# A Sociological Perspective on Meaningful Work: Community versus Autonomy

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In this article, I present a sociological approach to the problem of meaningful work that dwells on its broad social and cultural sources, as opposed to the focus on subjective and organizational factors currently prevailing in the field. Specifically, I consider two sociological perspectives, those of community and autonomy, as important conceptual tools for understanding the ambivalent character of modern culture in providing individuals with a sense of meaningfulness of their activities. I also review some of the existing research on meaningful work and interpret it through this conceptual distinction, both to show the latter's relevance for the field and to identify the gaps it might help fill. As a result, based on the sociological perspectives, I propose a general conceptual model and discuss five directions to further advance the theoretical comprehension of meaningful work, and I suggest some implications of these perspectives for normative business ethics.

**Key Words:** autonomy, community, critical theory, meaningful work, morality, sociology

Although the problem of meaningfulness of work is extremely meaningful for anyone who has a job, including scholars from a variety of specializations, there is little clarity in what exactly is so captivating about it. Intuitively, it feels that it is very important for anyone to work for some higher purpose other than just making a living, and, for different reasons, for many, that is not the case—which is a legitimate source for both the research interest in this problem and increased public attention to it (see Graeber, 2018). The phenomenon of meaningful work has been attracting scholars from organizational studies and business ethics alike: whereas the former usually focus on the descriptive and explanatory analyses of its factors and outcomes, the latter concentrate on the normative argumentation regarding management's moral responsibilities to foster the employee's sense of working for something intrinsically valuable (Michaelson, Pratt, Grant, & Dunn, 2014). Although the strict separation between the descriptive and the prescriptive—or social science and philosophy—has been questioned in business ethics (e.g., Islam & Greenwood, 2021), this rough distinction is worth maintaining, because, before transforming certain normative visions into organizational practices, it is essential to get a more or less advanced understanding of the nature of the phenomenon in question. This is certainly the case for meaningful work, because, despite the concept's great

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attractiveness for those who study organizations and employment, it is difficult to determine all the sources of people's comprehension of their work roles as having some wider significance for them.

Indeed, the concrete manifestations of this phenomenon are generally quite diverse. Bailey, Yeoman, Madden, Thompson, and Kerridge (2019), in a comprehensive study of empirical literature on meaningful work, found little consensus among scholars on its very definition; however, it appears that what is most commonly understood as the meaningfulness of work is some inner state of fulfillment and joy associated with performing one's job. In their review, Lysova, Allan, Dik, Duffy, and Steger (2019) also focus on the studies of the factors contributing to individual experience of work as meaningful, which are conducted mostly within such fields as management and organizational psychology. Accordingly, their definition of meaningful work (work "that is personally significant and worthwhile" [375]) also emphasizes its subjective aspect; yet the authors acknowledge a relative neglect of the social and cultural factors that affect the perception of work as meaningful. While these and other reviews (e.g., Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010) and myriads of empirical studies indicate the growing attention to this problem and unquestionable growth of relevant knowledge, they also show that some important sources of the meaningfulness of work, associated with a broad social milieu, remain largely understudied and undertheorized.

In contrast to this prevailing subjectivism, an important general feature of a sociological approach advocated here is considering the "external" world of society and culture as a fundamental point of reference in addressing the problem of meaningful (and, no less importantly, meaningless) work. The very notion of meaningfulness, of course, assumes subjective evaluation—yet this does not necessarily mean that it should be analyzed only in relation to other subjective, behavioral, or organizational variables, such as psychological traits, work performance, or management style, as many studies suggest (Bailey, Yeoman et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2019). The problem with subjectivism is well recognized by some philosophy-minded scholars, who argue that what an employee herself or her managers believe to be meaningful work might in fact not be so (and vice versa), as it is possible that genuine meaningfulness "exists" independently of one's personal perception and as such cannot be reduced to it (Bowie, 1998; Michaelson, 2021). This philosophical treatment of subjectivism is instructive in many important ways, such as by questioning the relativism and arbitrariness of what good or worthy work is, but it hardly takes into account the role of societal cultural patterns in providing individuals with these "external" normative standards, which—consciously or not—are used in making such subjective judgments and evaluations.

The sociological tradition (Levine, 1995), on the contrary, has always stressed that the characteristics of society are crucial for explaining individual experiences, and, in this respect, many sociological theorists were particularly interested in conceptualizing the transformations of work, employment, and professional relations in modern societies, which inevitably affect our personal realm (see also Bailey, Lips-Wiersma, Madden, Yeoman, Thompson, & Chalofsky, 2019; Cannizzo & James, 2020). This body of knowledge, as I will demonstrate, is of a

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considerable value for the current debate about the nature of meaningful work, largely because it reveals the fundamental sources of meaning that, ontologically speaking, do not belong to the individual realm.

This article, therefore, is based on the assumption that meaningfulness of work is a *social* and *moral* issue. The latter could be considered as a cause of unnecessary vagueness, because sociologists also lack a conventional definition of morality, besides rather general claims that it is associated with normative evaluations of different phenomena as good or bad, right and wrong, desirable or undesirable (Bykov, 2019). However, linking meaningful work to morality allows for broadening the research perspective precisely because morality cannot be reduced to individual ideas and feelings of what is right or wrong but, essentially, is a social and cultural phenomenon (Hitlin & Vaisey, 2010). Accordingly, in contrast to the philosophical tradition, the sociological vision of morality largely implies an explicitly descriptive rather than prescriptive approach to ethics, as it aims primarily to understand variation in what people belonging to different groups and societies consider to be good or bad (Durkheim, 2010; Hitlin & Vaisey, 2013). Yet, besides these descriptive and explanatory analyses—which are vital for any empirically informed normative argumentation—certain implicit normative connotations in sociological theorizing on society and morality (and sometimes even open criticism of the societal status quo) can be relevant for more applied ethics as well (see also Michaelson et al., 2014). What is crucial for the sociological perspective is stressing that, although morality manifests through individual representations and emotions, it is more complex than that, as moral rules regulate actions toward other individuals and even whole collectivities, and these rules demonstrate significant cultural variation (e.g., Graham et al., 2013; Schwartz, 2006), which, in turn, indicates that the societal factors might be critical for explaining individual moral ideas. Drawing on sociological theory, thus, is important for business ethics because it illuminates the most general sociocultural prerequisites of moral ideas that systematically affect individuals in modern societies, which is essential for comprehending both the possibilities and the limits (see also Reeves & Sinnicks, 2021) of the normative commitments and practical efforts aimed at fostering meaningfulness within specific spheres and organizations (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

It is also necessary to note that what I present in this article is not a "systematic literature review," because, rather than mapping a field and demonstrating a certain lack of theoretical or empirical knowledge, I concentrate here on overcoming a conceptual gap identified by several recently published ones (Bailey, Yeoman et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2019; Rosso et al., 2010). I also by no means attempt here to develop a comprehensive sociological or interdisciplinary account of meaningful work, which would be a way more complex task. Instead, I would like to focus on the analytical dichotomy that represents an important contradiction between the moral foundations of meaningfulness—*community* versus *autonomy*. Though this distinction arguably lies within the very core of ethics (Haidt, 2013; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997), in this article, I propose to apply it to the problem of meaningful work by explicating those conceptual resources of the sociological theories of morality and modernity that are promising for further interdisciplinary

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comprehension of this issue. Drawing on the largely polar sociological conceptions of functionalism and critical theory, I will try to demonstrate that the very meaningfulness of work might not be fully understood only as a function of personal preferences or of characteristics of a job or a particular organization but is no less a matter of much broader social sources of normative regulation.

