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Conceptualising Meaningful Work as a Fundamental Human Need

Abstract

In liberal political theory, meaningful work is a preference in the market. Although this avoids transgressing liberal neutrality, the subsequent constraint upon state intervention aimed at promoting the social and economic conditions for widespread meaningful work is normatively unsatisfactory. Instead, meaningful work can be understood to be a fundamental human need, which all persons require in order to satisfy their inescapable interests in freedom, autonomy and dignity. To overcome the inadequate treatment of meaningful work by liberal political theory, I situate the good of meaningful work within a liberal perfectionist framework, from which standpoint I develop a normative justification for making meaningful work the object of political action. To understand the content of meaningful work, I make use of Susan Wolf's distinct value of meaningfulness, in which she brings together the dimensions of objectivity and subjectivity into the 'bipartite value' of meaningfulness (BVM) (Wolf, 2010). However, in order to be able to incorporate the BVM into our lives, we must become valuers, that is, co-creators of values and meanings. This demands that we acquire the relevant capabilities and status as co-authorities in the realm of value. I conclude that meaningful work is of first importance because it is a fundamental human need, and that society ought to be arranged to allow as many people as possible to experience their work as meaningful through the development of the relevant capabilities.

For consideration by Philosophical Foundations

Key words

capabilities; human need; liberal neutrality; liberal perfectionism; meaningful work; meaning in life

Introduction

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4 *'Working is about the search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for*
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6 *recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for*
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8 *a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying'. (Terkel,*
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10 *1975: 1)*

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13 In advanced industrialised societies, work occupies a peculiarly ambivalent position –
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16 simultaneously valued for providing the means for self-realisation and disvalued for being
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18 burdensome and compulsory. Shershow (2005) describes work as consisting of a 'double
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20 necessity', whereby 'we see ourselves both as *working to live* and as *living to work*' (ibid: 13,
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22 original emphasis). Work is either a source of expressive human action, one of 'the hopes of
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24 civilisation' (Morris, 1993), fulfilled in a correctly ordered society which enables all persons
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26 to do decent, humane and dignified work; or it is an experience of oppressive degradation,
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28 from which we must escape, since the worker deprived of worthwhile activities 'generally
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30 becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become' (Smith,
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32 1999 [1776]), resulting in him becoming 'a crippled monstrosity' (Marx, 1978 [1867]).

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34 Despite the many ways in which our daily experience of work falls short of
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36 meaningfulness, the ideal of meaningful work retains a strong hold upon our imagination. In
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38 this paper, I aim to show that the conceptual evaluation of meaningful work is not simply an
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40 exercise in remote abstraction, but directs us toward the pragmatic political possibility of
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42 ensuring that all work possesses the structure for meaningfulness. Following Kovacs (1986), I
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44 take work to be 'a basic mode of being in the world', where 'to work means to humanise the
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46 world and to produce something' (ibid: 198). In this sense, work functions to create and to
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48 sustain values and meanings beyond the realm of its economic productivity: work is a mode
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1 of being in the world which transcends the employment relation to include all the activities
2 which contribute to producing and reproducing a complex system of social cooperation.
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5 But if work is to humanise the world, it must at the same time humanise the one
6 through whom the work takes place. In William Morris's words: 'Nothing should be made by
7 man's labour which is not worth doing; or which must be made by labour degrading to the
8 makers' (Morris, 1884). Work cannot be meaningful if it requires the enslavement of the
9 worker, the deformation of her human capabilities, or the misrecognition of her vital
10 commitments. If non-meaningful work visits avoidable harms upon people, then the
11 widespread institution of meaningful work is a proper moral and political project – and even
12 a necessary element in addressing the many challenges of our times, including how
13 increasingly unequal societies unevenly distribute the benefits and burdens of the work of
14 social cooperation.¹
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28 I ground my reasons for making meaningful work for all a political project in a
29 normative argument that being able to experience one's life as meaningful is a fundamental
30 human need, which, under present economic arrangements, is extremely difficult for most
31 people to satisfy if their work lacks the structure for meaningfulness. I shall argue that
32 meaningful work is a fundamental human need because it satisfies our inescapable interests
33 in being able to experience the constitutive values of autonomy, freedom and dignity. By
34 requiring social organisation to ensure that all work is structured for meaningfulness, I
35 distinguish my approach from liberal political theorists, for whom meaningful work, whilst
36 an important ideal, is an individual preference which may or may not be expressed in any
37 particular conception of the good life, and thus cannot be the legitimate target of state
38 intervention without coming into conflict with the principle of liberal neutrality. Instead, I
39 propose that meaningful work is a fundamental human need within a liberal perfectionist
40 framework (cf. Roessler, 2012). I go on to evaluate the conceptual content of meaningfulness
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1 using Wolf's (2010) concept of a bipartite value of meaningfulness, arguing that, in order to
2 experience our lives as meaningful, we require certain capabilities for objective valuing and
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4 affective attachment, supported by the recognition of our equal status as co-authorities in the
5 realm of value. This implies that the possibility of experiencing meaningfulness in work
6
7 depends upon our becoming valuers, situated in social structures allowing us to develop the
8
9 relevant capabilities (Sen, 1999) and enabling us to join with others in interpretive sense-
10 making (see for example Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Wrzesniewski et al, 2003; Bechky,
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12 2003).

23 **Meaningfulness in Work: Preference or Need?**

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27 I claim that meaningfulness is a fundamental human need which liberal political
28 theorists have subordinated to their commitment to the principle of liberal neutrality. As a
29 result, our need for work which is free, autonomous and dignified has been relegated to the
30 status of an individual taste or preference, which it is no business of the state's to promote.
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32 But this settlement is normatively inadequate when the centrality of work in modern societies
33 makes it increasingly difficult for individuals to remedy non-meaningful work in other action
34 contexts.
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43 **The Argument for Meaningful Work as a Preference**

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51 Meaningful work, liberal political theorists complain, is an immodest ideal, because,
52 by making work central to the possibility of a meaningful life, individual preferences for
53 meaning in other action contexts, such as the family, community or political life, are crowded
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55 out (Arneson, 1987). Moreover, since meaningful work is constituted by substantive
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normative commitments to what it is to live a good life, variously including values such as autonomy (Schwartz, 1982), expressive freedom (Marx, 1844), complex activities (Rawls, 1999 [1971]; Elster, 1986a), or self-respect (Honneth, 1995), then it arbitrarily specifies the content of the good life for all (see also Michaelson et al, 2012; Rosso et al, 2010).² As a result, the substantive normative content of meaningful work violates the liberal principle of neutrality, which maintains that a liberal democratic state must remain neutral between different conceptions of living. Since people possess a diversity of subjective preferences for the kind of work they wish to undertake, then the state has no legitimate role in specifying whether or not that work should be meaningful.

The liberal neutralist is concerned that to legislate for the character of work means that one kind of good will be prioritised over other equally valuable goods. If the state were to privilege meaningful work, then the range of values which people might incorporate into their conception of living would be narrowed. So, even though we can acknowledge the importance of meaningful work for living a good life, meaningful work must be restricted to the status of an individual preference (Kymlicka, 2002; Miller, 1999; Christman, 2002). To do otherwise is to support state sponsored perfectionism which promotes one conception of living, constraining options for finding meaning in other activities. In arguing against both a strong and a weak right to meaningful work, Arneson (1987) says: ‘implementing a right to meaningful work elevates one particular category of good, intrinsic job satisfaction, and arbitrarily privileges that good and those people who favour it over other equally desirable goods and equally wise fans of those other goods’ (ibid: 524-5). For Arneson, meaningful work is a perfectionist ideal which ‘assumes objective knowledge of the good life for human beings, the activities that constitute human flourishing’ (ibid: 520).

