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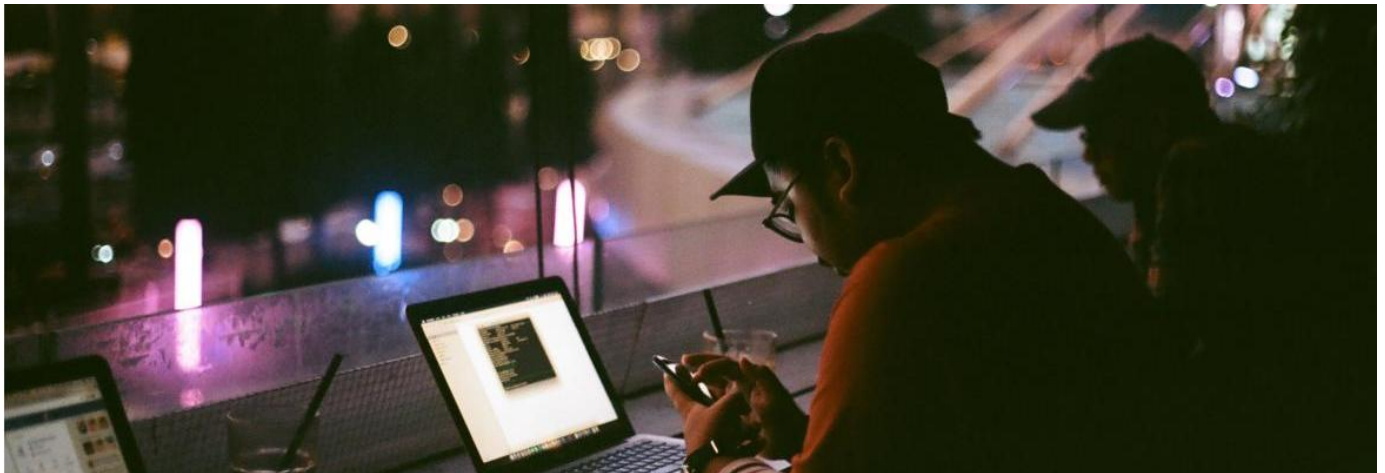
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iai news

Changing How the World Thinks

Can Artificial Intelligence Give Our Lives Meaning?

Could AI make our daily lives more human?



Issue 69, 26th June 2018



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1,776 words

Read time: approx. 9 mins

Work is an unavoidable necessity. The promise of autonomous and intelligent systems (A/IS) challenges this

turning each of us into what Karl Marx called a ‘crippled monstrosity’. Instead, we are fearful, not simply of a world without work, but one where there is no point to our human contribution. Life reduced to hobbies and entertainment does not seem worthwhile. In other words, we want a world which can keep creating meaningful work.

Being frightened by the prospect of not having anything to do which really matters is neither self-indulgent nor irrational. When no-one calls upon our labour for a serious purpose, we face the terrifying prospect of being rendered socially invisible, reduced to what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben called ‘bare life’, and therefore no longer worthy of anyone’s consideration. In other words, ‘the misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared with the misery of not being exploited at all’, said economist Joan Robinson, and she was right. If work – and especially meaningful work - disappears, whole populations fall under the radar.

We may not see work as one of the ‘hopes of civilisation’, as described by artist William Morris, but we still want to do something which has moral significance and emotional appeal. In other words, we desire meaningful work.

Meaningful work makes us feel *present* to ourselves and others. This sense of personhood, of being a vivid presence in collective action, occurs when work is structured by the core goods of freedom, autonomy and dignity. In meaningful work, dignity has a specific meaning – of being seen as particular persons with lives of our own to lead.

Such work is not only morally desirable, but is a viable regulative ideal for a good society. New technologies around artificial intelligence can help or hinder the achievement of meaningfulness. Machines could help us build a more progressive society, when combined with radical social policies, such as a universal basic income. Only thus can we get to be seen by ourselves and others as dignified persons.

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eliminate. Indeed, people will use whatever materials are to hand, including poor quality and precarious work, to craft meaningfulness. For example, some hospital cleaners see themselves as part of the care team looking after patients, and some refuse collectors as stewarding the environment for future generations. The injustice is that organisational neglect can undermine this instinctive crafting of meaningfulness, and managerial power can appropriate meaning-making capacities to benefit some at the expense of others.

"Meaningful work makes us feel *present* to ourselves and others."

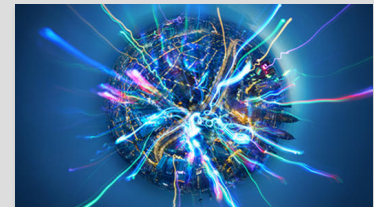
Moral philosopher Susan Wolf says that we find meaning when 'subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness'. That is, we are more likely to experience meaningfulness when we are actively connected to, and emotionally involved in, something or someone of value. Wolf's therefore integrates an objective dimension as well as a subjective dimension to meaning. But when valuable persons or things become part of what constitutes meaning to us, we have to foster a concern for, and evaluate how well we are doing to promote their welfare. If we are going to be successful in fulfilling such responsibilities of ethical care we will need access to resources, capabilities and organisations.