In the following pages, I first propose a definition of meaningful work that explicitly links this phenomenon to the societal cultural patterns, thus enabling the conceptual integration of this field with sociological theory and its perspectives on the problem of meanings. After that, I discuss the general functionalist theories of society that see social community as a crucial factor in explaining individual normative ideas, including those concerning the fundamental meanings ascribed to activities. Then, I briefly review the perspective of critical theory, which, in contrast, is much more cautious about the impact modern society and culture have on individuals, as modern capitalism is portrayed as threatening autonomy and self-determination and as contradicting genuine human nature. I also apply the community–autonomy distinction to the studies of work and organizations to demonstrate its importance for concrete people's experiences of work as more or less meaningful. Finally, based on my summary analysis of the sociological perspective, I conclude by discussing the promise of considering these opposite concepts for future studies of meaningful work and suggest five directions of theoretical and empirical research that can help further advance the field, also specifying their relevance for normative business ethics.

## DEFINING MEANING OF WORK AND MEANINGFUL WORK

First, it is necessary to make some terminological clarifications in relation to the very concept of *meaningful work*, especially given considerable vagueness of this idea, as many authors of systematic reviews have noted (e.g., Lysova et al., 2019). Though *meaningful*, to be sure, is the most problematic and debatable part of the concept, here *work* is used mostly in the sense of "employment," that is, some form of paid labor; however, the whole term certainly implies wider connotations, referring to intrinsic motivation for any productive activity. It is no wonder, then, that meaningful work can be considered as a "thick" moral concept (Abend, 2011), arguably containing both descriptive and evaluative components and, therefore, equally inspiring empirical researchers and philosophical ethicists (Michaelson et al., 2014). But what exactly does *meaningful work* mean?

Pratt and Ashforth (2003), in an oft-cited chapter, propose a distinction between the concept of *meaning of work*, which refers to general sensemaking process, not necessarily associated with some positive feeling toward one's job role, and *meaningful work*, related to personal significance and inner motivation for working. Rosso et al. (2010), commenting on this distinction, suggest that researchers tend to confuse the two terms: whereas the term *meaning* should refer to what work signifies, *meaningfulness* should be used for describing the "amount of significance attached to work" (95). The two concepts are overlapping to a certain degree, but having in mind this distinction is useful, largely because, as I will show, it helps

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clarify the relationships between individual perception of work and the role of culture in employees' sensemaking.

Although the process of sensemaking, apparently, is an attribute of individual minds, it would be misleading to see it as a strictly psychological, inner mechanism, because the symbolic means used in this process are the result of internal (intuitive or reflective) comprehension of cultural elements. Sensemaking, after all, is a collective phenomenon, also recognized by Pratt and Ashforth (2003), who heavily rely on social identity theory while discussing the interactional compounds of producing meanings. In turn, Rosso et al. (2010: 119), testifying to the dominant focus on subjectivist understandings of meaningful work, and giving certain credit to the sociological perspective on meaning and meaningfulness, call for more attention to its collective foundations; "putting a stronger focus on social and cultural factors would greatly expand our understanding of how other persons and cultural norms matter for meaning."

So, given this acknowledged need to broaden our conception of employees' sensemaking (see also Lysova et al., 2019), it is worth offering more sociological definitions of meaning and meaningfulness of work that would go beyond psychological, interactional, and organizational domains to emphasize the cultural dimensions of the phenomena in question. For this purpose, I define meaning of work *as a result of individual sensemaking process that is based on using, and more or less explicitly articulating, the symbolic means provided by societal culture (such as moral norms, values, ideologies, and religious beliefs) to comprehend one's work role in relation to wider life experience.* Accordingly, meaningfulness of work refers to *emotionally laden subjective evaluation of one's work that is mediated by a positive or negative normative (moral) attitude toward what is perceived to be the work's core meanings.* Although these definitions are hardly exhaustive, at least two moments, in my view, make applying them to the problem of meaningful work useful.

First, the definition of meaning of work, as presented here, allows us to explicitly link the inner cognitive process of sensemaking to societal cultural phenomena, including the dominant values and other forms of symbolism that exceed the level of individuals, interactions, and organizations. It emphasizes that meanings of work are being collectively (re)constructed by individuals through shared symbolic forms that manifest across large-scale social entities. Such an understanding situates the idea of meaningful work within the large intellectual terrain of the sociological theories of culture (e.g., Parsons, 1972; Swidler, 1986; Vaisey, 2009), thus contributing to filling the conceptual gap that exists in the field by suggesting a way to further integrate the sociological perspective with organization studies (see also Shadnam, Bykov, & Prasad, 2021).

Second, and more concretely, the concept of meaningful work, as defined herein, suggests a general mechanism of interaction of, on one hand, macrocultural value patterns and, on the other, subjective ascribing of meaningfulness to work, specifying its potentially problematic character. It stresses that employees can evaluate the same meanings of work (e.g., work as an instrument of survival and economic success or as a path to self-realization) quite differently, depending, inter alia, on

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their perception and internalization of the core values attached to those meanings. In simple words, such a concept provides accounts for meaningfulness and meaninglessness of work alike.

But what kinds of societal cultural patterns can be said to constitute the essential meanings of work? Sociological theories of modernity give us some idea of these dominant values—abstract normative concepts that characterize macro-scale social entities but still manifest in individual thinking. Although the two perspectives I am about to consider appeal to polar individual needs—exercising autonomy and belonging to community—both take society, not individuals or organizations, as a point of departure. In the next two sections, I characterize the key features of a sociological perspective on meaning and meaningfulness, drawing on the traditions of functionalism and critical theory.

## SOCIOLOGICAL FUNCTIONALISM: COMMUNITY AS THE SOURCE OF MEANING

Historically, much (but by no means all) of what is now known as classical sociology was a large intellectual endeavor aimed at demonstrating that society is not simply a sum of discrete individuals but a separate reality that should be analyzed in its own terms and by its own science (Levine, 1995). This task was rather challenging, as individuals appeared to be the only observable entities—however, such theorists as Émile Durkheim (2010) took pains to argue that there is something in individuals' behavior and ideas, especially those about what is right and wrong, that cannot be adequately explained without the concept of society as a reality in its own right.

Generally, Durkheim (2010: 37) argued that society, which he believed to be a separate "being" in an almost literal sense, is the only fundamental source of morality and meaning, as "from society derive all the essentials of our mental life." In his view, it would be wrong to see moral behavior as something aimed at enhancing the well-being of any other individual, because, if we assume (as liberal and utilitarian accounts of morality tend to do) that the interests of every person should be given equal priority, it appears that we are left without any authoritative rule that would allow us to choose whether to act in a selfish or an altruistic way. "Disinterestedness," Durkheim argues, "becomes meaningful only when its object has a higher moral value than we have as individuals" (25). Hence a collectivity could be the only ultimate source of moral authority to provide guidance for individual activities and subjective meanings attached to them. Durkheim stressed that this understanding provides an account of an individual's will to transcend the egoistic impulses and live for some higher purpose, as he also explicitly connects the idea of the moral to that of the sacred: both are characterized by somewhat ambivalent feelings of awe and desire that one experiences toward some valuable object. In this secular conception, society, as a supraindividual being, plays the role of providing the fundamental meanings for one's social life, which is, to a large extent, analogous to the role of God in religious traditions: a collectivity is both the *source* and the *end* of moral

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authority and meaningful agency. Yet, from the perspective of the individual, it is necessary that these moral meanings be internalized and subjectively comprehended, in Durkheim's own words:

> We cannot perform an act which is not in some way meaningful to us simply because we have been commanded to do so. It is psychologically impossible to pursue an end to which we are indifferent—i.e. that does not appear to us as *good* and does not affect our sensibility. Morality must, then, be not only obligatory but also desirable and desired (21, emphasis original).