As a consequence of similar anxieties, Rawls (1999 [1971]) acknowledges the value of meaningful work (ibid: 463-4) from the point of view of human flourishing and autonomy

1 (it is one of the human goods), but does not make meaningful work a primary good because
2 to do so would result in the good of meaningful work being prioritised over equally valuable
3 human goods. For Rawls, meaningful work is crucial to justice as fairness, because work with
4 the requisite structure supports the self-respect of citizens, but it need not be part of the good
5 for everyone - and to make it so is to advocate perfectionism which breaches the priority of
6 liberty. Since to legislate for the interior content of work would require interference in the
7 available range of values which society allows to be constitutive of the good life, a liberal
8 democratic state ought to have no interest in the normative content of work, except to ensure
9 that work meets basic humane standards, such as health and safety, employment rights, or
10 welfare support for the unlucky, and that society is organised to secure justice in the equality
11 of opportunity for the available supply of meaningful work. Where equality of opportunity
12 pertains, we do not require guarantees for the interior content of work because the market will
13 sort out individual preferences for meaningful or non-meaningful work (cf. Nozick, 1974).
14 Thus, provided individuals are able to satisfy their preferences for meaning in other spheres
15 of living, we need have no further concerns for the normative content of the work they
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37 *The Compensation Argument*

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46 But constructing meaningful work as an individual preference which can be satisfied in
47 the market does not entirely eliminate the intuition that liberal political theory should have
48 something more to say about the interior content of work. We are uncomfortable concurring
49 with Henry Ford's conclusion that 'to some types of mind [...] the ideal job is one where the
50 creative instinct need not be expressed' (Breen, 2011: 9). Surely preferences for some kinds
51 of work over others do not extend to the desire to do work where no expressive human
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1 faculty need be exercised? Instead, I argue that it is incumbent upon a liberal democratic state
2 to take seriously the moral concern that the interior content of much contemporary work
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4 stunts the human flourishing of workers by failing to meet their fundamental human interests
5 in autonomy, freedom and social recognition. This is because non-meaningful work visits
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7 extensive harms upon those who have to do it, which for most people cannot be offset by
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9 compensations in other spheres of action.
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14 If people are harmed by having to do non-meaningful work, then liberal complacency
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16 with respect to the availability and distribution of meaningful work becomes difficult to
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18 maintain. After all, despite the remarkable growth in varieties of work, as well as persisting
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20 expectations that work should be attractive or meaningful, work often fails to provide even a
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22 basic standard of living, let alone meets minimal standards for a humane and dignified
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24 experience of working. A common response to these concerns is some variant of the
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26 Compensation Argument: that work does not have to be meaningful, provided we can find
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28 our lives as a whole to be meaningful because of our activities in other spheres of living, such
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30 as our status in a community of interest (see Gomberg, 2007). Whilst I admit this to be a
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32 possibility, I argue that, in contemporary societies, such a strategy is extremely difficult for
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34 most individuals to pursue, because of the ways in which the burdens and benefits of the
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36 work we do shapes our lives as a whole. Work provides access to the roles, practices and
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38 social institutions of society which allocate resources for the development of the capabilities
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40 necessary to secure our social position and economic participation over the life course.
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42 Furthermore, such social structures embody the values we can potentially incorporate into our
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44 practical identities, grounding the sense that our lives have meaning (Roessler, 2012; cf.
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46 Korsegaard, 2009). This means that, in no small way, the work we do determines ‘the
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48 distribution of lives’ (Walzer, 1994). Indeed, to such an extent that, when our work lacks the
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50 requisite content in a system which restricts the supply of meaningful work, then we are less
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1 likely to develop the human capabilities necessary for equal participation over the life course,
2 with the result that our lives as a whole are less likely to be structured for meaningfulness.

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5 I argue that the Compensation Argument fails to address three kinds of concerns
6 arising from a social organisation of work which generates a scarcity of meaningful work:
7 firstly, the injustice of an unfair distribution of the most attractive work; secondly, harms to
8 the capability formation necessary for equal participation in making one's contribution; and
9 thirdly, the diminishing of human well-being.

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12 Firstly, the injustice of an unfair distribution of attractive work - all societies provide
13 forms of meaningful work, but it has been meaningful work for the few and not for the many:
14 Lane (1991) comments that it is the 'privileged class' for whom work offers 'self-direction,
15 substantive complexity and challenge, variety, little supervision, and intrinsic satisfaction of
16 excellence or self-determination' (ibid: 302). But liberal political theory has had little to say
17 on the subject of elite expropriation of the most 'attractive work' (Fourier, 1983), nor has
18 remedying the harms of non-meaningful work been central to theories of liberal egalitarian
19 justice – and particularly of how social structures operate to shape an individual's search for
20 meaning by enabling or disabling his capabilities for experiencing meaningfulness. Schooler
21 (2007) theorises that one way in which social structure directly affects psychological
22 functioning is through occupational conditions, where she defines social structure as 'the
23 patterned interrelationships upon a set of individual and organisational statuses, as defined by
24 the nature of their interacting roles' (ibid: 371). Schooler concludes that being able to
25 undertake complex work, that is, work requiring self-direction, thought and judgement,
26 depends upon where the job is located in the social structure of society (ibid: 375). This
27 suggests that the way in which society arranges the work of social cooperation is unjust,
28 because it unfairly allocates and unnecessarily constrains the kind of work which is most
29 likely to enable individuals to satisfy their fundamental human interests in exercising thought
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1 and judgement.⁴ Given the importance of the nature of work for the development of human
2 capabilities, then justice requires that all work ought to be organised to allow each person to
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4 experience beings and doings which foster vital human capacities for thinking and feeling
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6 (see Sen, 2009).
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9 Secondly, the harms of non-meaningful work to the capability formation necessary to
10 secure equal participation over the life course - such harms are not mere inconveniences to be
11 remedied elsewhere, because, from poorly developed human capabilities to physical, mental
12 and psychological deterioration, they affect the flourishing of an individual in every
13 dimension of her life (Kohn & Schooler, 1983). Drawing upon Kohn & Schooler, Schwartz
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15 (1982) argues that the prevailing structure of work is degrading because it fails to provide for
16 the exercise of autonomy which is vital to moral personhood (Schwartz, 1982: 636). Lack of
17 autonomy whilst at work affects a person's ability to lead an autonomous life as a whole,
18 because the lack of autonomy at work cannot be made up for by full autonomy elsewhere:
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20 'When persons work for considerable lengths of time at jobs that involve mainly mechanical
21 activity, they tend to be made less capable of and less interested in rationally framing,
22 pursuing and adjusting their own plans during the rest of their time' (Schwartz, 1982: 637).
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Autonomy is not simply having the capability to form one's own plans and purposes - it is
also being able to exercise those capacities throughout all aspects of one's life. Schwartz
(ibid) argues that action contexts cannot be artificially separated, and we cannot assume that
if a person is able to practice autonomy in one sphere, then it does not matter if a person is
deprived of autonomy in another. Kohn & Schooler (1978; 1983.) find that the structure of
work affects the development of abilities to sustain thought and exercise judgement, and that
the loss of these abilities carries over into the rest of the person's life so that those who
undertake challenging and creative market work also demonstrate a preference for leisure
work with similar characteristics. Kornhauser (1965) in his study of factory workers in

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Detroit found that: ‘factory employment, especially in routine production tasks, does give evidence of extinguishing workers’ ambition, initiative, and purposeful direction toward life goals’ (ibid: 252).

Specifically, the harms of non-meaningful work undermine an individual’s ability to participate in the work of social cooperation over a lifetime by: stunting the development of her capabilities for free and autonomous action; undermining her sense of self-esteem and self-worth, of her standing relative to others; and thwarting her sense of efficacy, of being able to act with others upon the world. Together, these harms to capabilities, status, and efficacy reduce a person’s ability to build the practical identity necessary to securing a sense that her life has meaning (cf. Korsegaard, 2009). Thus, work with the right content for avoiding such harms is an essential experience for those living in contemporary societies who have an interest in the development of their human capabilities, the securing of their social status, and their sense of being able to act with others – which is all people.

Thirdly, the diminishing of human well-being - the psychology of work and organisational studies literatures provides compelling empirical evidence that being involved in ‘satisfying work’ is fundamental for psychological well-being ‘across various domains of human functioning’ (Blustein, 2008). Being able to experience meaningful work is linked to greater reported levels of well-being (Arnold et al, 2007) and to higher levels of job satisfaction (Sparks & Schenk, 2001). Kohn and Schooler (1983; 1978), in their studies of how occupational conditions affect cognitive and psychological functioning in a 1970s longitudinal research of male workers in the US, present evidence for the pervasive impact of the interior content of work upon an individual’s sense of competence and self-respect: ‘Hence, doing substantially complex work tends to increase one’s respect for one’s own capacities, one’s valuation of self-direction, one’s intellectuality (even in leisure-time pursuits), and one’s sense that the problems one encounters are manageable’ (ibid: 304).

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Kohn & Schooler (1983) looked at occupational self-direction in terms of substantial complexity, closeness of supervision, and routinisation, of which substantive complexity was the core concept. They define substantively complex work as ‘work that, in its very substance, requires thought and independent judgement’ (ibid: 106), and identify a positive link between the substantive complexity of work and intellectual flexibility. They observed that job conditions shape personality (ibid: 47): jobs differing in complexity and self-direction were occupied by people with differing levels of cognitive functioning, but over time the nature of the job led to changes in the intellectual flexibility of job holders. Kohn & Schooler (1983) conclude: ‘The structural imperatives of the job – particularly those conditions that facilitate or restrict the exercise of self-direction in work – affect workers’ values, orientations to the self and society, and cognitive functioning primarily through a direct process of learning from the job and generalising what has been learned to other realms of life’ (ibid: 62-6, 126; see also Kornhauser, 1964).

