering#Ref46)); and between task and relational aspects of jobs (Grant and Parker, [2009](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Redesigning#Ref24)). Part of the problem is the complexity of a construct whose dimensions include antecedent conditions, a phenomenology of ascription, and claims around consequences. For the purposes of this chapter however the antecedent condition through which agents are able to understand their work as meaningful, and to justify this ascription, are particularly pertinent. In their review, Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010: 95) “identified four main sources of meaning or meaningfulness in work: the self, other persons, the work context and spiritual life,” each of which comprises a variety of potential avenues for meaning fulfillment—your desire for social status, mine for financial security, his for relationships of mutual trust and regard, hers for the relief of suffering (Care, 1984) and so on.

Much work on sources of meaning has drawn on Bellah et al.’s ([1985](#Ref11)) account of three distinctive work orientations. In this schema, those with a “job” orientation approach work as a means to other desired ends while a second group with a “career” orientation value work inasmuch as it contributes to a wider narrative of the self, organized in terms of career. The third “calling” orientation animates those who desire to undertake intrinsically meaningful work (e.g. Bunderson and Thompson, [2009](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref14); Hall and Chandler, [2005](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Psychological#Ref27)). The “called” seek tasks, relationships, and conceptualizations of their work that are invested with meaning (Wrzesniewski et al., [1997](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Jobs,#Ref54); Wrzesniewski and Dutton, [2001](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Crafting#Ref53); Berg, Dutton, and Wrzesniewski, 2013), even in the most mundane and routine of task environments.

This latter observation has led some to suggest a further distinction between “callers” who craft any job in sometimes discouraging contexts to enable the experience of meaningful work to be realized and the “called” who invest whatever work role they happen to occupy with meaning (Hall and Chandler, [2005](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Psychological#Ref27); Pratt, Pradies, and Lepisto, 2013). Bunderson and Thompson ([2009](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref14)) suggest a slightly different distinction between two potential sources of meaning—in the first, agents are called to realize what they take to be their particular talents, and in the second they are called to serve some greater good. For the “called” but not the “callers”, individual responsibility was “not to decide but to discover and dutifully embrace” their role (Bunderson and Thompson, [2009](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref14): 51).

Lepisto and Pratt ([2016](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref33)) argue for another distinction between vocational callings which “emphasize the personal engagements and enjoyment that callings bring” (<IBT>Lepisto and Pratt, [2016](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref33)</IBT>: 3) and those which “emphasize duty and obligation” (ibid. and see also Madden, Bailey, and Kerr, [2015](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\‘For#Ref39)). It is worth noting however that Lepisto and Pratt’s distinction requires a bifurcation between self- and other-regarding goods that is rooted in the modern conception of the self, and that Bunderson and Thompson’s distinction adheres to a Kantian bifurcation between duty and self-actualization. While both are at home in a post-Enlightenment understanding of the self, both are highly questionable when considered from the perspective of the virtue traditions (MacIntyre, [2016](#Ref38)). They also contrast markedly with Bellah et al.’s initial conceptualization of “calling” in which vocational and communal goods require each other as they do for the virtue traditions. On this account, work provides for those who are “called”:

A practical ideal of activity and character that makes a person’s work inseparable from his or her life. It subsumes the self into a community of disciplined practice and sound judgment whose activity has meaning and value in itself, not just in the output or profit that results from it. But the calling not only links a person to his or her fellow workers. A calling links a person to the larger community, a whole in which the calling of each is a contribution to the good of all . . . The calling is a crucial link between the individual and the public world. Work in the sense of calling can never be merely private. (Bellah et al., 1996 [[1985](#Ref11)]: 66, cited in McPherson, [2013](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Vocational#Ref42): 289)

For Bellah et al. (1985 [[1985](#Ref11)]) we cannot describe vocational orientations to self-actualization as expressions of “calling” even if their experience is understood as deeply meaningful, because such orientations are “merely private.” Bailey and Madden ([2015](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Time#Ref5)) concur, and suggest that work should only be understood as meaningful “when an individual perceives an authentic connection between their work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self” (Bailey and Madden, [2015](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Time#Ref5): 4).