Importantly, Durkheim's vison of morality is also formulated in opposition to "speculative" philosophical ethics, which, as he argued, does not take into account the objective social reality: "morality is not geometry, it is not a system of abstract truths which can be derived from some fundamental notion, posited as self-evident" (Durkheim, 1979: 34). Rather, morality belongs to the real world of social relations, which should be approached by the methods of empirically oriented, positive social science, not abstract philosophical reasoning: only after a comprehensive sociological analysis of the "moral facts" would it be possible to consider normative arguments and provide practical recommendations on how to improve the morals of a particular collective. Durkheim's focus on the social reality sui generis as a prerequisite of individual moral ideas, therefore, is sharply contrasted to both psychological subjectivism and ethical apriorism.

These abstract speculations about the social nature of morality and meaningfulness might sound like a kind of obscure essentialism, but Durkheim was also more specific in developing this general idea, by pointing out that this abstract "society," in fact, is manifested via different groups to which one belongs simultaneously, including family, work collectives, national society, or even the whole body of humanity. In particular, he considered ancient and medieval guilds, which he believed to be not merely professional associations but, more importantly, moral communities (Durkheim, 2003). A guild member was tightly bound to other members, often via participating in common religious rituals and fests, and, as Durkheim argued, it was a form of adherence to something bigger than oneself that led to the increased sense of solidarity. Accordingly, the function of the guild was somewhat analogous to that of the family, because both collectivities were based on providing their members with different forms of material and moral support. Although Durkheim acknowledged that the guild system went extinct largely because it became structurally inadequate to capitalist production, he also saw the need for reinstituting it in some modernized form, so that it would significantly contribute to the moral regulation of economic activities.

A similar functionalist logic that positions society, as opposed to the individual, in the center of producing meaningfulness was later employed by Talcott Parsons. According to Parsons (1991), people's activities are not driven by purely subjective or utilitarian motivations but are fundamentally norm and value oriented. These values are derived from what Parsons called the "system of culture," which includes all the symbolic means (such as language, morality, ideologies) used in social

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interactions (which compose the "social system") and serving for uniting individuals into a functionally coherent whole. Parsons (1972) emphasized the normative character of culture, seeing it as something inherently evaluative: it provides the symbolic criteria that allow for distinguishing the "right" or "correct" ways of acting and thinking from "wrong" or "incorrect" ways. The values, thus understood, constitute a system that is somewhat differentiated according to the institutions' functions—yet, at the most abstract level, the culture of a given society is centered around the "ultimate values" that provide the fundamental meanings for both social and individual life, which, in a way, lie beyond the domain of science (Parsons, 1966).

Again, like Durkheim, Parsons was a bit more specific and provided some illustrations of his abstract analytical scheme, related mostly to the medical and academic professions (e.g., Parsons, 1991). Being socialized within the academic community, a university professor, for instance, is likely to feel obliged to follow certain standards while interacting with peers and students, standards based on such ideas as universalism and disinterestedness (see also Merton, 1973). On the personal level, one just knows and feels that it is very important to be objective and impartial in assessing students' work and critical but helpful toward other scholars, judging their research based only on its merit, evidence, argumentation, and so forth. However, according to Parsons, all these elements of academic ethics are properly conceptualized as belonging rather to the "system of culture" that attributes symbolic meanings to academic activities in relation to some core value: in the case of American universities, Parsons and Platt (1973) labeled this value as "cognitive rationality." This symbolic value (or, in fact, the value complex united under its umbrella) is important because of its wider societal consequences, as science largely contributes to the function of adaptation that Parsons considered to be one of the four major functions vital for any social system (Parsons, 1991). The personal, social, and cultural levels of normativity are deeply intertwined and distinguished only analytically—yet, Parsons's crucial point was that the symbolic systems constitute the meanings for social activities that cannot not be adequately comprehended as belonging to a strictly subjective domain.

Although functionalism is no longer the dominant paradigm in sociological theorizing, and modern sociologists pay more attention to instances of value conflicts rather than consensus and solidarity, this perspective tells us something important about the nature of meaningfulness. First, it emphasizes that the very notion of meaningfulness is not a matter of isolated "minds" but rather a collective phenomenon: the core values to which individuals appeal in constructing meanings for their activities are in some sense "external" to them, being part of morality, which, by definition, cannot be fully subjective. Second, it suggests that the foundations of meaningfulness might be linked not to individual or psychological well-being but rather to the well-being of the *community* (or, indeed, a number of different ones). Stressing the social and normative nature of morality, meanings, and meaningfulness, this perspective views community as something inherently good, something that provides individuals with a purpose, a sense of solidarity and belonging. However, within the sociological tradition, one can find another perspective on

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modernity, which portrays contemporary capitalism as the Leviathan that destroys the very essence of human beings—so now we briefly consider the impact of society on meaningfulness as viewed by critical theory.

## CRITICAL THEORY: AUTONOMY AND SELF-REALIZATION

Like the functionalists, many of the proponents of critical theory see modern capitalist societies and culture as entities that are capable of exercising dramatic external influence on individuals and their sense of meaningfulness—yet their evaluation of this impact is quite the opposite. This vision was inspired mostly by early writings of Karl Marx (2007), who believed that the way capitalist production is organized (via fragmentation of labor and extracting surplus value by the class of capitalists) suppresses genuine human nature, as workers do not feel that they realize their potential through labor and, as a result, do not perceive their work as in any way meaningful, aside from being a means for not dying of starvation. Marx's ideas, including such notions as alienation and reification, were developed by a number of subsequent theorists who analyzed the social forces associated with modern capitalism as fundamentally oppressive. This tradition, to a certain degree, also corresponds to those classical sociological conceptions of modernity that largely viewed it as a grand loss of authentic social relations and traditional cultural meanings (Tönnies, 2001; Weber, 1958; see also Greisman & Ritzer, 1981).

Herbert Marcuse (1964), for instance, analyzed contemporary market society in terms of objectified forces that impose drastic effects on individuals' sense of meaning: to reproduce itself, the capitalist system inflates people's desire to consume and evaluate everything in relation to consumption, while its ideological apparatus prevents almost any questioning of the status quo. Individuals tend to uncritically accept these values and perceive their jobs only as means for increasing their ability to consume rather than a path toward self-realization or building sincere relations (which are now highly commodified). Max Horkheimer (2004), in a similar vein, argued that capitalist culture cannot provide genuine foundations for meaningfulness because it relies on a solely instrumental use of reason and refrains from applying it to the search for "objective" ends that lie beyond the domains of efficiency, material success, and consumption. Instead of independent thinking and the quest for genuine life meaning, individuals prefer conforming to external value standards associated with overwhelming economic rationalism and reproducing reified social relations.