The Kohn-Schooler hypothesis receives strong confirmation from a 1978 study of Polish workers (Kohn & Slomczynski, 1990), and a Japanese study of employed males (Naoi & Schooler, 1985). More recently, Hauser & Roan’s (2007) evaluation of the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study shows there are moderate, but significant, effects of work complexity upon abstract reasoning abilities in midlife. Moreover, Kornhauser (1965) identifies how the mental health of workers deteriorated ‘as we move from skilled, responsible, varied types of work to jobs lower in those respects’ (ibid: 75-76). Physical as well as mental health is affected by the interior content of work: for example, the Whitehall I and II studies showed that lack of control in the work environment, indicated by low job status, was associated with an increase in heart disease amongst government office workers (Bosma et al, 1997). Importantly, Bosma et al find that the objective state of low job control, independent of subjective reporting of the experience of low job control, has a deleterious impact upon

1 health. They conclude that the harmful effects of disease can be ameliorated by increasing
2 task variety and providing enriched opportunities for having a voice in decision-making.⁵
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5 Such studies are highly suggestive of the way work affects the shape of a life, making
6 the harms experienced at work difficult to remedy elsewhere. Taken together, evidence for
7 the harms of non-meaningful work compels us to re-consider the claims of liberal theory -
8 that the promotion of meaningful work is not state business because it violates liberal
9 neutrality. Of course, such research does not allow us to claim that a particularly forthright,
10 reflective and capable individual doing non-meaningful work cannot find their lives to be
11 meaningful because of their activities in other action contexts. But, if the present organisation
12 of work unjustly distributes, and constrains the supply of, meaningful work, resulting in
13 distorted capabilities and diminished well-being, then having to do non-meaningful work
14 does present formidable barriers to most people being able to do so.
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28 In sum, the Compensation Argument fails because, firstly, our experiences in work
29 shapes the capabilities, status and identities which structure our lives as a whole and,
30 secondly, the course of our life is influenced by the associations we belong to, and the social
31 and economic positions we occupy (Young, 1990). Work is demanding, time consuming and,
32 in complex societies, often requires skills to be developed over many years of training. Being
33 able to do work with the requisite content structures an individual's life as whole, but the
34 supply of meaningful work is restricted. This means that a just society should seek to make
35 available to everyone work which secures the opportunity to develop important human
36 capabilities through being able to do something worthwhile in mutually respectful relations
37 with others.
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The Need for Meaningfulness Argument

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5 The harmfulness of non-meaningful work is derived from its inability to satisfy
6 inescapable human interests to be able to experience freedom, autonomy and dignity. The
7 fundamental human need for meaning, implied by such interests, justify institutional
8 guarantees for meaningful work, given the centrality of work in modern society. Frankl
9 (1978; 1988) claims that the search for meaning, or the ‘will to meaning’, is a universal
10 human motivation which addresses a fundamental need for a sense that one’s life is worth
11 living (see also Maddi, 1971). He says that the need for meaning is satisfied by active
12 engagement with ordinary human living: ‘Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to
13 find the right answer to its problems and to fulfil the tasks which it constantly sets for each
14 individual’ (Frankl, 1984: 98). In a similar vein: meaning is ‘the ontological significance of
15 life; making sense of life situations, deriving purpose in existence’ (Martsoff & Mickey,
16 1998: 294). Frankl acknowledges that there is a givenness to everyday problems, which
17 appears to undermine our personal autonomy, but this does not mean that we are not
18 choosers, since it is incumbent upon us to take responsibility for resolving the struggles of
19 everyday living, demanding that we make reflective judgements when choosing the modes of
20 acting and being appropriate to the situations in which we find ourselves. However, the
21 necessity for an individual to choose how she responds to everyday situations does not imply
22 that she bears all the responsibility for finding her life to be meaningful, since the Kohn-
23 Schooler research shows us how social structures can enable or disable capabilities, status
24 and efficacy, thereby determining the resources which society makes available to any
25 particular individual in her search for meaning.
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56 Our need for meaning is confirmed by a number of different sources. From
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58 *psychology*, Baumeister (1991) identifies four needs for meaning: a sense of purpose; a sense
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of efficacy; being able to view oneself as having positive value or being morally justified; and a sense of positive self-worth. Blustein (2006) identifies three fundamental needs for survival, self-determination and relatedness, consistent with the harms of non-meaningful work already discussed: stunted capabilities, damaged self-worth, and an inhibited sense of efficacy in acting with others upon the world and in forming a practical identity. From *moral philosophy*, Wolf (2010) suggests that meaningfulness may be ‘*felt* to answer to a certain kind of human need’ (Wolf, 2010: 26), one where we experience the need for meaningfulness as urgent and inescapable, because it addresses vital human interests which are necessary for human flourishing:

‘Our interest in being able to see our lives as worthwhile from some point of view external to ourselves, and our interest in being able to see ourselves as part of an at least notional community that can understand us and that to some degree shares our point of view, then, seems to me to be pervasive if not universal. By engaging in projects of independent value, by protecting, preserving, creating, and realizing value the source of which lies outside of ourselves, we can satisfy these interests. *Indeed, it is hard to see how we could satisfy them in any other way*’ (ibid: 31, emphasis added).

From *political theory*, Holbrook (1977) describes the need for meaning as a ‘primary human need’ which he claims has been insufficiently recognised in political deliberation. According to Holbrook, reductionist philosophies have recast men and women into the roles of social functionaries in which our human worth has degraded into the value our roles and status positions have within the formal economy. Holbrook suggests that the frustrated will to meaning manifests itself in dysfunctions such as compulsive consumerism: ‘If we reduce men

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to their functions, both in their life and the predominant philosophy of their existence, they are doomed [...] For man reduced to functional man, there is no possibility of finding any meaning in his life (ibid: 183).

I argue that individuals who undertake non-meaningful work are less likely to be able to satisfy their need for meaning, and are thereby made unacceptably vulnerable to the harms of non-meaningful work. Remedying such harms demands a politics of meaningfulness, enabled by collective deliberation over the ways in which the interior content of work can be structured to alleviate unfreedom, heteronomy and misrecognition. Holbrook proposes that the fundamental question for politics is: *‘what opportunities do societies provide for the satisfaction of the human need for meaning, and how should societies be organised in order to provide those opportunities?’ (ibid.)*. Workers are not motivated purely by external goods - they act also out of a fundamental need for living a human kind of life, which goes beyond the necessity for survival. In the absence of a functioning politics of meaningfulness, workers will seek some outlet for their frustrated will to meaning. For example, denied the experience of autonomy, workers will invent simulations of autonomy in the form of games, or even make deliberate mistakes, which Burawoy (1979) describes as the art of ‘making out’.

Amongst numerous testimonies to such practices, is that of the worker who said: ‘Yes, I want my signature on ‘em too. Sometimes, out of pure meanness, when I make something, I put a little dent in it. I like to do something to make it really unique. Hit it with a hammer. I deliberately fuck it up to see if it’ll get by, just so I can say I did it’ (Mike Levevre, Steelworker, in Terkel, 1975: 22). In a liberal democratic society, the expressive need for meaning must take the form of a politics of meaningfulness, which seeks to ensure that people are not prevented from experiencing their lives as meaningful because of the work they do. And I propose that the starting point for such a politics of meaningfulness is to

1 understand meaningful work, not as a preference in the market, but as a fundamental human
2 need.