While disputes as to the nature of calling are prevalent, there is little divergence in respect of its consequences. In their oft-cited study, Bunderson and Thompson ([2009](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref14)) found American zookeepers to be exemplars of employees for whom work was experienced as deeply meaningful despite a number of structural obstacles. These included being significantly underpaid against comparably qualified professionals, undertaking manual tasks in unpleasant conditions, and having to work second and even third jobs to sustain their income levels. Zookeepers’ understanding of the importance of their work was the source of their experience of deeply meaningful work. Justifications took the kind of teleological form associated with vocation (McPherson, [2013](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Vocational#Ref42)) provided, in this case, by animal welfare (Bunderson and Thompson, [2009](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref14)). Their belief that “one’s employing organization also has a moral duty related to the work” (Bunderson and Thompson, [2009](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref14): 43) is consistent with other research findings from marginal environments, including the travelling circus (Beadle and Kӧnyӧt, [2006](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref8); Beadle, [2013](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Managerial#Ref6)). Dempsey and Sanders’s (2010) study of narrative accounts of social entrepreneurs found similar relationships as a range of purposive objects animated their particular missions and their willingness to sacrifice economic and other important goods, including those of health and family relationships.

For the “called,” the pursuit of work purposes was prioritized over conventional preferences for satisfactory levels of income and work–life balance. Bunderson and Thompson ([2009](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref14): 32) characterize such work as “double-edged” while Dempsey and Sanders (2010: 437) find their participants’ accounts to be “troubling,” and indeed the consequences of such an orientation to work are far-reaching. Bunderson and Thompson’s ([2009](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref14)) finding that zookeepers who understand themselves as “called” are more likely to resist managerial initiatives that they perceive harm animals than those that impact on their own terms and conditions at work, indicates that this distinction may have implications for employment relations (see also Dutton, Roberts and Bednar., 2010).

The importance of work orientation to the experience of work is consistent with Malka and Chatman’s ([2003](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Intrinsic#Ref41)) longitudinal study. This found that variation in job satisfaction among their sample of MBA graduates was largely explained by pre-existing extrinsic and intrinsic work orientations. While the satisfaction of those who sought extrinsic goods was positively associated with income growth, the intrinsically motivated reported a small negative relationship between income levels and job satisfaction so that as they earned more their satisfaction marginally declined.

In relating such disparate sources of meaning to the experience of meaningful work, Michaelson comments that:

There is often an implicit logic in this literature that meaningfulness involves a sort of “fit” or alignment between the individual and the tasks, job or work he or she performs. That is, to the degree that work fulfils one’s needs or matches one’s values or beliefs, then work is often seen as meaningful.” (Michaelson et al., 2014: 79)

Critically, such a conceptualization of meaningful work is processual rather than substantive because there is no standard by which “meaningful” work might be distinguished other than its fulfillment of the individual’s “values or beliefs.” And while this provides an account through which to understand the phenomenology of meaningful work, it does little for those who seek to prioritize the provision of meaningful work as a “public policy concern” (Breen, 2016: *passim*) or as “a fundamental human need” (Yeoman, [2014](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Conceptualising#Ref55): 235) in liberal or welfare accounts. For liberals, “meaningful work” thereby reduces to just one more preference to be satisfied (Maitland, 1989) while for welfarists “It is morally arbitrary for the state to put its thumb on the scale to further some of these purposes over others” (Arneson, [1987](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref4): 523).