This state of affairs, as another prominent critical theorist, Erich Fromm (1976), argued, is deeply pathological, because it leads to a situation in which many people suffer from neurosis or are simply unhappy. Trying to satisfy the false needs imposed by the market society, people live in the modus of "possession," which is fundamentally about consuming—not only goods and services but also emotions and relations—and, as a result, cannot realize their genuine human potential. As Fromm argues, the only way to find happiness is by changing the attitude of "having" to that

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of "being," which is based on inner interest in activities, altruistic motivation, and a critical and autonomous search for meaningfulness.

Jürgen Habermas (1984), in an impressive attempt to analyze the ambivalent nature of contemporary capitalist societies, draws a key distinction between what he calls the "system" and the "life-world." The former refers to those economic and administrative forces that largely follow their own, external to the individual, logic, whereas the latter represents the intersubjective sphere of meanings and disinterested communication between people (see also Baxter, 1987). According to Habermas, while the relations between these two domains are quite complex and assume a number of "exchanges," the system tends to "colonize" the life-world by enforcing on individuals the values of money and power that substitute their inherent desire to reach mutual agreement on their "validity claims" via rational and free discussions. Capitalist culture, therefore, appears to stand in opposition to individuals as it disturbs their inner development and impedes self-determination by making them serve the interests of external structures.

Despite certain differences in these conceptions (which can hardly be accounted for in this brief overview), the common feature of critical theory is its serious dissatisfaction with modernity and arguing for an alternative social development. In contrast to the perspective of community that sees societal culture as a positive and uniting force, critical theorists largely portray modern social relations and cultural phenomena as alien to genuine human nature. Such a vision, labeled here as the perspective of *autonomy*, emphasizes the emancipatory potential of individuals who are expected to constitute meaningfulness of their life in a reflexive and deliberative way, as opposed to external societal norms and values. In Horkheimer's (2004: 95) words,

> there are still some forces of resistance left within man. It is evidence against social pessimism that despite the continuous assault of collective patterns, the spirit of humanity is still alive, if not in the individual as a member of social groups, at least in the individual as far as he is let alone.

This theoretical perspective of autonomy resembles that of community in taking a holistic approach to theorizing culture, which is also seen as a fundamental reference point in the analysis of individual sense of meaningfulness. However, in contrast, it rather concentrates on the role of external social structures and processes in shaping those feelings, ideas, and motivations that are believed to be deeply pathological: in fact, the perspective of autonomy sees modern society largely as a source, not of meaningfulness, but of meaninglessness. This view assumes that genuine purpose could be found, not in culturally prescribed (and, in a sense, amoral) patterns concentrated around unbounded economic power and consumerism, but in those activities individuals find worthy, truly enjoyable, and to be advancing humanity. Although the two conceptual perspectives discussed so far represent competing visions of society's role in constructing meaningfulness, I argue that both contain valuable potential for applying to the study of work and organizations; in the next section, I review some of the recent research on meaningful work to demonstrate the relevance and prospect of the community–autonomy distinction for this rapidly developing field.

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## THE COMMUNITY–AUTONOMY DISTINCTION AND THE STUDIES OF MEANINGFUL WORK

The two perspectives on the social sources of meaningfulness are rather abstract, as they are grounded in fundamental social theory of a "grand" scale that aims to make sense of social reality as a whole. Although the conceptions of community and autonomy by no means represent all the sociologically relevant visions of culture and meaningfulness (nor are they immune to multiple criticisms), I argue that they capture a very important distinction that manifests in employees' concrete experiences of their work as more or less meaningful and, as a result, in corresponding studies. This research tradition, however, so far seems to have but loose connections with the sociological perspective, so here I will briefly discuss the existing literature on meaningful work and interpret it using the analytical dichotomy of community and autonomy. This will allow me, first, to show that some of the core ideas on the social and cultural sources of meaningfulness are present within the field, but, to large extent, only implicitly. And second, this will help identify certain gaps and suggest how a more explicit consideration of the concepts of community and autonomy, and sociological theory in general, might advance our understanding of the nature of meaningful work.

The perspective of autonomy, which largely stresses individual, subjective ways of constructing meaningfulness, is perhaps the most well represented in the field. Indeed, meaningfulness is usually conceptualized and measured as some form of individuals' own beliefs that their work is meaningful, rather than referring to any externally provided objective standard (Bailey, Yeoman et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2019). Experiencing work as more or less meaningful is usually analyzed in terms of its correlates, including employees' psychological traits (Frieder, Wang, & Oh, 2018), relations with colleagues (Montani, Boudrias, & Pigeon, 2020), management style (Pavlish & Hunt, 2012), and characteristics of the job (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). Accordingly, meaningfulness of work, thus understood, is considered as a variable that can be linked, for instance, to one's tendency to experience positive affect or being altruistic (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), feeling unity and solidarity with other members of the work collective (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012), responsible management (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019), and active engagement of employees in designing their work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). When considered as an independent or mediating variable, one's belief in having meaningful work is shown to lead to greater satisfaction with life in general (Johnson & Jiang, 2017) and to work engagement and organizational commitment (Geldenhuys, Łaba, & Venter, 2014) and to positively affect employee creativity (Cohen-Meitar, Carmeli, & Waldman, 2009) and some other variables (Allan, Batz-Barbarich, Sterling, & Tay, 2019). As most of these and similar studies were conducted within the field of management and organizational psychology, they are highly practically oriented: meaningfulness of work is approached as something to be managed by introducing certain organizational policies, ideologies, and strategies that would improve different facets of work performance and job satisfaction (see also Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

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Yet, another crucial feature of the perspective of autonomy, as understood here, is its illuminating of the critical potential of human beings, whose nature is believed to be in opposition to the dominating values of efficiency and consumption. In this sense, the imposed managerial strategies, even those aimed at facilitating meaningfulness of work, might face certain resistance from employees, and this topic often attracts not only management scholars (e.g., Bailey, Madden, Alfes, Shantz, & Soane, 2017) but also sociologists and anthropologists. For instance, Gabriel (1999), in a manner consistent with critical theory, argues that modern organizations tend to colonize workers' internal experiences by overcontrolling and overmanaging their subjectivity in an almost totalitarian way: he advocates for an approach that recognizes an organizational member as a "struggling, interacting, feeling, thinking and suffering subject, one capable of obeying and disobeying, controlling and being controlled, losing control and escaping control" (199). Graeber (2018), in his popular book, reports many cases when the employees, despite all the attempts at managerial control, experience their work as meaningless, suggesting that this is largely the result of the societal and cultural transformations that gave birth to the ideology that moralizes working for its own sake, rather than for some objectively produced and subjectively perceived value. Empirical studies of organizations also testify to the morally motivated "worker resistance" (Courpasson, Dany, & Delbridge, 2017; Hodson, 1995) to managerial control not only among such traditionally autonomous professional groups as doctors (e.g., Correia, 2017; Heldal, 2015) but also among those groups directly based on the capitalist logic of stimulating consumption, such as salespersons, who, by identifying with shoppers instead of their managers, can also view their work as comprising meaningful interactions with customers and as serving their real best interests, rather than as pushing an item by any means necessary (Misra & Waters, 2016).

This, in turn, leads us to the opposite theoretical perspective on meaningfulness, which claims that it is related not to one's sense of autonomy and self-development but to solidarity with others and community belonging. Researchers within the field of meaningful work studies acknowledge that one of its key elements is social identity, especially that in relation to the work collective or the organization, which is sometimes referred to as "meaningfulness *at* work" (e.g., Cohen-Meitar et al., 2009; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Lepisto and Pratt (2017), for instance, rely on some insights from the sociological theories of modernity, including the notions of alienation and anomie (the former originates from the Marxist tradition, the latter from the functionalist), in their distinction between "realization" and "justification" perspectives on meaningful work. Their analysis, however, remains on the level of individuals and organizations, without clear and explicit conceptual connections to larger social and cultural phenomena and processes.