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5 *Meaningfulness is a Fundamental Human Need*
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10 My claim is that meaningfulness is a fundamental human need because it identifies
11 and satisfies what is of profound importance for living a human kind of life: ‘human needs
12 are the things that must be if human life is to be’ (Reader, 2005: 135). Thomson (2005)
13 defines a fundamental need as:
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22 ‘a non-derivative [...] inescapable necessary condition in order for the person
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24 A not to undergo serious harm’ (Thomson, 2005: 175).
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29 A fundamental need directs us to what constitutes the normative outlines of a person’s
30 life: ‘A person’s needs have a bearing on how he ought to live, but drives have no such
31 relevance’ (Thomson, 1987: 14). A person is harmed when their fundamental needs remain
32 unmet because, in such circumstances, they are ‘deprived of activities and experiences that
33 answer such interests’ (Thomson, 2005: 177). Thomson (1987) argues that a fundamental
34 need addresses vital interests that are characteristic of a person’s essential nature. Vital
35 interests are reasons which lie behind our ‘non-instrumental desires’ (ibid: 64), where an
36 interest ‘defines the range and type of activities and experiences that partly constitute a
37 meaningful, worthwhile life, and it defines the nature of their worth’ (ibid: 76). This means
38 that harm is not be understand just in terms of thwarted desire satisfaction; instead, harm
39 arises when the unavoidable interests a person has in her life being a certain way are ignored
40 or misrecognised, independent of whether or not her desires have been met. Interests may be
41 unfulfilled even when desires are satisfied, because people adapt their expectations to the
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1 constraints of their circumstances (Elster, 1983): ‘the poor who have never had money are
2 deprived and harmed, even though their standard of living has never actually fallen’
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4 (Thomson, 1987: 26). This is because a continuing, unchanging, low quality of living, whilst
5 it may keep life going, damages a person’s potential to lead a life of human flourishing. Wolf
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7 (2010) suggests that the value of meaningfulness addresses several important human
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9 interests: an aspiration to objectivity or being connected to something larger than ourselves; a
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11 need for self-esteem or being able to judge ourselves and our projects as worthwhile; a sense
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13 of belonging or a wish not to be alone; and existential security (ibid: 28). Our self-esteem
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15 depends upon being able to assess ourselves and our situation from an external point of view,
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17 and then being able to judge our lives as ‘good and valuable’ against the standards generated
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19 by that exterior standpoint (ibid.) which then becomes a ‘rightful source of pride’ (ibid.).
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21 Meaningful work is a fundamental human need in this sense because it addresses our
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23 inescapable interest in living a life of human quality. And in modern societies, such
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25 inescapable interests are satisfied or thwarted in the work we do together in a system of social
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27 cooperation.
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36 So, fundamental human needs are not simply what are required (negatively) if harm is
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38 to be avoided, but are necessities (positively) for a flourishing life. Furthermore, the
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40 fundamental needs which we attribute to a person depend on what we understand to be their
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42 value as human beings. Reader (2005) defines entrenched needs as needs which are
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44 determined by relatively unchangeable facts of nature, facts which generate a need for work
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46 of a certain kind. She argues that what we understand by need is grounded in what we
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48 understand the human being to be: for example, in the same way that food is not simply what
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50 keep human physiology going, work is not simply what provides necessities for continuing to
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52 exist. If the human being is merely biological then work can be provided in any way which
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54 simply sustains life, it will not matter if the work is of poor quality. If, however, the human
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1 being is essentially free, rational and social, then this generates a demand that he is treated
2 with respect in relation to work, which, given the kind of creature he is, requires that the work
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4 he does possesses the requisite interior content. Thus, providing a person with any kind of
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6 work which sustains human existence is not sufficient for satisfying the need for meaningful
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8 work, since a person who has become inured to non-meaningful work will still have
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10 inescapable interests in the goods of freedom, autonomy and dignity. A useful illustration is a
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12 study of mid-life Australians which indicates that poor quality work involving job strain and
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14 insecurity may be as bad for health outcomes as unemployment (Broom et al., 2006).
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18 I conclude that meaningful work is an ‘inescapably valuable’ (Thomson, 2005: 84)
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20 fundamental human need, because it answers our unavoidable interests in work being
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22 structured by freedom, autonomy and dignity.⁶ Therefore, to argue for the political
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24 importance of meaningful work is to make the claim that each individual ought to be treated
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26 as a certain kind of being, one possessing dignity and worth. This means that, in
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28 contemporary societies, the centrality of work for securing a life of human flourishing makes
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30 evaluating how work inhibits the development of capabilities, status and efficacy a political
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32 priority. If we accept this claim, then meaningful work is not a mere preference in the market,
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34 but is a regulatory ideal, requiring societies to pay attention to how work meets the
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36 fundamental human needs of its members, by ensuring that the interior content of work has
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38 the requisite structure for meaningfulness.
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49 *Liberal Perfectionism and a Politics of Meaningfulness*

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53 Adopting institutional guarantees for the content of work breaks with liberal
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55 neutrality, but this does not entail that the state is entitled to impose a perfectionist ideal of
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57 work upon its members. Rather, several writers have identified that it is possible for a
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meaningful work ideal to operate within a framework of liberal perfectionism (Roessler, 2012; Keat, 2006, 2009b; Hsieh, 2008; Muirhead, 2004), which Dzur (1998) describes as ‘an effort to escape the shortcomings of the predominant liberal conception of the state as neutral in matters of life-choices without falling into the overreaching perfectionism of neoconservative writings’ (ibid: 668; cf. Raz, 1986; cf. Sher, 1997). In a liberal perfectionist framework, meaningful work is an open-ended ideal containing an extensive range of values, allowing for the development of a diversity of capability formations and practical identities. So, although a liberal perfectionist framework for meaningful work will ‘reject the role of state agents in channelling a person into a particular life’ it will allow ‘the ‘mild illiberality’ of preventing the degradation or truncation of capabilities’ (Dzur, 1998: 678). However, the protection of capabilities does not prevent there being a very wide range of activities, embodying a plurality of values - although excluding those which are likely to result in capability deformation of self or others. Consequently, institutional guarantees for meaningful work will permit many worthwhile activities containing a plurality of attractive values, thereby making available a wide diversity of individual interpretations of meaningfulness.⁷

Since people can continue to pursue a broad range of options for living, with the added security of capability protection, then liberal concerns that institutional guarantees for meaningful work will limit those options are overstated. Instead, setting meaningful work within a liberal perfectionist framework ensures that no person’s efforts will be rendered futile by finding themselves in work which is structured by heteronomy, unfreedom, and misrecognition. However, the concerns of liberal neutralists may not be so easy to set aside, because any kind of perfectionism runs the risk of compromising our autonomy. Dzur (1998) addresses these anxieties by making the legitimacy of a liberal perfectionist framework dependent upon a general capability for collective self-determination in forming the values

1 embodied within the framework of acting and being. By allowing for deliberative
2 engagement in the interpretation of what values add to the meaningfulness of an individual
3 life, the form that meaningful work might take for any individual remains available for
4 amendment, ensuring that individuals are not coerced into taking work which is subjectively
5 unappealing or objectively valueless. Instead, deliberation provides, not only for the
6 interpretation and multiplication of values, but also for engagement with others over which of
7 these values add to the meaning content of a life, disagreeing with them, being challenged
8 and challenging in return. Through deliberative engagement over values, people develop and
9 exercise the political mode of being, opening up possibilities for personal and social change,
10 in the process finding that being able to express the political mode of being can add, in-itself,
11 to the meaning content of a life.
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26 Of course, simply securing institutional guarantees for the availability of meaningful
27 work for all does not ensure that all individuals will experience their work as meaningful: ‘no
28 one can make a success of another person’s life’ (Raz, 1996: 8). Hurka (1993) calls this the
29 problem of asymmetry where ‘governments can provide necessary but not sufficient
30 conditions for the realization of good lives’ (Dzur, 1998: 677). In defending perfectionism,
31 Hurka (1993) says that seeking the fulfilment of one’s human potential requires the deliberate
32 engagement of one’s own self in projects and persons: it ‘involves doing things, forming
33 goals and realizing them in the world. And each person’s doing must be largely her own,
34 reflecting her energy and commitment’ (ibid: 64). But although the individual herself must
35 engage actively with meaning possibilities, governments can ensure that social structures do
36 not inhibit the individual’s search for meaning, and that they contain a sufficiently wide range
37 of positive values conducive to meaning attribution. In sum, liberal perfectionism legitimised
38 by a deliberative framework requires: firstly, an active orientation of the self towards the
39 values embodied in substantive ideals, ensuring that values are not simply received, but
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1 interpreted, made, accepted or rejected; supported by, secondly, state action to ensure that
2 social structures enable people to develop the capabilities and acquire the status for becoming
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5 co-authorities in the creation and maintenance of positive values. Finally, this implies a
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7 reordering of economic life to ensure widespread access to democratic participation at work.
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10 11 **The Value of Meaningfulness** 12