Lepisto and Pratt’s ([2016](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref33)) argument that the field has been marred by a failure to distinguish between the phenomenological realization of meaningful work and the justifications that enable workers to distinguish between work that has meaning and work that does not is also thrown into sharp relief. For both liberals and welfarists, matters of personal preference are, as Arneson puts it, “morally arbitrary”; the state should not “put its thumb on the scale” for it has no stronger grounds so to do than one individual has in claiming the superiority of their “values or beliefs” over those of any other agent. You might value work that helps others (Care, 1984), I might value work that pays well, and there is no non-arbitrary basis through which either of us might seek to persuade the other of the merits of our position. The only role for justification is in the means–end reasoning that enables us to align the ends provided by our preferences with the means afforded by the opportunities open to us. Lepisto and Pratt’s ([2016](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref33)) examples of the type of anomie into which individuals who are unable to justify the meaningfulness of their work are liable to sink, are to the point. Such individuals are at home in a contemporary social order in which the types of justificatory accounts that might provide such an argument are not only absent, but must be absent, because any such argument is held to be arbitrary and therefore without warrant. This relationship between the crisis of meaning in individual lives and the lack of a shared public standard of meaningful work may only be overcome if we can provide an account of the good that provides a background against which particular claims—those of meaningful work, but also of other goods—might be judged. Arneson recognizes this possibility but dismisses it:

If one rules out the grounding of pre-modern metaphysics and theology, the prospects for a rationally compelling perfectionism look dim. (Arneson, [1987](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref4): 584)

On Arneson’s account and that of liberals such as Maitland ([1989](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Rights#Ref40)), the types of justification which Lepisto and Pratt ([2016](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref33)) seek are arbitrary—we might collect them, but in so doing we would be engaged in an activity that had more in common with philately than social science. Arneson’s (1987) argument requires the denial of the distinction between preferences and goods and hence renders questions such as: “Should I desire X?” to be unanswerable. Nevertheless, a moment’s reflection on our own lives suggests that we not only consider which preferences to act on and in which circumstances, but also whether particular desires (for money, fame, the next cigarette, the downfall of our rival, or whatever) are worth having. To do this requires us to have at least an implicit understanding of the good against which to judge our preferences. Let us turn, then, to the neo-Aristotelian virtue tradition that attempts to provide a grounding for such questions to be asked and answered.

**Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics**

It is worth beginning this section with a clarification of language because the idea of “meaningful work” is simply not at home in a virtue tradition. Precisely because this tradition is concerned with the justification of claims to “good” and goods as they apply to whole classes of existents, “meaning” is something to be judged against such an understanding rather than being in any sense primary. To focus on “meaning” is to admit precisely to that form of relativism in which preferences trump goods. MacIntyre outlines this distinction when he states that:

Aristotle meant by “eudaimonia” a state such that there is nothing better that we could wish for ourselves or anyone else, a state in which the life of a rational animal is completed and perfected. There is no concept of a “meaningful life” in Aristotle or indeed anywhere in thought, I am inclined to say, until the nineteenth century. It is only when people are unable to conceive of human lives as having by their very nature some *telos*, the achievement of which perfects and completes such lives, that they ask “What could give meaning to a human life such as mine?” The question of the meaning of human life, as distinguished from the question about the ends of human life, is posed only when it can no longer be answered. (MacIntyre, [2015](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Interview#Ref37))

An account of good work is therefore privileged over that of meaningful work, and in its turn must find its place in a wider account of human goods. Virtue-based accounts, found across traditional pre-Enlightenment societies and in some contemporary marginal groups, are many and varied (MacIntyre, [2007](#Ref36) [[1981](#Ref36)]). They shared and share a common understanding of the relationship between the acquisition of virtues, those qualities of mind and character that enable us to identify and achieve goods, and the type of work we do.

This is the work of particular practices, human activities through which, among other features, distinctions become available that were at first obscure to us and their use becomes familiar through undertaking successively more challenging tasks; we may even develop or discover distinctions once we have become experienced practitioners ourselves. Meaning develops with such distinctions as those between colors in portraiture or some other practice in which a color palette is essential (MacIntyre, [1992](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Colors,#Ref34)). On this account, the concept of meaning, and the derivation of meaningfulness as its active attribution, is available only to the extent that we participate in relevant practices. To abstract “meaning” and “meaningfulness” from practices is to render them unintelligible; for it is only in the context of practice that such distinctions become available. It is this conceptualization of meaning and meaningfulness that informs MacIntyre’s contention that the concept of “the meaning of life” is unintelligible.