Several scholars, including most notably Marjolein Lips-Wiersma and her collaborators, also argue that one of the key individual needs is a feeling of relating to others and being a part of something bigger, and when this need is fulfilled via work-related activities, it can lead to a greater feeling of meaningfulness. For instance, Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009), after discussions with their participants, found that one of the key attributes of meaningful work, as reported by the employees, is a

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feeling of unity with others. "Serving others" is also found to be a major component of meaningful work, which is manifested via considering one's work as providing real and difference-making contributions to the well-being of others, also reflected in the Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012).

In further developing the conceptualization and measurement of meaningful work, Lips-Wiersma, Haar, and Wright (2020) propose an approach that even more closely converges with the sociological perspective of community. They hypothesize that one of the key "ethical antecedents" of meaningfulness is feeling that the job is "worthy," suggesting that "one's work, to be meaningful, has to have independent value to society" (39). They find that, indeed, worthy work is among the most important factors of experiencing work as meaningful, so that the authors conclude that "this finding indicates that MFW research needs to focus on the business-society relationship, which is featuring very prominently in ethics and CSR research but is currently overlooked in much MFW research" (46). However, these conceptualizations and findings, although very important and instructive, do not pay sufficient attention to the role of societal cultural schemata in constructing this prosocial orientation, so that it appears that it comes to employees' minds virtually "out of nowhere."

Florian, Costas, and Kärreman (2019), taking a sociological angle, aim at demonstrating the role of "societal discourses" in changing the perception of work, suggesting some "intertwining" of the cultural patterns (represented by shifting media frames) and individual experiencing of meaningfulness. In their ethnographic study, they focus on volunteers in a refugee camp—one of the most exemplary works in terms of facing the tensions between the values of "altruism, caring and autonomy" (Florian et al., 2019: 594) and the market logic. Yet, in their analysis, "social" is still reduced to "situational" or "interactional," largely implying microprocesses of producing meaningfulness, while the causal role of the macrocultural phenomena remains unclear.

Although these and other studies and approaches within the field (e.g., Lysova et al., 2019) recognize the need to situate the problem of meaningful work within a large social and cultural context, most of the research does not go beyond the level of individuals and organizations and their characteristics as determinants or correlates of one's sense of working for some important purpose. Unlike sociological theorists, organization and management scholars are far less inclined to consider the general features and tensions of modern culture as prerequisites of one's sense of meaningfulness or meaninglessness of one's work. As a corollary, the existing research within the sociocultural perspective is somewhat fragmentary in its reception of sociological theory, lacking a conceptual basis that would allow for relating the problem of meaningful work to the most fundamental features of the human condition in contemporary society. Organization scholars often address such issues only implicitly, usually in terms of relations between singular variables, which has only limited implications for theory construction.

It is also important to note here that, besides the (largely) descriptive perspectives analyzed so far, the distinction between individual and social is also rather salient within a more normative or prescriptive approach, the one that seeks to discover or

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argue for some form of genuine meaningfulness as opposed to subjective interpretations of it. Here autonomy is usually understood in a Kantian normative sense of exercising independence, freedom, and rational capacity for identifying what worthy or meaningful work is (e.g., Bowie, 1998), without explicit consideration of the impact of the social system on one's desire to be self-determined. There is also a certain acknowledgment of the perspective of community by philosophical scholars of meaningful work, reflected, for instance, in Michaelson's (2021) distinction between subjective, social, and normative accounts; yet, his view of the social presupposes being meaningful "in the eyes of others," without much elaboration on what this could mean in terms of social theory. In turn, "normativity" is viewed here in a (what appears to be quasi-Kantian) sense of adhering to an "independent standard" or some "good reasons" to be objectively meaningful, rather than referring to the social mechanisms and sources of values and the associated tensions (Merton, 1938; Parsons, 1991). Overall, the philosophy-driven perspectives on meaningful work (e.g., Beadle & Knight, 2012; Michaelson et al., 2014; Yeoman, 2014), aiming at a more objective and fundamental analysis of the human sense of meaningfulness, do not pay sufficient attention to its social and cultural prerequisites, whereas sociological theory provides the conceptual means for a comprehensive and integral analysis of culture, including the ambivalent impact of a social totality on individuals (Durkheim, 2010; Marcuse, 1964). A sociological approach stresses that, although these "external" forces are experienced by real employees in particular organizations and social contexts, the problem of meaningfulness is by no means reducible to this level, because it is often the general characteristics of the social structure and cultural processes that beget both one's sense of fulfillment and one's misery at work. In the next sections, I aim to demonstrate how employing a sociological angle, and the perspectives of autonomy and community in particular, might help further advance the interdisciplinary field of meaningful work studies.

## THE KEY FEATURES OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON MEANINGFUL WORK

Before proceeding further, let me summarize the key features of the sociological perspective on meaningful work that characterize its general epistemological orientation. For this purpose, I distinguish three interrelated points that demonstrate what can be learned from the two sociological traditions and how the sociological problematization differs from other approaches to analyzing meaningfulness.

### *A(n) (Analytically) Social Realist Position*

Both sociological traditions discussed in this article—functionalism and critical theory—share a holist approach to analyzing society and culture: they largely see social entities as complex systems rather than as mere clusters of discrete individuals. Accordingly, the sociological perspective of meaning making, as based on such macrotheorizing, would assume that meanings exist, in some important sense, independently of concrete individuals. In this way, meanings should be considered as belonging to the level of culture that forms an external, "objective" context of

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symbolic schemata, which are used and evaluated more or less intuitively or deliberately (see Vaisey, 2009) in individual meaning making. Although such a vision does not necessarily beg ontological questions about the nature of social reality, for analytical reasons, it assumes that meanings are attributes not (only) of individual minds but of cultures that characterize groups and communities of different scale (constituting what Durkheim [1982] famously called a "social fact").

Importantly, what distinguishes such a perspective from normative philosophical approaches to meaningful work, which also aim at a more objectivist comprehension of this phenomenon (e.g., Bowie, 1998; Michaelson, 2021; Michaelson et al., 2014), is escaping the problems associated with moral realism in metaethics. In relation to meaningful work, these include both theoretical doubts about the very existence of objective meaningfulness for some activity and empirical fact that two different people might consider the same work as meaningful or meaningless, so that it's not clear whether we can discern that one of them is making any real mistake. On the contrary, the social realist position assumes that the fundamental point of reference in the problem of meanings and meaningfulness is not some transcendent "independent standard" (Michaelson, 2021: 421) but the social and cultural reality, which can be both theorized (e.g., Durkheim, 1984; Parsons, 1991) and empirically measured with the methods of social science (e.g., Taras, Rowney, & Steel, 2009). As such, this sociological perspective, while also leaning toward objectivism, is more compatible with the studies and approaches from other traditions sharing a focus on empirically informed analysis of normativity (e.g., management, organizational studies, anthropology), compared to moral philosophy, which is largely speculative. Yet, this does not make the sociological perspective irrelevant for applied business ethics, because, as I will try to show in the final section, social realism might have certain implications worth considering for making normative arguments, as well as informing organizational practice.