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18 We might argue that, in the absence of God, or some transcendental standpoint, the
19 individual search for meaning in life is nonsensical (Nagel, 1971; Hare, 1972), and our
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21 lingering need for meaning simply ‘a kind of hangover produced by overindulgence in the
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23 potent brew of metaphysics’ (Kekes, 1986: 79). Whilst acknowledging that we can no longer
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25 rely upon a transcendental standpoint to satisfy our need for meaning, I argue, with Frankl
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27 (2004), Kekes (1986) and Wolf (2007), that this does not entail having to dispense with all
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29 possibility of being able to attribute meaning to our lives. Wolf (2007) says that ‘an
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31 appropriate response to our status as specks in a vast universe is a concern and aspiration to
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33 have one’s life wrapped up with projects of positive value’ (ibid: 19-20; see also Metz, 2001;
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35 Wong, 2008). Frankl (2004) says that the search for meaning is satisfied by the ordinary,
36
37 everyday experiences towards which we adopt positive and active orientations: ‘The
38
39 perception of meaning boils down to becoming aware of a possibility against the background
40
41 of reality, or, more simply, becoming aware of what can be done about a given situation’
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43 (ibid: 84). This indicates that meaningfulness, if such exists, must be sought in the mundane
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45 realities of our human lives, in our acting and being together in the messy everyday of human
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47 experience: ‘Our lives have such meaning as we give to them. Meaning is made, not received
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49 or found; it is a human contribution to the world’ (Kekes, 1986: 75). Even though
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51 meaningfulness is not given, but must, instead, be patched together from our experiences of
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living together, this does not force us to conclude that the value of meaningfulness is either illusory or cannot be described. Nor is the search for meaningfulness a purely personal affair for which we have no collective responsibility, because we have already seen how social structures can inhibit or support meaning-making capabilities, rendering us more or less vulnerable to the harms of non-meaningful work, and unfairly distributing the available range of positive values. When interpretive differences become subject to public evaluation and judgement through a system of workplace democracy in which workers are co-decision makers, then such differences become a public resource of positive values, from which we can all draw to create meaningful self-identities. Thus, despite the loss of a transcendental standpoint, the search for meaningfulness remains a legitimate personal and social objective, where a politics of meaningfulness acts to ensure that all work has the requisite structure for meaningfulness (Levy, 2005).⁸

Structuring the Value of Meaningfulness

Because work with the structure for meaningfulness shapes our lives as a whole, an individual seeking to find her life meaningful will be concerned to ensure that work contributes to ‘the meaningfulness of her life, in virtue of the way it furthers her life story’, rather than simply ‘the sum total of good things in life’ (Kauppinen, 2008: 2). I show that activities with the structure for meaningfulness combine objective valuing with subjective attachment in actions which promote what is good for the objects of our actions, whether a person, an animal, an institution, or a practice. In Wolf’s work on the value of meaningfulness, meaningfulness has an overarching structure, given by what has independent value beyond its value to the individual (Wolf, 2010; see also Wolf, 1982; 1997a; 1997b; 2002; 2007). Wolf (2010) says:

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2 ‘Our interest in living a meaningful life is not an interest in a life *feeling* a
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4 certain way, but rather an interest that it *be* a certain way, specifically, that it
5 be one that can be appropriately appreciated, admired, or valued by others;
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7 that it be a life that contributes to or realizes or connects in some positive
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9 way with independent value’ (Wolf, 2010: 32).
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16 Wolf describes a bipartite value of meaningfulness which unites objective valuation
17 with subjective satisfaction: ‘meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective
18 attractiveness’ (ibid: 9), where the experience of meaningfulness is more likely to occur when
19 a person becomes actively connected to a worthy object, or something or someone of value,
20 such that they are ‘gripped, excited, involved by it’ (Wolf, 1997a: 208; see also Starkey,
21 2006). She distinguishes the bipartite value of meaningfulness from morality (duty) or
22 happiness (feelings of goodness), where meaningfulness is ‘a category of value that is not
23 reducible to happiness or morality, and that is realized by loving objects worthy of love and
24 engaging with them in a positive way’ (Wolf, 2010: 13). Wolf argues that a bipartite value for
25 meaningfulness is necessary because the morality/self-interest distinction fails to describe all
26 that is normatively significant about our actions and our relations. In particular, the
27 morality/self-interest distinction is unable to account for the special ties we feel towards our
28 ‘ground projects’ – projects which help us to answer the question ‘what reasons do we have
29 for living?’ (Wolf, 2010: 56). Williams (1981) refers to ground projects as ‘closely related to
30 [one’s] existence and [...] to a significant degree give meaning to [one’s] life’ (ibid: 12; see
31 also Smart & Williams, 1983). The special significance for meaningfulness of ground
32 projects comes from how they organise our values and frame our practical identities. Having
33 ground projects provides us with the material for the narrative formation of our lives,
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1 directing us to the responsibilities we have to act appropriately towards the objects for the
2 sake of which such projects exist. Thus, meaningfulness does not come from the aggregation
3 of individual goods, but from long-lasting, *appropriate orientations* towards particular
4 objects, such as persons, animals, or activities, where orientations are appropriate when they
5 point us towards the responsibilities we have to further the good for those objects.
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11 Wolf's bipartite value of meaningfulness integrates the objective and subjective
12 dimensions when affective feelings of attachment, satisfaction or fulfilment are united to an
13 assessment of the worthiness of the object at which the feelings aim. This implies that in
14 order for our ground projects to be meaningful, then what we subjectively feel to be
15 meaningful must be joined to considerations of what is of independent value: 'A meaningful
16 life is a life that a.) the subject finds fulfilling, and b.) contributes to or connects positively
17 with something the value of which has its source outside the subject' (ibid: 20). Wolf argues
18 that a purely subjective view of meaningfulness as the pursuit of feelings of fulfilment fails to
19 address our intuitions concerning the meaningfulness of objects and activities. She illustrates
20 her argument with Taylor's (1970) adaption of the figure of Sisyphus, condemned to stone
21 rolling, but who is given a drug to change him into someone who enjoys the activity of stone
22 rolling (Wolf, 2010: 17). The reason Wolf gives for the continued meaninglessness of
23 Sisyphus' life is that his efforts are objectively futile and their futility cannot be redeemed
24 simply because they have become subjectively satisfying (see also Joske, 1974). In Wolf's
25 bipartite view, the life of 'Sisyphus Fulfilled' cannot be meaningful without the objective
26 dimension of being involved in activities which have independent value in a 'source *outside*
27 *of oneself*' (Wolf, 2010: 19).
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52 Thus how ground projects add to the meaning content of a life is not given
53 automatically by the objective values they represent. Although a project may be
54 acknowledged by all, including the one whose life is structured by the project, as valuable,
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1 this does not mean that the individual doing the project will have an affective sense of that
2 project being meaningful. Objectively, there are ‘many different kinds of lives that are good,
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4 many different activities and relationships that are valuable and can contribute to a life that is
5 worth living’ (Keat, 2009a: 360), but, subjectively, there is ‘variability with respect to what is
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7 good for the different subjects’ (ibid.). Consequently, finding meaning in ground projects
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9 requires the exercise of ‘subjective judgement’ (Hicks & King, 2009: 643), involving ‘a
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11 confirmatory search for information suggesting that one’s life is meaningful’ (ibid: 644). The
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13 search for information is the search for validation, for affirmation of one’s judgements, out of
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15 which we construct the objective value of our doings and beings.
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22 Subjective satisfactions contribute to a life of meaning when they arise from
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24 engagements with worthy objects: ‘what is valuable is that in one’s life we actively (and
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26 lovingly) engage in projects that give rise to this feeling, when the projects in question can be
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28 seen to have a certain kind of objective value’ (ibid: 27). This includes what is appropriate for
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30 the particular kinds of creatures we are. Sisyphus Fulfilled fails to meet the objective
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32 condition of the value of meaningfulness, but I suggest that the full explanation for the
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34 continued meaninglessness of Sisyphus’s activities lies, not just in the structure of the action,
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36 but in the failure to be attentive to the kind of creature Sisyphus is. Even though Sisyphus is
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38 now subjectively satisfied, the pointlessness of the task makes it unworthy of a creature who
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40 is capable of more complex and meaningful feats, and to whom violence had to be done in
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42 order to make him into the kind of creature who would experience such work as fulfilling. It
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44 is disrespectful of our status as human beings if the meaning of our valued activities or
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46 ground projects is reduced to manipulated feelings of satisfaction. This suggests that
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48 fulfilment which is worth experiencing must contain ‘a cognitive component that requires
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50 seeing the source or object of fulfilment as being, in some independent way, good or
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52 worthwhile’ (Wolf, 2010: 24). Some actions are inappropriate for a creature whose
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fundamental needs are not to be met in any way whatsoever, but in a manner consistent with
the kind of creature he is, that is, one who has a fundamental human need to express free,
autonomous acts directed towards worthy objects in respectful association with others.⁹

10 **The Capability for Objective Valuing: Worthy Objects in the Objective Dimension**

