

Is work an essential element of the good life?

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The prospect of a future without work or with much reduced work has been held up as the Utopia for which we are headed. Today we have the future possibility of AI being able to carry out many of the tasks we do currently such as car driving, looking after the elderly, teaching, refuse disposal, legal tasks, medical diagnosis and surgery. There are also many tasks that we might think are better automated out of existence. This essay seeks to ask if there is a limit to this desired automation and to answer the question of whether work is a necessary component of the good life.

The term good life here is used in a general sense, having its roots in Aristotelian Eudaimonia. It is life that is satisfying for the individual whilst being led in accordance with ethical requirements. Happiness, as Aristotle says, may be considered as the supreme good (1) but requires the exercising of virtues, understood as human capabilities. The questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-Being developed in Positive Psychology (2) lists six dimensions of Eudaimonia: self-discovery, perceived development of one's best potentials, a sense of purpose and meaning in life, investment of significant effort in pursuit of excellence, intense involvement in activities and enjoyment of activities as personally expressive. This essay will review whether there are ethical requirements to do work and whether work is required to fulfil these dimensions of eudaimonia.

One definition of work is sustained physical or mental effort or activity directed toward the production or accomplishment of something, paid or unpaid, outside the person's private domain. There are key criteria in this definition. Work requires sustained effort. Work is essentially not private in that the result of it is something that is expected to be seen or experienced by others. So Work permits a projection or transcendence of subjective experience into an objective reality. (3) Whereas a hobby is done for enjoyment of the person involved, there may be many different motives for work but often it is done for the benefit of others. If it is paid work then it is expected to be a benefit to the person or company that pays for the work. Voluntary work is again expected to benefit others. If flower arranging is done purely for oneself it would be classed as a hobby, if done for the benefit of others then it starts to look like work.

Work can be thought by many to involve only paid employment. Those who have retired may say they have given up work. However, if we accept that work is not limited to paid employment, we may soon find them doing other activities which can be counted as work. The retired doctor who works at pottery producing artifacts for family and friends, the retired management consultant who takes up writing novels because it is something she has always wanted to do and is now free from the need to support herself, the epidemiologist who now runs the village shop all seem to have taken up voluntary work when paid employment ended. This speaks of a human desire to work even when it is not necessary to support oneself.

Let us deal with the question of whether there is an ethical requirement to work and so for work to be part of the good life. Aristotle, given that he approval of slavery, thought that certain work, such as manual work, was not part of the good life. Much literature on meaningful work seems to assume that all work can be made such that it involves self-discovery, perceived development of one's best potentials, investment of significant effort in pursuit of excellence, intense involvement in activities or enjoyment of activities as personally expressive with autonomy of the worker in how the work is carried out. It is no doubt true that many jobs can be made personally rewarding for the individuals in these terms or may be automated out of existence in the future by AI. But let us examine the

situation in which a society requires, for it to function, jobs that are not intrinsically personally rewarding, work that I shall call drudgery. Should these jobs form part of the good life? To deny that they do is to accept an elitist conception of the good life: a life to be had by some made possible by the labour of others. If we think that a conception of the good life should fit with a conception of the ideal society and in such a society everyone is able to lead the good life then such drudgery must form part of it.

If that is the case, is there something about drudgery that could bring a sense of purpose and meaning to life for those involved? Carrying out CPR, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, is very repetitive, boring and exhausting. It involves turning oneself into a machine in order to do it well, but it becomes meaningful because it may save someone's life. Many jobs have value, not because they are intrinsically rewarding but because the benefit to others or society as a whole. The individual may find more worth in these jobs if they are also met with recognition and given appropriate status for their contribution of society. Gandhi took his turn in cleaning the latrines at his ashram and in so doing provided status to those doing the worst jobs in his society. Martin Luther King makes clear in a speech that all those carrying out work necessary for society should have respect. (4) So even if the nature of the work is such that intrinsically it does not support the good life, then the end result of essential work and recognition of its value from others can provide a sense purpose and meaning to life. It can make drudgery divine. (5) It would therefore seem that such work should form a component of the good life and can do so if proper recognition and dignity is afforded to those who do it.

But let us now look at whether we should carry out tasks that are better done by machine or indeed not done at all. We might say that as long as the individual believes that the work has value or enjoys doing it then that it is all that matters. The work can play an important role in developing skills and potentials, a pursuit of excellence, intense involvement and enjoyment. So it might be that the self-driving car is not required for the good life, driving by itself can provide many of the eudaimonian aspects listed if approached in the right way, an approach close to what one might call work. The surgeon whose work could be better carried out by robot may also find the work intrinsically more satisfying than pressing a button on a robot. So it would seem that just as value to society can bring meaning to those who work, so can activities with no net benefit to society have meaning if the individual enjoys them or develops herself in doing them. However if the action, such as driving or surgery, could be better done by machine and in doing so be of more benefit to others with better fuel efficiency, better outcomes and fewer accidents, then it starts to look more like a hobby than work as it is carried out for the enjoyment of the individual rather than the benefit of others.