### *Societal Culture as the Source of Meaning, Meaningfulness, and Meaninglessness*

While not disregarding other factors of experiencing work as meaningful, the sociological approach advocated here suggests that societal culture and structure should be seriously considered as prerequisites for any individual idea of meaningful work. Some scholars within the field recognize the importance of the collectively reproduced societal culture for individual comprehension of work; for instance, Lepisto and Pratt (2017: 112) acknowledge that "social, cultural, and institutional contexts delimit the acceptable, reasonable, and feasible ways in which individuals explain, legitimize, and make sense of their behavior." Although they suggest important directions for further research within this perspective, their reasoning remains rather declarative, almost without substantive connections to the sociological theories of culture and society.

Perhaps this lack of the sociological focus is the most evident in Lepisto and Pratt's (2017) use of the notions of anomie and alienation, which is rather extensive throughout their paper. Yet, their treatment of these concepts appears to be essentially subjectivist, as they mostly refer to negative psychological experiences, such as a feeling of normlessness and of being out of control of one's work. Such an

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application, while being useful for certain purposes, obscures the social causes of such psychological conditions integral for both concepts, namely, some form of societal disintegration that is mirrored in individual consciousness. For the functionalists, anomie is the result of either a lack of societal normative order that fosters cooperation (Durkheim, 1984) or a contradiction between the reception of the institutionally prescribed goals and means for their attainment (Merton, 1938), so that psychological vulnerability is often caused by social disturbance: a software engineer is confused and not sure whether to continue working for a domestic company or to consider emigration, but it is the societal value polarization and economic crisis due to a geopolitical conflict that make many employees like her feel lost and afraid of the future. For the critical theorists, alienation is an inevitable by-product of capitalism as a system of production (Marx, 2007) or capitalism as a cultural system (Marcuse, 1964), so that the structural characteristics of society are responsible for individual feelings of estrangement: an office clerk feels distressed and unhappy with his loans and burnout, but it is the neoliberal capitalist culture that stimulates his desire to earn more and spend more, regardless of whether it has anything to do with his genuine interests. Examples like these show the importance of understanding and being attentive to the social origin and causal links implicit to both concepts, as well as the impact of the "social totality" on one's ideas of meaningful work.

*Focusing on the Tensions Between Individual and Society in Relation to the Problem of Meaningfulness*

Both previously discussed features of the sociological approach—that is, seeing societal culture as a real force and recognizing its effects on individual sensemaking—lead to the third one, which accentuates the potential conflict between societal values and individual comprehension of work. The two sociological traditions portray individual–society relations differently: whereas functionalism largely stresses people's compliance with external normative standards, critical theory advocates for individual freedom and autonomy from reified social structures that cause multiple pathologies. These opposite visions suggest a fundamental contradiction between societal value patterns and, accordingly, their individual appropriations, and such tensions should be given special attention in understanding the phenomenon of meaningful work.

The sociological perspective sees individuals as *homo duplex* (Ross, 2017): we are all striving for both the personal and the social, for autonomy from others and for belonging to a greater entity. This dualism of human nature is reflected in societal culture that provides the corresponding symbolism, including egoistic and prosocial value patterns that circulate through communication and media systems. It is true that the "interests" of society and individual are often at odds, but, as Durkheim (1984, 2010) argued, it is the former that provides the conditions and symbolic means for even stating the problem in such terms. Yet, the sociological approach does not see the role of societal culture in meaning making as strictly deterministic, as individuals certainly have a capacity to comprehend, internalize, criticize, and reject both prosocial and individualistic value standards. They, however, can hardly

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ignore this external symbolic context that poses tensions between personal success (or individual development) and the well-being of the collectivity (or reified societal demands), which can have considerable implications for one's perception of work as meaningful or meaningless. The conceptual model of meaningful work outlined in the following section aims at specifying the basic structure of these contradictions.

## THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE AND FUTURE STUDIES OF MEANINGFUL WORK

The two sociological perspectives provide the general conceptual tools for understanding the social foundations of meaningful work, making it possible to propose a conceptual model that recognizes the cultural genesis of an individual's sense of fulfillment at work. Figure 1 shows some of the key features of such a comprehension; although not an exhaustive framework, this scheme highlights the basic tensions between the dominating cultural patterns, as emphasized by the perspectives of community and autonomy, and their feasible impact on viewing one's work as meaningful or meaningless.

Broadly, this model suggests the ways these cultural complexes of meanings are related to one's sense of purpose of/at work, depending on how they affect the basic psychological needs of exercising autonomy and belonging to community (i.e., Deci & Ryan, 2000), specifying certain conditions that are likely to foster perception of work as meaningful or meaningless. Although much, of course, is owed to other individual, job-level, and contextual factors, this model proposes that, generally, the societal moral values of altruism and cooperation positively influence the sense of meaningfulness in cases when employees share these values, and the job can be legitimately viewed by them as making a difference in terms of increasing the well-being of others. When employees lack such value orientations, they are likely to see their work as meaningless—especially in situations of low-paid labor and professional burnout. The market values of success, competition, and efficiency, on the contrary, can cause employees' distress and sense of meaninglessness, most probably among those who have a great need in experiencing autonomy and are apt to critical thinking (Graeber, 2018). However, those who internalize the market values and occupy a relatively privileged economic position will—other things being equal—see their work as a meaningful endeavor. While these potential mechanisms will be discussed in further detail, it should be noted that this scheme is very abstract, largely hypothetical, and by no means comprehensive, as it is intended to be a subject for future elaboration based on more detailed conceptual and empirical work. It provides, however, a general account for the role of the two societal value complexes, mediated by the corresponding individual needs, in constructing one's sense of having meaningful or meaningless work.

But how exactly might considering a sociological perspective on the problem of cultural meanings foster the progress of the study of meaningful work? And how it could fruitfully inform the normative debates within the field? To provide some idea, I propose five general directions that could be further pursued not only by sociologists but by scholars across the wide spectrum of the disciplines interested in the