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Whilst the bipartite value of meaningfulness provides us with the means to identify
which activities have the structure for meaningfulness, it does not tell us how these activities
translate into the actual experience of meaningfulness for any particular individual. I propose
that to experience meaningfulness, we need to become valuers, able to recognise what has
objective worth, and to affectively appropriate positive values to our lives. When we become
valuers, we provide ourselves with the opportunity to become ‘appropriately related to what
has worth’ (Wolf, 2010: 179) by developing the capabilities for objective valuation and
subjective attachment, through which we learn to appreciate what objects have value, and to
generate the *relevant orientations* towards those objects. I argue that the relevant orientations
are those which motivate the right actions consistent with the nature of the object: for
example, unconditional love when parenting a child or respectful care when looking after an
aged relative. In addition, becoming a valuer must be incorporated into our practical
identities, where we see ourselves as having the status as co-authorities entitled both to make
judgements upon the worthiness of objects and to decide upon how to act towards those
objects appropriately. However, developing the capabilities and practical identity necessary
for becoming a valuer depends upon our being able to engage in activities which connect us
to things that matter: ‘connecting with something of worth in a way that enables the direct
appreciation of the value of one’s activity’ (ibid: 189). This is because, by investing their
objects with meaning and positive values, and educating our capacities for judging and

1 feeling, these connections are intrinsically valuable: ‘we flourish through (meritorious)
2 activity such as parenting and music making, because these activities involve an appreciation
3 of things that matter, things with worth’ (ibid: 179). Although purposes derive from the needs
4 and characteristics of worthy objects, they are not just read off from worthy objects, but are
5 shaped and created by processes of interpretation, disagreement and consensus. In turn,
6 objects themselves are constructed: for example, in contrast to earlier historical periods, the
7 object of modern parenting is the child who is entitled to an extended period of care,
8 education and development, exempting them from hard labour, early marriage or adult
9 responsibilities.
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20 21 22 23 24 *The Purpose of Work*

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29 The purposes we create to attend to worthy objects are shaped, in part, by what we
30 understand to be the final ends of work. If work is just to ensure survival or to provide a
31 surplus for leisure, then work is simply a means to an end, and activities can be structured in
32 any way which achieves the relevant ends, including by ‘unpleasant toil’ (Sayers, 2005: 608).
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39 Drawing upon Marx’s concept of alienated work, in which we ‘relate to our own product or
40 activity as if it is something independent or hostile’ (ibid: 609), Sayers opposes this
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44 instrumental view of work to work as an end-in-itself, that is ‘productive, creative activity’
45 which should be ‘an expression and confirmation of our creative powers’ (ibid: 610; see
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49 Marx 1978 [1867]). Thus, in work as an end-in-itself, the purpose of work is to achieve self-
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realisation by becoming productive and creative beings. However, an important feature of
non-alienated work is that it is not arrived at through individual effort alone, but through
inter-dependency and cooperation, specifically through the reconciliation and repair
(Spelman, 2003) of our relations to self, others, our products and the world. In alienated

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2 work, the worker is divorced from his skills and capabilities when the content of work
3 inhibits his sense of autonomy over his actions. He is separated from his own self when the
4 relations and circumstances of work fail to support his sense of identity as an efficacious,
5 distinct person; and he is divided from others, such that he values the other person only for
6 her position in the division of labour, making the mutual needs, which should be a source of
7 solidarity, 'a source of tactical advantage' (Miller, 2003). In work as an end-in-itself, the
8 purpose of work is to restore our alienated relations by making of the world a home, where
9 'our coming to be at home in our world is not our natural and initial condition; rather it is an
10 achievement, a result of human activity and work, both individual and social' (Sayers, 2005:
11 613). Meaningful work is therefore work which has both the object and the activity in mind.
12 By developing the capability for objective valuing, we become participants in constructing
13 purposes consistent with the interests of worthy objects, through activities which are
14 characterised by autonomy, freedom and dignity. And by attending to both the object and the
15 activity, we create and repair the human world, make it a habitation suitable for human
16 flourishing.

37 38 39 *Creating Purposes*

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43 A life of meaning is a life with a *purpose*: 'A life has point when it is oriented toward goals
44 which transcend the limits of the individual, goals which are more valuable than the
45 subjective concerns of any one person' (Levy, 2005: 178). But the life of a person does not
46 reduce to her goals or purposes: 'It is degrading for a man to be regarded as merely serving a
47 purpose' (Baier, 1957: 120). Besides, not all purposes are equally worthwhile - some goals
48 are trivial, reprehensible or even wicked. Furthermore, a life defined by its goals is vulnerable
49 to devaluation, as a consequence either of failure, or of over-achievement. For example,
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1 Wiggins's (1998) farmer, trapped in a cycle of endless achievement in which the farmer buys
2 land to grow corn to feed pigs, illustrates the pointlessness of the repetitious recreation of the
3 same goal without resolution, unconnected to a wider structure of value. Even though 'lives
4 do not acquire meaning just in case they achieve goals' (Levy, 2005: 178), goals can add to
5 the meaning content of a life. This is so, even where the activities concerned lack intrinsic
6 merit, as is the case with many kinds of hard work (Walzer, 1983), since those engaged in
7 dirty, hard or menial work are not unjustified in claiming meaning for those activities when
8 their ends benefit society; for example, cleaning sewers is vital for public health. In case
9 study research of several workplaces from banks to retail, Doherty (2009) found that work
10 interpreted from 'the outside' as unskilled, poor quality work, was often seen by workers
11 themselves as invested in complex social interactions and meaning: 'The job I'm doing now
12 (customer service) is mostly pluses because I like dealing with people and I like arguing! I
13 love the job I'm doing now (Deirdre)' (ibid: 92). Thus, when sufficient political space is
14 given to interpretive sense-making, then even purposes judged as less worthwhile by society
15 can acquire valuable meaning for those doing them – and when these judgements are brought
16 into public deliberation through democratic practices, they have the potential to reframe
17 society's valuation of the worthiness of activities.

18 Democratic deliberation provides a way to construct the objective basis for
19 independent value, allowing individuals to deploy meaning-making capabilities in
20 interpreting, shaping and ordering purposes. For example, Lawrence (1977) suggests that
21 people in the same organisation will pursue different types of primary purposes. They will
22 pursue the *normative* primary task, or the official version of the task; the *existential* primary
23 task or the one they believe they are doing; or the *phenomenal* primary task or the task which
24 can be deduced from their behaviour. The distances between formal description of the
25 purpose, beliefs about the purpose and actual behaviours open out the deliberative space for

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contestation and interpretive differences over purposes. This directs us to the potential of democratic practices at the level of the task to bring into public view interpretive differences over values, meanings, and purposes. We should be careful, however, not to conclude that, just by filtering the meaning of poor quality work through deliberative public evaluation, we have satisfied all normative concerns with respect to the content of work, since ‘boring work is boring work’ (Carter, 2003: 179). If the work fails to provide sufficient meaning in an objective sense, then it must be reorganised to ensure that it contains a sufficient range of worthy objects embodying attractive values, where activities, to be consistent with the ends of work as self-realisation and reconciliation, are structured by autonomy, freedom, and dignity. Moreover, to be susceptible to meaning appropriation, purposes need to be contained within wider structures of value, such as the roles, practices and institutions which make up the fabric of a system of social cooperation, where to be a practice participant is also to be afforded a vantage point for deliberation with others over the value of those objects, accessing information about the worthiness of objects, and of assessing whether our actions and orientations are appropriate for the objects in question (see MacIntyre, 1981).

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In sum, the purposes of work are concerned both with the object and the activity. The object is constructed through interpretive sense-making, and the activity is both a mediator for self-realisation and a means to attend to the needs of worthy objects. The capability for objective valuing is formed and exercised through institutional structures of value which enable us to engage with others in determining the purposes and ends of work. Through the practice of objective valuing, we join with others in creation and maintenance of positive values, which generates both objects and activities consistent with the value of meaningfulness, thereby affirming and validating our appropriation of worthy objects to the meaning content of our lives.