Our education as practitioners—as farmers, painters, acrobats, nurses, and many others—develops our virtues and enables us to learn how to make distinctions around the goods internal to them, and the standards of excellence they seek. On this account, meaning supervenes on practices so that distinctions around the goods and excellences of both practices and practitioners become available to us only as we learn. Such activities as the expression of an emotion through the painting of a particular type of shadow falling over the planes of a face, the critique of such expression, the development of traditions through which the delineation of and relationships between artistic styles is to be understood, and even the isolation of the *sui generis* are all meaning-making and meaning-contesting activities whose intelligibility derives from participation in relevant practices as practitioner or learned observer (Garcia-Ruiz and Rodriguez-Lluesma, [2014](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Consumption#Ref17)). It is only, for example, through an extensive familiarity with literature that the achievements of a Joyce or an Elliott might be understood, a familiarity with mathematics that enables an appreciation of the achievement of Ramanujan, but equally only through a familiarity with the soil and history of particular fields that a farmer can learn how best to manage them.

This understanding of meaning as supervening on activity takes us far from accounts in which work becomes meaningful only to the extent of fulfilling pre-existing psychological needs or motives. One consequence is that we acquire a dynamic understanding of preference and desire, not as surd facts, but as stages in the development of our learning about our own good; stages that may be frustrated by inadequate education, resources, and opportunities. But if things go well, virtues such as temperance and patience are acquired as we develop in becoming farmers, painters, acrobats, and nurses such that:

desires we initially bring to these tasks—often desires to please parents or teachers and to obtain goods that are the external rewards for success in this or that particular activity, prizes, fame, money, are displaced by and transformed into desires for the goods internal to each particular activity, and more especially, for the good of excellence in performing those tasks. (MacIntyre, [2000](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref35): 124)

Practitioners’ development not only actualizes excellence in products but also in ourselves because an intimate relationship holds between our experience of work and the development or frustration of our virtues. As we become able to better discern quality distinctions, identify the skills that we lack and work to overcome them, we develop a rank-ordering of relevant goods that directs our attention and effort:

It is not only the conception of such ends that may be unexpectedly transformed in the course of our activities. We too, while developing those skills and qualities of mind and character needed to achieve those ends, may discover that the transformation of ourselves that is involved is significantly different from what we had expected, in part perhaps because of the particularities of our circumstances, but in part because what such virtues as courage, patience, truthfulness, and justice require can never be fully specified in advance. Hence, as Aquinas emphasized, in the life of practice there are no fully adequate generalizations to guide us, no set of rules sufficient to do the work for us, something that each of us has to learn for her or himself as we move toward the achievement of the ends of our activities and the end of excellence in those activities. (MacIntyre, [2016](#Ref38): 51)

The pursuit of a practice enables the achievement of: “the good of a certain kind of life . . . the painter’s living out of a greater or lesser part of his or her life *as a painter* . . . is the second kind of good internal to painting’ (MacIntyre, [2007](#Ref36) [[1981](#Ref36)]: 190; emphasis retained). This relationship between our own development and our ability to achieve the goods internal to practices characterizes our apprenticeship and introduces us to the necessity of teleological reasoning; that is, reasoning towards the achievement of goods, both as individuals and with fellow practitioners and teachers. Denied this kind of education we are unlikely to acquire such an understanding of ourselves and our goods. While such an apprenticeship might occur at any stage in our lives, our virtues and moral agency will have to be recovered if they are not achieved in early education (MacIntyre, [2000](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref35)). What is it that we would have lost?