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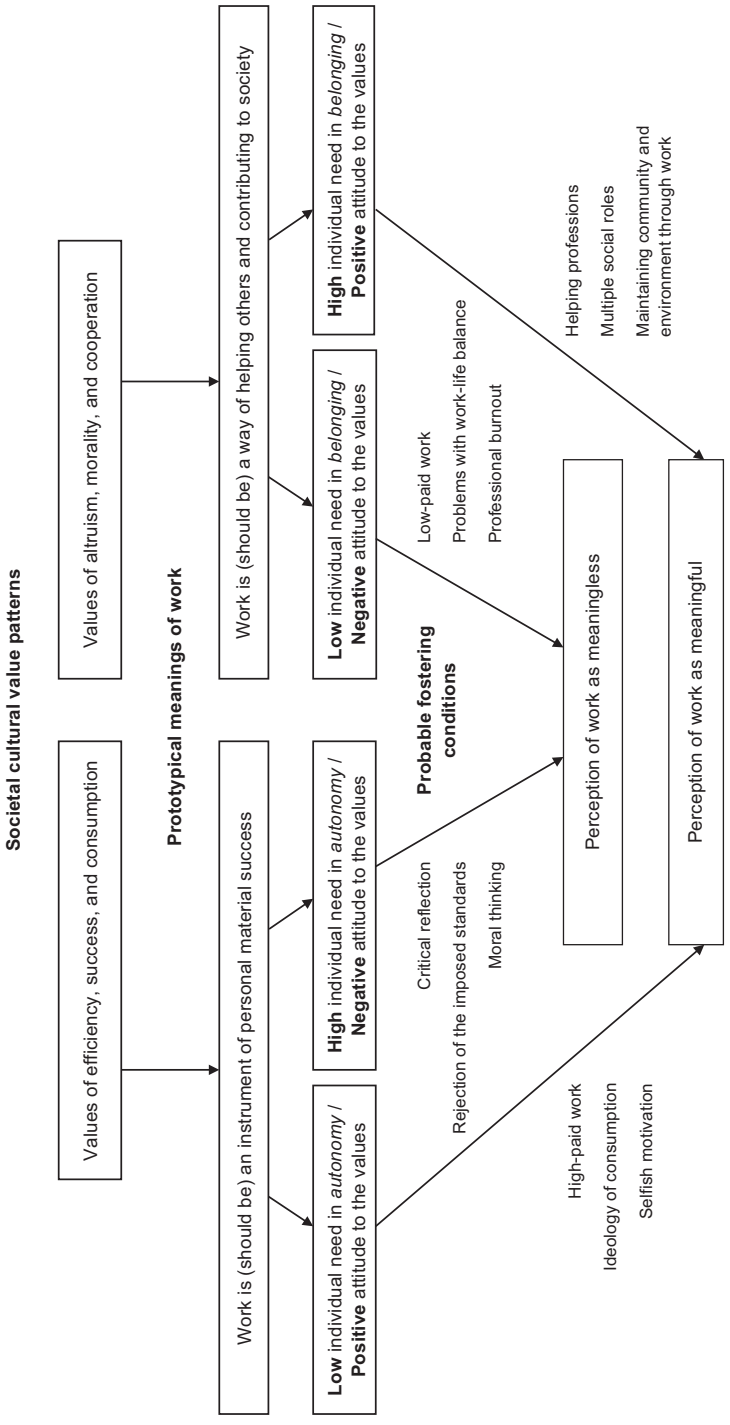


**Figure 1: Model of the Effects of Societal Cultural Value Patterns on Meaningful Work**

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study of work and organizations. For each direction, I also summarize its relevance for descriptive organization studies and suggest how it could be valuable for normative approaches. Although not exhaustive, this list allows for identifying some more concrete and nuanced ways of broadening the conceptual and research agenda in the field, which, in turn, might be implemented in practical actions aimed at fostering meaningfulness of work in particular spheres.

*Developing a Richer Conceptual Understanding of Meaningful Work*

The first and most general direction refers to using the theoretical means provided by sociological theory for advancing the very notion of meaningful work and the associated concepts, such as morality, values, and culture. Despite the abundance of empirical studies, there is a certain lack of conceptual development in the field, which is testified by Bailey, Yeoman et al. (2019), who, after an extensive literature review, conclude,

> By far, the largest number of studies can be located within work/industrial/organizational psychology, where meaningfulness is broadly considered as a motivational attitude or perception that is likely to be influenced by a range of personality factors and, equally, is malleable according to factors within the workplace, such as workplace relationships, supervisory support, or job design features (92).

This, in particular, indicates a relative neglect of the lager societal and cultural determinants and consequences of meaningful work in the current research program. Meanwhile, organizations, at the level of which the problem of meaningful work is usually approached, function within a much larger social and cultural environment that provides the fundamental conditions of employees' sensemaking within specific workplaces. Even though the two discussed sociological perspectives, obviously, are much more complex than they are presented in this article, they give an example of capturing the role of societal phenomena in shaping individuals' sense of doing something worthy and valuable or, in contrast, pointless and even harmful. Meaningfulness of work, which could be conceptualized as a "thick" moral concept (Abend, 2011), therefore, should be further linked to the general sociological theories of values (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004), morality (Hitlin & Vaisey, 2013), and modernity (Cannizzo & James, 2020).

Yet, for now, I emphasize that the crucial point of the sociological approach presented here is seeing meaningfulness as, in a sense, a function of societal culture: although it would be misleading to see the latter's role as strictly deterministic, it is still culture that provides individuals with the available repertoire of symbolic tools, including moral norms, values, and ideologies, that are used in meaning making (Swidler, 1986). This suggests that, rather than stressing that "meaningfulness is necessarily subjective" (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003: 331) (which is, of course, true, but is only a part of the whole story), it would be fruitful to take a sociological standpoint and thoroughly analyze the role of cultural patterns in constructing meaningfulness, which is, after all, a collective endeavor. In this respect, an example of the effect of societal culture on one's perception of work can be found in the study by Wallace and Leicht (2004) that shows how important cultural transformations, including the

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increased concern for equality and diversity, are manifested at workplaces and affect employees' sense of job entitlement. Whether a similar effect of "cultural wars" can be observed in relation to the sense of meaningfulness of a job deserves further specific investigation, but it is clear that the core cultural values and symbolic schemata are involved in meaning making, and there is a need for a more advanced theoretical understanding of how this happens in the domain of work. For instance, as some scholars (e.g., Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Lysova et al., 2019) suggest, collectivistic and individualistic cultures might influence the sense of meaningfulness in different ways, which also should be accounted for. Religion, as a macro-cultural phenomenon, is also likely to play a significant role in constructing meaningfulness of work (e.g., Davidson & Caddell, 1994).

### Relevance for Organization Studies

Considering the sociocultural dimension of meaningful work would allow organization scholars to explicitly link this notion to external societal structure and value standards and to be more reflexive about many basic concepts related to meaningful work as having social, not psychological, origins. Besides more substantive integration with social theory, comparative and historical analyses of what is believed to be meaningful work across cultures might be particularly valuable in this respect.

### Implications for Normative Business Ethics and Management Practice

The theoretical debate about whether work can have objective meaningfulness would gain from considering Durkheim's critique of normative apriorism based on social realist position (e.g., Mestrovic, 1989), as well as critical theory of capitalist culture, because each perspective, in its own way, emphasizes the social origins of the evaluative categories one employs for making subjective judgments. In this sense, collectively reproduced societal structure and cultural values might provide an alternative point of departure for those seeking the foundations of objective meaningfulness, one that is more congruent with both empirical studies and social theory compared to abstract philosophical reasoning.

In terms of management practice, this would assume being more attentive not only to job conditions and psychological well-being of employees but also to cultural codes and societal transformations "outside" the organizations affecting employees' ideas of whether their work is worthy.

#### *Recognizing the Morally Ambivalent Character of Societal Culture in Constructing Meaningfulness*

The ultimate meanings for activities are not created ex nihilo but derived from a plethora of symbolic means that are collectively reproduced on different levels of social interactions, in this way constituting what can be called the *system of culture.* The sociological perspectives of community and autonomy present competing visions of the general impact of culture on individuals' sense of meaningfulness: the former sees cultural values as a source of individuals' sense of belonging to a greater entity, living a moral life, and experiencing solidarity with others, whereas the latter accentuates the negative aspects of culture that impose false ideals of

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efficiency and consumption, leading to feelings of alienation and unfulfillment. It is likely that neither of the two is absolutely right or wrong; rather, it is the ambivalent character of modern culture that allows for polar interpretations. I believe this fact should be acknowledged and taken into account in further studies of meaningful work, so that it would be possible to develop a more advanced understanding, according to which the problem of meaningfulness is not just a matter of particular persons, occupations, and organizations but much more fundamental and integral to the contemporary human condition.