The Capability for Subjective Attachment: Affective Appropriation in the Subjective Dimension

Recognition of the value of worthy objects, and even active involvement with those worthy objects through public practices, does not guarantee that a person will find those objects and activities to be personally meaningful, in the absence of their affective incorporation into the meaning content of that person's life. Practices and projects are sources of worthy objects and sites for the development of the relevant capabilities for meaningfulness, but, to secure the value of meaningfulness to their lives, a person must also experience those worthy objects as subjectively attractive. Realising subjective attractiveness requires that a person be able to incorporate worthy objects into her life, such that her life is shaped by the orientations and actions promoting the good for the worthy objects in question. But there may be occasions when, although we may recognise the objective value of things, we may be unable to experience them as valuable for our own lives. Raz (2001), for example, says that the attempt to revive the mood of a depressed person by pointing out to them the beauties and treasures of the world is unlikely to be successful: 'Their problem is not the absence of value in the world but the absence of meaning in their lives' (ibid: 19). In short, without affective attachment, worthy objects cannot, on their own, add to the meaning content of a life: 'Concrete attachments are good for those whose attachments they are; their value is within the sphere of personal meaning. The uniqueness of an object or pursuit established by an attachment is uniqueness to one person, not uniqueness impersonally judged' (Raz, 2001: 39). This means that, for worthwhile activities to add to the meaning content of our lives, we need to experience them as subjectively attractive: 'A housewife and mother, a doctor, or a bus driver may be competently doing a socially valuable job, but because she is not engaged by her work (or, as we are assuming, by anything else in her life),

1 she has no categorical desires that give her a reason to live' (Wolf, 1997: 211). And this
2 implies limits to public practices as a source of meaningfulness because, although public
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4 acknowledgement of value or worthiness reinforces our affective engagement with values,
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6 public acknowledgement will not compensate for a person finding an activity insufficiently
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8 attractive. An achievement can be objectively and publically valued as a genuine
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10 contribution, but still be subjectively disvalued by the individual whose achievement it is.
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12 Arneson (2000) claims that the slave's achievements are not diminished by his state of
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14 slavery – they can still add to the perfection of his life, although he qualifies this by adding
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16 'no doubt achievement does more to enhance an agent's life, other things being equal, when
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18 the agent wholeheartedly endorses the doing and properly rates its value' (ibid: 57). Arneson
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20 does not find that the absence of subjective endorsement prevents an exceptional achievement
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22 from counting towards the *perfection* of a person's life, but, in my application of the bipartite
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24 value of meaningfulness to work, it would constitute a formidable barrier to the
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Appropriation and Affective Attachment

I argue that for persons, objects and activities of value to be constitutive of the
meaning content of our lives, we must make them our own through a process of affective
appropriation. Affective appropriation in the bipartite value of meaningfulness implies
legitimate emotional engagement with worthy objects where legitimacy is given by how our
emotions direct us toward what is good for worthy objects. As a consequence of affective
appropriation, we acknowledge them as ours because of the particular place they have within
our lives which gives us reasons to regard our life as worth living; but we also acknowledge

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2 them as ours because their objective value confirms that we are right to give them such
3 prominence in our lives:

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7 ‘The personal meaning of objects, causes and pursuits depends upon their
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9 impersonal value, and is conditional upon it. But things of value have to be
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11 appropriated by us to endow our lives with meaning, meaning which is a
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13 precondition for life being either a success or a failure’ (Raz, 2001: 20).
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19 Drawing on Raz’s identification of the need for appropriation of ‘things of value’, I
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21 understand appropriation not in the pejorative sense of exploitation, but as an active
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23 orientation of one’s self to the particular value of worthy objects, requiring a form of
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25 emotional engagement which does not seek to secure in ourselves a satisfying state of mind,
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27 but seeks instead what is good for worthy objects. Consequently, not just any kind of
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29 emotional state will do for meaning appropriation - some emotions directed at worthy objects
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31 are not legitimate if they lead to abuse, or simply misrecognition, of what constitutes the
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33 good for the object. This suggests that we need an account of emotional engagement which
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35 describes the kind of affective appropriation of worthy objects capable of fostering the
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37 correct orientations towards the objects in question. Nussbaum (2001) characterises emotions
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39 as ‘forms of judgement’ (ibid: 22) which, in their intensity and particularity, are
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41 ‘acknowledgements of neediness and lack of self-sufficiency’ (ibid.). Because they are
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43 directed at objects (goals, projects, persons) constituting our vital interests in our conception
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45 of the good life, such emotions indicate where we are vulnerable to reversion, loss or harm:
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47 ‘The emotional importance of the projects that one values is revealed in the whole complex
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49 array of feelings to which one becomes vulnerable by virtue of one’s engagement with them’
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51 (Scheffler, 2006: 254; see also Reader, 2007). Our sense of meaning, our place in the world,
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is dependent upon the flourishing of the worthy objects we have appropriated to the meaning content of our lives, where the type and intensity of our emotions indicate the relative importance of various objects, and how they structure our lives as a whole. Nussbaum specifies the normative dimensions of the relevant emotions in relation to their objects which explains also the nature of our vulnerability: firstly, our emotions have an object (and in the value of meaningfulness, it is a worthy object); secondly, the kind of emotion which it is appropriate for us to experience is ‘internal’ to the object (Nussbaum, 2001: 27), that is, the nature of the object, in addition to the place it occupies in our lives, specifies the correct emotional orientation; thirdly, our beliefs about the object generate types of emotions, for example, the anger we experience if a loved one is threatened (ibid: 29); and fourthly, the kind and intensity of our emotions signals the value of the object, they are ‘concerned with value, they see their object as invested with value or importance’ (ibid: 30). Thus, our emotions alert us to what is important in our lives, in their intensity and persistence they indicate the shape of our lives, and direct us to how the judgements we make are legitimate when they are structured by what is good for the worthy objects to which we are affectively engaged.

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But our emotions do not simply happen to us, rendering us out of control and unable to exercise freedom of choice (cf. Wallace, 1993). Instead, emotions are susceptible to change in the light of new evaluations and judgements, potentially leading to reassessments of the worthiness of objects: ‘Transformation in feeling for oneself is a transformation in judgements about the self’ (Gilligan, 1982). Developed emotions are person-specific, as well as object-appropriate; that is, they are constituted by the place the object has in the life of the person whose emotions they are, as well as by the nature of the object: ‘they insist on the real importance of their object, but they also embody the person’s own commitment to the object as a part of her scheme of ends’ (Nussbaum, 2001: 33). They are eudaimonistic (ibid: 31)

1 because they are concerned with both the person's, and the object's, flourishing, and they
2 specify the appropriate actions we should take towards worthy objects, such as deciding,
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4 making, preserving, caring and restoring (cf. Spelman, 2003). This means that emotions
5 which enable legitimate affective appropriation of worthy objects are 'merited emotions'
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7 (Kauppinen, 2008), that is, they are emotions which are structured by the recognition that the
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9 objective worthiness of the object *merits* our emotional engagement with the object
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11 (Kauppinen, 2008). In addition, they are merited because they reflect legitimate attachments;
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13 for example, unmerited emotions include feelings of attachment which keep us in destructive
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15 personal relationships, or foster misplaced loyalty to dysfunctional practices or institutions.
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22 'Merited emotions' help us to forgo personal welfare maximisation: they support our
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24 recognition that our vulnerability to loss or harm of worthy objects is alleviated if we act to
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26 fulfil our responsibilities of care towards these objects, even if such actions are not
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28 maximally beneficial to ourselves. In sum, emotional engagement enables legitimate affective
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30 appropriation of worthy objects in two ways: firstly, when the objects are worthy of our
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32 emotional engagement, and secondly, when our emotions direct our attention and actions
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34 towards what is good for worthy objects.
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37 38 39 40 41 **Equal Co-Authorities in the Realm of Value**

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46 In my account of the bipartite value of meaningfulness, I show that being able to
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48 experience meaningfulness depends not only upon our becoming valuers, able to exercise the
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50 capabilities for objective valuing and affective attachment, but also upon our equal status as
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52 co-authorities in the realm of value. This is because to be involved in the co-creation of
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54 meaning, we need to experience ourselves as worthy of the entitlement to speak and be heard,
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56 where participating in meaning-making is necessary for experiencing our lives as worthwhile:
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‘human beings denied the opportunity to exercise their world-building capacities live an impoverished life, a life that is somehow less human, a life without freedom, without happiness’ (Honig, 1993: 112). Christiano (2005) proposes that the fundamentally relevant feature of the person which grounds the principle of egalitarian justice is ‘their authority in the realm of value’ (ibid: 49) and it is in virtue of each person’s status as authorities that we give each person their due (ibid.). Potentially, all persons possess the capabilities for objective valuing and subjective attachment, including being able to appreciate, to engage with, and to produce values. This means that being a valuer applies to all persons with no distinctions which are relevant to a theory of justice:

‘The humanity of a person is that person’s capacity to recognise, appreciate, engage with, harmonise with, and produce intrinsic goods. It is in virtue of this feature of human beings that they bring something unique and distinctive to the world [...] Humans do not merely cause these things to come about, as say a river causes the condition of life to come about; they bring about these things self-consciously and through their own activity because they appreciate them’ (ibid: 47-48).