New Kinds of Work

We experience activities as meaningful through social processes of meaning-making operating in the midst of work which is designed for autonomy, freedom and dignity. Such work is generated by organisations which recognise workers as having the status of co-authorities in making meaning, and which help them develop capabilities for judging the

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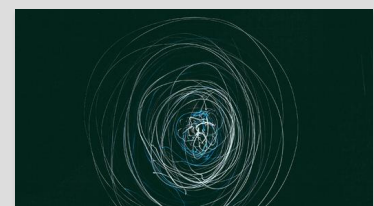
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This requires a rich organisational meaning-system, combining varied sources of positive meanings with practices which encourage employees to voice different interpretations of meanings. In building an HSBC and World Wide Fund for Nature partnership on water conservation in the Ganges, India, an important aspect was the attractiveness of the project for HSBC's employees. In another example, when a team of caretakers in a co-owned housing association, little valued by their co-workers or organisation in general, were led by their manager to explore the meaningfulness of their work, and its significance for tenants and the organisation, it produced a transformative impact on team morale, performance and their capacity to extend the nature of their contribution.

As we use machines to reshape the human world, living a life of ethical care has something to offer. But to make this a viable route to meaningfulness, we will need to bring to public prominence some undervalued and latent sources of meaning such as stewardship, repair, empathy and love.

"In meaningful work, dignity has a specific meaning - of being seen as particular persons with lives of our own to lead."

American philosopher Harry Frankfurt in *The Importance of What We Care About* argues that loving is a powerful source of universal meaning. He says 'locating the source of meaning in the activity of loving renders opportunities for meaningful life much more readily accessible'. Finding something to care about is a vital human task which provides us with work of importance and value. Adopted into a politics of meaningfulness, this will generate new kinds of work with a core emphasis upon building morally valuable relationships between intelligent and feeling beings (perhaps both human and machine) who share their agency

orchestrates joint efforts by building trusting, mutually interdependent relationships; *voice work* gives a share of decision-making power; and *complexity work* uses knowledge and technology to generate innovations in operating practices.

Such work will not be created automatically – it will require conscious design. When organisations are ordered by such (normative) dimensions of work, we will need new social practices that will enable us to participate as equal co-authorities in the social construction of ethical purpose and practical action. Each of us will acquire entitlements and obligations to contribute to processes of world-building. However, asking people to make such contributions is legitimate only when the work involved is structured by the goods of meaningful work - freedom, autonomy and dignity.

Given this, it is most urgent that workplaces become democratically organised because democratic participation is a pathway to securing such goods. The future human-machine-natural world has the potential to make our lives more meaningful in diverse ways. But equal access to a plurality of positive meanings will depend upon the extent to which we involve as many people as possible in the collaborative design of values-grounded technology and organisations.

How can the machines help?

We can encourage meaningful work by involving diverse stakeholders in processes of creating organisational purposes which are morally intelligent and emotionally engaging. For example, by including agricultural workers, together with corporate employees and NGOs, in sustainable supply chain initiatives, corporations can start to generate new strategic capacities which combine the moral and emotional dimensions of meaningfulness. New technologies can help to embed such efforts at the system level.

**...ing something to be done as a
vital human task which provides us
with work of importance and value."**

In discussing the purpose of the new technologies, the Global Initiative on Ethics of Autonomous and Intelligent Systems (A/IS) by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers says that machines should be employed to improve human lives. The IEEE proposes that 'to create intelligent technical systems that enhance and extend human well-being and freedom, [we will need] value-based design methodologies which put human advancement at the core of development of technical systems, in concert with the recognition that machines should serve humans and not the other way around'.

We should add that the purpose of machines should also incorporate meaningfulness, complex human capabilities and care ethics. The future of meaningfulness will demand that we direct the machines towards the augmentation of human capabilities so that we may respond to complex moral and practical problems in the human world more effectively and ethically. We can harness A/IS into socio-technical activity systems which help us extend our reach and develop our capabilities for taking care of/looking after others.

The Future of Meaningfulness

Crafting meaningfulness in work, organisations and lives generally is a considerable design challenge which goes beyond technical mastery to ethical, social and cultural concerns relevant to us all. As a political project, it is also vulnerable to corruption, and therefore freighted with difficulties.

To aim at meaningfulness as a public good without a radical restructuring of the resources, pathways and distributions of power is to risk creating a meaningfulness machine. A machine capable of forging technologies of the human soul

World: 'in a properly organized society like ours, nobody has any opportunities for being noble or heroic....you're so conditioned that you can't help doing what you ought to do. And what you ought to do is on the whole so pleasant.'

Creating a pacifying meaningfulness machine will not make us vividly *present* in the world, consistent with the moral dimension of meaningfulness (even if the subjective experience is enjoyable). To counteract tendencies towards artificial meaningfulness we must design ethically-rich socio-technical ecosystems at multiple levels of organisations, communities, cities and nations.

"Most of us have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not big enough for people."

This will involve using tools of democratic participation in order to create inclusive institutions which mobilise collective power around anxieties that our lives lack value, dignity and meaning. In *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Bonnie Honig argues that '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'.

World-building requires a deepening of human contribution. This challenges the current citizen-worker model, and the forms of organisation associated with it, including ownership structures. Essentially, we must all become builders of the future human-machine world. This will demand a fundamentally altered power-sharing model of social and economic organisation which calls forth more and different human contributions into the work of social cooperation.

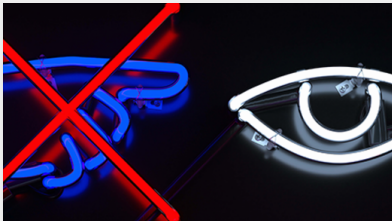
disappear, but with effort and good will, work may become expansively human.

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Ruth Yeoman
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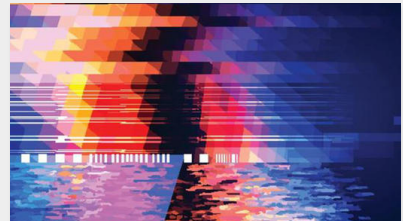
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