Philosophy of Work

How Can We Promote Flourishing, Purpose, and Meaning In and Through Work?

by Paul Blaschko and Claire Murphy
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Abstract

Because work plays such an outsized role in our lives, it's important to reflect on good work and how we can find it. Using tools from the virtue ethics method in philosophy, we identify three constituents of "good work," i.e. work that contributes in an appropriate way to the flourishing or wellbeing of the one doing it. We contrast this with "bad work," and identify three big threats in modern society to our ability to find, and engage in, good work. We then offer suggestions for how individuals, supervisors, businesses, and policymakers can take steps to promote good work and thus foster human flourishing in the workplace and beyond, with a particular eye to the ways that technology can be used to facilitate this flourishing.

Why Non-Philosophers Should Care

- Individuals should seek good work for themselves, and should be able to assess whether, and why, their work is (or is not) contributing to their flourishing as a well-integrated human person.
- People in leadership roles should recognize that different individuals have different needs, and that this might need to be reflected in how one structures policies, schedules, or other aspects of the workplace.
- Managers and supervisors should attend to the ways that technology, both as a tool used in carrying out tasks and as a means of communication among team members, can either contribute to or detract from good work.
- Businesses and corporations should ensure that employees are able to balance their work responsibilities with other essential goods in their lives (such as family, leisure, and friendships).
- Policymakers need to think strategically about the distribution of good jobs and income, and think about how public goods (like education) can be leveraged to combat contemporary challenges.

Introduction

Work is an activity that's both distinctive of, and integral to, human life. We find work at the center of the lives of individuals and communities in every time and place where we find human culture. Yet precisely because work has always been a part of life, there's always been controversy about its status and value. There's no shortage of criticism, praise, abuse, and celebration of work throughout the

history of ideas. And in today's world, technology has transformed the workplace: meritocratic and technocratic influences have shaped our attitudes toward what it means to live well, and automation and other emerging technologies are rapidly changing the availability of certain kinds of work.

Because it plays such an outsized role in our lives, it's important to reflect philosophically on good work and how we can find it. We will draw on virtue theory to identify three constituents of "good work," i.e. work that contributes in an appropriate way to the flourishing of the one doing it. We will then contrast this with "bad work," and identify three big threats in modern society to our ability to find, and engage in, good work.

Method and Findings

Philosophy provides a rich framework through which we can consider questions of meaning, purpose, and value. Centrally, the discipline is concerned with clarifying concepts we find ourselves using on an everyday basis (e.g. "What does it mean to *believe* or *trust* some expert?"), and providing arguments about how we can use these concepts to better appreciate the world and our place in it. Within philosophy, ethics aims to evaluate how we should live and what we should do, and to offer us arguments on these topics (e.g. "You should trust experts over your own judgment when trying to figure out questions in certain domains but not others.").

Within this field, we employ a "virtue ethics" approach. In contrast with approaches like utilitarianism—which emphasize expected outcomes or impact in determining whether a particular course of action is good, right, or just—virtue ethics asks questions about how complex issues relate to the lives of individuals. A key concept in this framework is the idea of "human flourishing," a state to which many or all of us aspire, and something that virtue ethicists see as a crucial consideration for evaluating whether a particular course of action is good or bad, right or wrong, just or unjust. For instance, a virtue ethicist might advise business leaders to consider more than just the impact of their company, and to take into account the complex ways in which the way an organization (and the work within it) is structured will be experienced by their employees, their clients, or society at large.

Key Findings When Examining Work from a Virtue Ethical Point of View

Before we discuss what constitutes good work, we need to establish what work is. It's difficult to give a universal definition of work, because every instance of work we encounter is concrete and particular, such as washing dishes, answering emails, or watering plants. But in all these instances we can identify a common character: we perform these actions with the intention of achieving some result, and that result (whether it's clean dishes, communication with colleagues, or thriving plants) is something we want to achieve because we see it as good for us in some way. So we'll define work in broad strokes:

> **Work** is *productive activity* undertaken in order to secure some *essential good* or goods.