By contrast to other personality traits and approaches to human characteristics, each virtue has intellectual, emotional, motivational, and behavioral dimensions (Alzolo, [2017](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Virtues#Ref2)) so that, for example, the benevolent person not only acts in a particular way with appropriate understanding of her purposes but is informed by appropriate emotions. The person who saves the child from the on-rushing car is courageous only if their action is inspired by the desire to save the child rather than to impress onlookers or because they are careless about their own lives (Alzolo, [2017](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Virtues#Ref2): 775). Inasmuch as they are virtuous, however, they will be disposed both to recognize that this situation requires action and to take the action. According to MacIntyre the virtues are:

just those qualities that enable agents to identify both what goods are at stake in any particular situation and their relative importance in that situation *and* how that particular agent must act for the sake of the good and the best. (MacIntyre, [2016](#Ref38): 190; emphasis retained)

The virtues enable us to exercise our judgment around the application of tools, materials, means, and arguments as we encounter obstacles to the achievements of the harvest, the painting, the somersault, the administration of medicine and those countless other actions we need to perform at the right time and in the right way. Such virtues serve to guard against undue haste and to reduce the anxiety of waiting; they prevent us from attempting either to dominate or to withdraw from those decision-making contexts in which we reason about and towards common goods (MacIntyre, [2007](#Ref36) [[1981](#Ref36)]). The virtue of patience, alongside the other virtues developed through participation in practices, prepares us to reason about goods as a whole; and to be denied participation in such practices is to risk becoming the victim of untutored desires, those which are not put to the question. To engage in dialogue around the meaningfulness of our work, rather than simply to state a preference, is to be able to account for the reasons why our work is meaningful in light of an account of good reasons as such. Meaningful work is thus epiphenomenal of the ordering of the directedness of our lives:

For individuals cannot define or redefine their place in achieving the common goods of home, school and workplace without also defining and redefining the place in their lives of those various goods through the achievement of which they direct themselves toward that good which would complete and perfect their lives. We go, that is, from asking “What is my good qua family member, qua student or teacher, qua apprentice or master of this set of working skills?” to asking “What is my good qua human agent?” In answering this latter question, we decide how the various aspects and relationships of each role are to be integrated into a single life and how the unity of that life is to be understood in terms of the various stages through which we pass from conception to death. (MacIntyre, [2016](#Ref38): 192–3).

It follows from the centrality of participation in practices to the development of the virtues that a neo-Aristotelian understanding distinguishes between work with which we are engaged as practitioners and work whose organization excludes us from such activities and relationships. The relationship between practices and the institutions in which they are housed is thus pivotal to the neo-Aristotelian understanding of work, for the institution is both prerequisite to and constantly in tension with the practices it houses (MacIntyre, [2007](#Ref36) [[1981](#Ref36)]; Moore, [2017](#Ref44)).

This truncated account of the neo-Aristotelian understanding of the virtues may provide a coherent theoretical framework, but what evidence is there for its contentions? While the scale of the type of longitudinal enquiry into virtue development that would test neo-Aristotelian contentions about habituation, practices, and the exercise of virtue has not been undertaken, evidence consistent with many of them may be found in empirical studies inspired by virtue ethics traditions, in increasing numbers of studies into particular virtues, and in work from experimental psychology.

Evidence of the relationship between experience of the goods produced through our work and changes in both behavior and subsequent preferences is found in the field experiments of Grant and his co-workers (see especially Grant ([2007](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Relational#Ref19), [2008a](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Designing#Ref20), [2008b](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref21)); Grant et al. ([2007](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Impact#Ref22)); Grant and Hoffman ([2011](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\It’s#Ref23))). These quasi-experiments demonstrate that the magnitude, frequency, and scope of prosocial job characteristics are positively correlated with affective commitment to beneficiaries (Grant, [2008a](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Designing#Ref20): 29). Whether hospital workers improving hand-washing (Grant and Hoffman, [2011](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\It’s#Ref23)), fund-raisers improving revenue (Grant et al., [2007](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Impact#Ref22)), or lifeguards’ enhanced sense of the meaningfulness of their work, experience of the impact of work on others has consistent positive and persistent (Grant, [2007](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Relational#Ref19): 403) effects on a range of outcomes. Grant argues that conventional understandings of orientations to altruism or self-interest should be replaced by the question: “*When and under what conditions* do employees care about others?” (Grant, [2007](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Relational#Ref19): 406; Grant’s emphasis). This account supports the traditional Aristotelian notion of habituation through which the work that we undertake encourages particular behavioral and affective responses.