It may be argued that there is nothing wrong with an elitist view of the good life where some are required to labour to support those who enjoy the good life. Alternatively, those who have retired might argue that they have already made their fair contribution to society and are now entitled to lead the good life. If this is accepted then we need to show that work can contribute to the good life and examine the question of whether it is an essential element of the good life.

There are many benefits to working: the satisfaction of providing for oneself, an outlet for creativity, the opportunity to use ones talents productively and to the benefit of society, social networking, development of skills by sustained effort, a requirement for discipline and routine, accepting responsibilities, sharing responsibilities and fulfilling responsibilities, the satisfaction of being part of a team and contributing to the team, providing something that is valued by other people with external validation and recognition. All of these can increase eudaimonic well-being but each individual may benefit in different ways.

I have argued so far that an ethical good life, one that could be led by everybody in society, will need to include work as part of it. I have made the case that work can significantly support leading a good life. I will now look at a life with a prohibition on work and consider whether that is coherent with the good life.

Imagine Smith who has just won by lottery a sum so large that it will keep both herself and everybody she cares about provided for indefinitely. There is no need for paid employment. Anything that looks like work is done for her. In fact she has told her staff that it is her desire that she should never do anything like work again and they take her seriously making sure that she is never given the opportunity to do any work. She has a driverless car to save her the work of driving, the head gardener decides what is to be planted in her gardens and sees to it, the housekeeper manages all matters within the house. Her collection of driverless cars is curated by others. All cooking and cleaning is done by others. She no longer has to decide on films to watch or restaurants to visit as this is done for her. What is left for her to do? Philosophy, poetry, art, music? Anything more than a casual interest would seem to betoken work and besides she has no gift these. Her staff understand that any evaluation by someone other than herself would move her actions out of her private domain. As a result she might then put her mind in a sustained way to garner their appreciation. With this in mind, they always reply that whatever she does is very good. People with such time on their hands sometimes turn to alcohol or other drugs by way of escape. There is plenty of contingent evidence that people who have no need to work, who have inherited a vast fortune without the ability to use it, have not done well. It is difficult to find examples of people who have led the good life without work. There are however plenty of examples people with time on their hands and no requirement to work who go looking for work. But what is there left for Smith to do?

The simple answer is that Smith should enjoy herself but is the experience of enjoyment sufficient? Robert Nozick makes the argument, with his thought experiment of the experience machine, that life is more than just the experience of it: we actually want to do something in the world.⁽⁶⁾ Given the choice of spending life plugged into the experience machine that could stimulate our brains to experience the most pleasurable or desirable experiences we might want or living a real life, we would choose real life and in doing so evidence that life is more than just the experience of it. And the reason for living a real life is not that the experience of it would be different to that of the experience machine, the food taste so much better, the scenery more interesting, the music sweeter but that there is actually something special about making a difference in the real world. The danger for Smith is that her wealth isolates her from the real world. She is unable to do anything that might make a difference as that starts to look like work. It may be objected that I have defined work too broadly. Instead of a sustained effort to decide which films to watch she has only to decide on the moment and that can hardly be called work. This may be true but then how does that meet the requirements for Eudaimonic Well-Being? If the Robert Nozick's argument is successful then the watching of films is done just as well or indeed better in the experience machine. Robert Nozick has argued there is more to life than the experience of it however without work, Smith's life seems to be focused on her experience of it. She might as well be attached to the experience machine.

In conclusion we can say that work can form an element of the good life and given an egalitarian ethic should do so. Work can indeed provide the vehicle for many aspects of eudaimonic well-being. A life without work can lead one into a situation where only the individual's experience matters and that is not a place many would wish to be.

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 1 ch 7
2. Kjell, Oscar (2011). "Sustainable Well-Being: A Potential Synergy Between Sustainability and Well-Being Research." *Review of General Psychology*, vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 255-266. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024603>.
3. Andrea Veltman, *Meaningful work*, Oxford University Press, 2016, page 10
4. Martin Luther King Jr., "All Labor Has Dignity," ed. and intro. Michael K. Honey (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 171– 172; see also 158. For instance, in a speech to the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees in Memphis, Tennessee, March 18, 1968, King says, "So often we overlook the work and the significance of those who are not in professional jobs, (Yeah) of those who are not in the so- called big jobs. But let me say to you tonight, that whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity, and it has worth. (Applause) One day our society must come to see this. One day our society will come to respect the sanitation worker if it is to survive, for the person who picks up our garbage, in the final analysis, is as significant as the physician, for if he doesn't do his job, diseases are rampant. (Applause) All labor (All labor) has dignity. (Yes!)" (171– 172).
5. George Herbert, *The Elixir*, Poem (and hymn)
6. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 1974