Some work sucks; perhaps much of it does. But some work is actually quite enjoyable. Work can provide us with meaning, structure, stability, and joy, and when we're engaged in this sort of work we see ourselves as "flourishing" human beings. The notion of flourishing has a rich philosophical history that goes as far back as Aristotle's theory of virtue ethics. On this theory, a flourishing person is one who lives and acts such that all facets of their humanity–physical, biological, and intellectual–are functioning well, in harmony with one another. We'll use this account to give a basic definition of good work:

Good work is *work* that *promotes flourishing.*

This definition builds directly on the definitions we've given of flourishing and of work in general. But we also need to identify some core constituents of good work, in order to accurately diagnose threats to good work and strategies for combating them. The three constituents most relevant to our discussion are:

- **Meaningfulness**: Good work is *meaningful* to the worker performing it.
- **Ownership:** Good work properly aligns a worker's efforts with her ownership over its products, and in a way that characteristically gives rise to a *feeling of ownership*.
- **Integrity:** Good work is an activity that's *integrated* (or integratable) into the *worker's life as a whole*, and into their attempts to make that life a good life.

No good work will lack these conditions (at least to some degree), though we don't think that they are the only necessary conditions on good work, nor do we claim that these conditions are sufficient for guaranteeing that work will be good. They're particularly relevant for our discussion, however, because their absence will help us to identify instances of bad work. As a first step in this direction, we can define bad work in simple contrast to good work:

Bad work is work that prevents or inhibits flourishing.

When one or more of the constituents of good work are absent, workers are unable to flourish. There are many different forms that this can take, but we'll focus on just a few of the challenges that today's worker faces:

- **Meaningless work or boredom ("bullshit jobs"):** Coined by anthropologist David Graeber, the term "bullshit jobs" refers to jobs that are unnecessary or pointless. These jobs not only lack the meaning that's essential to good work, but also require the worker to pretend that their work isn't meaningless even though they know that it is. Deceit and associated feelings of shame and guilt wear on a person morally and psychologically, and make bullshit work unpleasant or worse; they might be directly in conflict with one's flourishing.
- **Alienation:** Karl Marx uses the term "alienation" to name what happens when a worker becomes detached or separated from the product of his or her labor. When today's worker produces creative or intellectual products without having any sense of ownership over them–as when an artist is forced to create corporate logos and not properly recognized as creator–

they're at risk of experiencing alienation. Similarly, when one's efforts are consistently devoted to work processes that are so finely divided that one cannot appreciate or connect up these efforts with any greater whole, one is at risk of being alienated.

- **Disintegration or imbalance ("burnout"):** The concept of burnout can be hard to define, but it's immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with the contemporary workplace and its practices. Marked by a feeling of de-motivating exhaustion, burnout is–as the philosopher Byung Chul Han puts it–an "inability to be able," the persistent feeling that one's efforts are meaningless or doomed to fail. In Han's telling, burnout is the characteristic social pathology of a society that emphasizes achievement and positivity above all else.

We think that naming and understanding these threats that the contemporary worker faces is a crucial first step in recovering good work in today's world. We'll now use this framework to offer a few suggestions for how individuals and groups, at various levels of authority and influence, can foster human flourishing in the workplace.

Practical Applications

- **Defragmenting collaborative work:** Managers and supervisors should structure projects with an eye to making sure tasks aren't scattered across too many people or teams. Additionally, while automation can helpfully streamline many aspects of work, care must be taken to ensure that the automation of certain tasks doesn't cause remaining tasks to be distributed in a way that alienates individuals. Too much fragmentation in collaborative work can make individual workers' tasks seem meaningless. In contrast, work becomes more meaningful to the extent that the individual can perceive the way their work is ordered toward and integrated into the project as a whole.
- **Mechanisms of recognition and credit:** It's important for employees to understand how their contributions are taken up into the common good and goals of the institution for which they work. Virtual communication platforms make this possible even for teams that work remotely or are spread out geographically. By building community among team members and fostering an environment where individuals recognize and praise peers for their contributions, such platforms help individual workers to take ownership and pride in their work and to better see the ways in which that work benefits the larger group or company.
- **More flexible times and locations for work:** Work cannot be good, on our definition, if it's not integrated into the broader context of an individual's life. The COVID-19 pandemic drove us to develop technologies that allow many traditional "office jobs" to be done remotely. With these resources, we can explore ways to better accommodate individuals who need more flexible work so that they can balance their job with care work, family obligations, or other personal responsibilities. Thus remote work technologies offer new avenues for structuring work so that it can be more conducive to human flourishing.

Conclusion

Given the diversity we see among fields of work as well as among individual employers and workers, there certainly won't be a single, one-size-fits-all solution to these issues surrounding good work. But that's already a given within the framework of virtue ethics, which emphasizes the concreteness and particularity of any and every human action. This means that the steps one ought to take toward recovering good work may vary widely depending on one's circumstances and role in their team or company. Still, we believe that the general account of good work outlined here can serve as a guide in identifying and addressing the more particular issues posed by the ever-changing social and technological landscape of today's workplace.