A second source of evidence is found in the now extensive body of survey data (Beadle, Sison and Fontrodona, 2015) in which individual virtues have been found to predict such outcomes as organizational citizenship behaviors (Morse and Cohen, [2017](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Virtues#Ref45)). While there are critical differences between the understanding of virtues, and in particular their individuation and measurement in psychological studies and those of classical accounts (Alzolo, [2015](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Virtuous#Ref1)), these studies are largely consistent with an association between both self- and peer-reported virtues and persistent behavioral traits.

A third source of empirical evidence is found in distinctly MacIntyrean studies into workers’ resistance against institutional pressure to undermine internal goods of practices. These include von Krogh et al.’s ([2012](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Carrots#Ref51)) study of open source software engineers resisting the commercialization of code and Robson’s ([2015](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Constancy#Ref47)) account of Scottish bankers who undertook career-limiting opposition to the imposition of sales targets on business clients.

**A virtue-based account of meaningful work**

Finally, we turn to how neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics understands the wide divergence between preferences that has been so regularly noted in the empirical studies into meaningful work and how, unlike those approaching meaningful work from liberal of welfarist traditions, such findings are not probative to the case for “meaningful work.” On the account presented in this chapter, the type of work that develops the virtues involves tasks whose difficulty increases over time, thereby ensuring challenge; in which apprentices receive ongoing feedback, first from their teachers and later from peers (see Hall ([2011](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref26)) for an example from surgical practice); in which they enter into relationships not only with other practitioners but with those of the past and the future (see Bailey and Madden’s (2017) account of stonemasonry); and in which progress is marked by gradual increases in the ability to exercise autonomy and discretion.

While not using the language of meaning, for reasons considered earlier, these features of the practices that develop virtue echo those that characterize the realization of meaningful work in both classic (Hackman and Oldham, [1975](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Development#Ref25)) and contemporary accounts (Lepisto and Pratt, [2016](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref33)). For the virtue tradition it is only in such contexts that workers may experience the type of calling which directs career choices and relationships—such as Bunderson and Thompson’s ([2009](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\The#Ref14)) zookeepers. The divergence in contemporary preferences is consistent with the decline of such skilled work. It is not to be understood in terms of character traits alone but is socially and historically situated in an environment in which practice-based work is marginal (though see Breen [2007](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Work#Ref13) for counterarguments).

The availability and distribution of work requiring exercise of the virtues is therefore an ethical concern for a virtue-informed notion of the good. Unlike those liberal and welfarist accounts that deny a substantive notion of human good (MacIntyre, [2016](#Ref38)), a virtue-based account argues that our preferences must be educated if they are to make a contribution to our deliberations. Our ability to reason, individually and with others, about goods, is itself imperiled if we have not been introduced to teleological reasoning and to the virtues through which the conclusions of that reasoning might be enacted. Without such an education, our preferences will be ill-formed.

The availability and distribution of the work of practices is therefore a central concern of virtue traditions. It is perhaps then unsurprising that those most concerned with justice in the allocation of tasks and their distribution have regularly contributed ethical critiques of work organization (Breen, [2007](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Work#Ref13); Hsieh, [2008](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Survey#Ref29); Sayer, [2009](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Contributive#Ref49); Walsh, [1994](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref52)). Walsh, for example, argues for a robust definition of meaningful work based on the extent to which workers control goals and the design of tasks (Walsh, [1994](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Meaningful#Ref52): 243) while Sayer argues that workers should engage in both conceptual and operational tasks which are understood in terms of the larger projects to which they contribute (Sayer, [2009](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Contributive#Ref49): 5–6), and Breen ([2007](file:///C:\Users\hrrb1\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\0DX3DRBR\Work#Ref13)) lauds the experiments in cellular production by Volvo’s Udavella plant. For all of these researchers the observation that workers may be ostensibly satisfied in work that is routine and monotonous does not provide justification for a distribution of tasks that concentrates challenge and contribution in the work of others. One consequence of this virtue-based critique is that the allocation of work tasks is never merely a matter of technical disposal by those armed with the rationale of efficiency but always an ethical question in which the virtue of justice should be central.

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