But, although developing one’s human potential contributes to an activity being meaningful, simply realising one’s capacities is not the same as having a sense of one’s life being worth living, since ‘a slave might be forced to do theoretical physics and to do it surprisingly well’ (Arneson, 2000: 44). For meaningfulness, we must also find the project to be subjectively attractive, as well as judged objectively worthwhile against the values we have incorporated into our practical identities – and we maintain a sense of meaning by continuing to care about what we are doing in relation to worthy objects. And it is in the

1 interlocking of the objective and subjective dimensions of the bipartite value of
2 meaningfulness that we ensure a meaningful activity is not only recognised as objectively
3 valuable and subjectively engaging, but is experienced as such by the individual whose
4 activity it is: ‘meaning consists of engagement in an activity that is not only subjectively
5 engaging, but that is also subjectively experienced as being meaningful’ (Kekes, 1986: 97).
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7 This requires a ‘fittingness between certain kinds of activities and the potential for fulfilment’
8 which Wolf calls Fitting Fulfilment (Wolf, 1997: 216-7; see also Muirhead, 2004). Fitting
9 Fulfilment arises when there is a match between activities with the requisite structure for
10 capability formation and the individual’s own valuations of which activities and capability
11 formations are worth pursuing. I argue that Fitting Fulfilment is more likely to be realised
12 when we become valuers: that is, when we develop the capabilities relevant to realising the
13 bipartite value of meaningfulness, given by the capabilities for objective valuing and
14 subjective attachment, and where we possess a sense of our worthiness to be valuers.
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32 In sum, we need both the capabilities for meaningfulness and a sense of our status as
33 co-authorities to give us confidence that we are entitled to engage with others in the co-
34 creation of values; this means that we must be situated in social contexts which affirm our
35 equal status as co-authorities, and support our development of the ‘human capacity for
36 building, preserving, and caring for a world that can survive us and remain a place fit to live
37 in for those who come after us’ (Arendt, 1977 [1954], 95). Thus, the two capabilities united
38 to status specify the manner in which the objective and subjective dimensions of the bipartite
39 value of meaningfulness can be integrated in actual human lives.
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54 **Conclusion**

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I have argued that the concept of meaningful work deserves wider intellectual and political attention because our inescapable interests in freedom, autonomy and dignity makes meaningful work a fundamental human need. Although we are now exhorted to find satisfaction and self-fulfilment in consumption, Morris's call for dignified and humane labour retains a toehold in our imaginings of what a flourishing human life ought to look like. Indeed, Morris's comment upon the purchase of goods, 'Tis the lives of men you buy' (Morris, 1884), indicates how we might link the moral and political dimensions of consumption and production. This is because if we acquire goods from the oppressions of others then we compromise the possibilities for our own life - if one life can be made vulnerable because of the work he or she does, then so can the life of any man or woman. Consumers can be satisfied even where producers are exploited, alienated, or otherwise harmed, but consumers are also producers with interests in not being exploited, alienated, or subjected to undignified work. Because we all shared common vulnerabilities to the lack of meaningful work, we therefore have common cause in ensuring that all work is meaningful work, constituted by the goods of autonomy, freedom and dignity. And the starting point for such a political project is the recognition that meaningful is a fundamental human need.

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¹ Campbell (1989) describes how, during the two world wars, German theorists sought to restore *Arbeitsfreude*, or the joy of work, based upon the central organising idea that work alone 'is capable of giving meaning to human existence' (ibid: 4). *Arbeitsfreude* was motivated by enlightenment values, but given energy by the manifest harms visited upon workers by industrialisation (ibid: 9). However, when *Arbeitsfreude* was united to an ideology of German Work, as a superior form of work, it became a tool in Hitler's fascist nationalism (see also Schwartz, 1998). My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing *Arbeitsfreude* to my attention.

² Sources of meaning are multiple, and issue in a diversity of positive and negative values. There is an extensive organisational studies literature on what meaning work has for people, and what values are experienced as meaningful. For example, Rosso et al (2010) identify four sources of meaning in work: the self, others, the work context and spiritual life, and seven categories through which people experience their work as

meaningful: authenticity, self-efficacy, self-esteem, purpose, belongingness, transcendence and cultural and interpersonal sense-making. Michaelson et al (2013) argue for interdisciplinary research in meaningful work which combines organisational studies research on good outcomes from meaningful work for employees (job satisfaction, engagement, well-being) and for organisations (increased job performance, organisational citizenship, organisational commitment and identification, occupational identification and customer satisfaction) with business ethics approaches which argue that meaningful work is of moral concern.

³ Drucker (2010) points out that, whilst work organised on Fordist principles may have been experienced negatively by any individual worker, the system as a whole required elevated levels of skill, particularly social skills. Drucker argues that, by confining workers to routine tasks, Ford was motivated to 'free workers from arduous toil' (ibid: 163), thereby releasing them for active community life and for citizenship beyond the workplace. I am grateful to anonymous reviewer for directing me towards Drucker's essay.

⁴ Margalit (1996) identifies limits to what justice would demand with respect to meaningful work in a decent society. He argues that, to be called decent, a society is not obliged to guarantee meaningful work, but it is obliged to provide the opportunity for engaging in meaningful activities: 'A decent society is thus one that provides all its members with the opportunity to find at least one reasonably meaningful occupation' (ibid: 254). Prospects for supplying meaningful occupation are much enhanced when the work of social cooperation is understood more broadly than paid employment, and includes the diversity of unpaid work which sustains and reproduces our common life.

⁵ See Council of Civil Service Unions/Cabinet Office (2004), 'Work, Stress and Health: The Whitehall II Study', London: Public and Commercial Services Union.

⁶ One objection to this claim is that for some people meaningful work may not be a fundamental human need. And indeed, many people get by without their work being meaningful. However, it is possible that people, through disappointment and socialised expectations, may no longer come to desire the goods of meaningful work. Political theorists would call this a manifestation of 'adaptive preferences', where, faced with 'inaccessible options', it is rational to adjust one's preferences to the available choice set (Elster, 1993). In the case of the fox who desires the out of reach sweet grapes at the top of the tree, his desire is modified so that, not only does he learn to like the sour grapes at the bottom of the tree, but he loses awareness of the existence of the sweet grapes.

⁷ Adopting a liberal perfectionist framework means giving up strict neutrality. The value of neutrality lies in the space it provides for individual autonomy and freedom of choice. Since these are also constitutive values of my concept of meaningful work, then construing meaningful work within a liberal perfectionist framework would seem to introduce a contradiction. If we specify the good life as characterised by autonomy, then do we not thereby diminish autonomy by restricting non-autonomous forms of living. However, the variety of positive values and meanings which my concept of meaningful work would allow preserves wide discretion for individuals to select the meanings that have value to them (see Roessler, 2012). Furthermore, I draw upon Sen's capability approach to specify two capabilities relevant to experiencing the value of meaningfulness which requires that, to be complete, any capability must include the freedom not to turn that capability into a functioning (Sen, 1999). Applied to the capabilities for objective valuing and affective attachment, this means

1 that people retain the freedom to choose not to experience meaningful work, or even to engage in meaning-
2 making with others.

3 ⁸ Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees, & Gatenby (2010) report that 'the two most important drivers of [employee]
4 engagement are meaningfulness of work and employee voice' (ibid: 36).

5 ⁹ The objective/subjective distinction has been identified by several writers (Ciulla, 2000; see also *Laborem*
6 *Exercens*). Cuilla (2002) describes the intrinsic objective dimension of meaningful work as follows: 'meaningful
7 work, like a meaningful life, is morally worthy work undertaken in a morally worthy organisation' (ibid: 225). I
8 make a distinction between worthy objects and the objective dimensions of the work activity, which in my
9 conception of meaningful work are autonomy, freedom and dignity. A worthy object might be a material
10 object, a person, an animal, an idea, a practice, a project, an eco-system, or some set of institutional
11 arrangements which order the human world. However, this does not mean that we attend to the interests of
12 these worthy objects in ways which render harm to ourselves, through whom the activity occurs (since we are
13 also worthy objects). Instead, to be consistent with the value of meaningfulness, our actions must be
14 structured by the objective characteristics of autonomy, freedom and dignity. In my application of Wolf's
15 bipartite value of meaningfulness, I am concerned to describe how objectivity and subjectivity are to be
16 integrated. Hence, being attentive to worthy objects requires an emotional engagement which is both
17 satisfying to us because we are able to experience the objective features of meaningful work, and represents
18 an appropriate response to the nature of the object. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to
19 clarify my distinction between worthy objects and the objective features of meaningful work.
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