The two theoretical perspectives give us an opportunity to suggest what comprises these opposite complexes of meanings. The first value complex is associated with modern capitalist, and particularly neoliberal, ideology, concentrating around such concepts as market, efficiency, competition, and success (see Davies, 2014). Such ideas, which are translated by multiple media sources and through personal communication, get internalized by employees, who start perceiving their jobs in terms of increasing their ability to make money, be effective, and engage in individualized consumption. This, together with intensified managerial control, however, often leads to drastic negative effects on one's well-being, particularly for those who tend to lose the race (e.g., Lynch, 2006), so it can lead to the conscious rejection of such standards. This situation seems to be inescapable for the majority of those who find themselves within the neoliberal economic and cultural system; for instance, the large-scale data analyzed by Prins, Bates, Keyes, and Muntaner (2015) suggest that the structural characteristics of modern capitalist society have systematic negative impacts on one's mental health and sense of meaning, manifest even among those who occupy relatively privileged economic positions. The perspective of autonomy assumes that meaningfulness of work can be found in a deliberative opposition to those market values by refusing to participate in overwhelming competition and adhering to those activities that encourage self-determination, expression of one's true self, and more humane ways of thinking and acting.

The perspective of community reflects another value complex, based on the ideas of altruism, cooperation, and disinterested service to others to make a significant contribution to their well-being. It also stresses that by enacting moral standards, which often requires overcoming one's own selfish interests, a person can reach a sense of self-transcendence and serve some higher purpose, contributing to sustainment and development of a given society and the whole of humanity (Durkheim, 2010). Accordingly, meaningfulness of work in relation to this value complex can be related to those occupations and positions that are perceived as containing considerable moral worth, fostering feelings of belonging and unity with others or providing some generalized service to the community.

These ambivalent values coexist within modern culture, being relatively more or less salient depending on different domains and contexts, so that their relations in specific cases deserve more focused research. I suggest that one of the most interesting problems here is clarifying the mechanisms of the value mimicry, such as resorting to sham sincerity in relationships to stimulate efficiency and consumption (what Robert Merton [1968] used to call "pseudo-Gemeinschaft"), and the impact of those instances on meaningful work. The ways employees communicate and

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negotiate these values in collectively constructing the meaningfulness of their jobs (e.g., Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017) also need to be further investigated and theorized.

#### Relevance for Organization Studies

Focusing on the ambivalent societal value patterns and the controversies of employees' internalization of them could help in understanding the contested nature of meaningful work and, accordingly, in comprehending the limits of manipulating meaningfulness on the organizational level (perhaps making certain connections with critical management perspectives could be instructive for this purpose). It might also help clarify how the organizational values of meaningful work are related to societal ones and how these potential tensions affect employees with different motivations and visions of work.

#### Implications for Normative Business Ethics and Management Practice

The tensions between cultural value patterns should be considered as an objective context in which meaning making takes place, one that has inevitable systematic—though not necessarily straightforward—effects on individual thinking. Moreover, the very existence of this value conflict as the "worldly," social source of "good" and "evil" might be conceptualized as a necessary precondition for constructing genuinely meaningful work (Reeves & Sinnicks, 2021). Social theory of modernity can provide normatively oriented scholars in business ethics an idea of why the search for genuine meaning within capitalism (including their own search) is both attractive and problematic, largely because of losing traditional cultural symbolism due to overwhelming rationalization (Horkheimer, 2004; Weber, 1958). In this sense, it could be especially instructive to closely examine Habermas's (1984) ideas on how our socially determined rational capacity can, and perhaps should, be used to reach intersubjective agreement on such normative issues through "communicative action."

Practically, given the controversial character of the relations between societal meanings and individual meaningfulness, it might be instructive to discuss with the employees their attitudes toward capitalism ideology of individual success and altruistic values of work openly and deliberately, to get a shared sense of how to make their job more morally valuable.

### *Clarifying the Multiple Social Sources of Meaningfulness*

This direction mainly draws on the perspective of community that stresses the social origins of morality and meaningfulness. Perhaps the most important fact in this respect is multiple social identity, because one simultaneously belongs to a number of different social groups, the interests of which might not always coincide. Each collectivity—family, organization, professional association or labor union, religious confession, nation/society, humanity—has its own and somewhat different moral demands, which can be a source of certain tensions in relation to meaningfulness of one's work (Durkheim, 2003). Although scholars have certain knowledge, for instance, about the impact of meaningful work on experiencing work–family

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conflict (Bragger et al., 2021; see also Oelberger, 2019), I suggest that more attention should be given to other groups as the possible recipients of meaningful contributions from employees of different occupations.

Specifically, it would be instructive to focus on those cases when the two groups to which one belongs have somewhat polar moral codes, such as faculty members who also hold administrative positions or otherwise experience identity conflicts (e.g., Shams, 2019). Another interesting example of the role of group identity in constructing meaningfulness is military service, assuming that it is based on the partial morality of favoring the interests of one's own community at the expense of other communities. In this respect, it would also be promising to investigate how perception of work as meaningful is related to endorsing individualized or pro-group moral attitudes (Haidt, 2013) or universalistic and particularistic values (Schwartz, 2006). Considering these and similar issues would both encourage theoretical development in the field and promote the implementation of more nuanced approaches to organizational practice.

#### Relevance for Organization Studies

Focusing on the different group demands and identity conflicts in constructing and questioning meaningfulness of work would shed light on the role of balance between multiple social responsibilities beyond the work–family dichotomy. For instance, it is worth considering one's feeling of belonging to a professional community (as complementary—or even opposed—to a particular organization) and following professional ethical standards as potential factors of meaningful work.

#### Implications for Normative Business Ethics and Management Practice

The association of meaningfulness with multiple social identities and group memberships puts into question its universalistic notion, because, as the sociological tradition shows, the well-being of different collectives might be at odds. Normative business ethics should consider whether it is possible to produce a concept of genuine meaningfulness for those types of work that benefit certain groups at the expense of others (be that firm, family, local community, class, or state) and, if so, how this could be reconciled with moral realism.

Practically, this conflict between different group demands would presume creating conditions for satisfying multiple role expectations, including those of family, work collective, organization, profession, and the larger community (e.g., via employee volunteering), as a way of enhancing meaningfulness.

### *Analyzing the Impact of Recent Social and Technological Transformations on Meaningful Work*

This direction, in turn, is largely inspired by the perspective of autonomy, as critical theorists have always been very skeptical of and even apprehensive about the impact of new technologies on one's subjectivity, fulfillment, and well-being (e.g., Marcuse, 1964). In this respect, the most crucial recent technological change is the unprecedented digitalization of different social processes and relations, including those directly or indirectly related to work. The increased use of digital

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algorithms and big data arguably leads to the diminishing subjective aspects of work for many employees and, as a result, negatively affects their sense of meaningfulness by producing the feelings of being overly controlled by reified technologies. An instructive example of this technology-driven transformation is taxi drivers, who nowadays are becoming increasingly dependent on computer algorithms (provided by ride-hailing platforms) that largely substitute individual agency and hinder the sense of being in control of one's work. Some studies show that relying on computer algorithms might lead to serious negative effects on economic equality by distributing very different wages to drivers of similar performance (Bokányi & Hannák, 2020). However, other research provides evidence that many drivers resist the power of the imposed technologies by adopting more nuanced strategies, such as using multiple devices and accounts, so that "algorithmic activism is taking shape in their deliberate efforts to manipulate and to gain an advantage over the digital platform" (Chen, 2018: 2706). I believe, therefore, that scholars should give more attention to the effects of these transformations on meaningful work, focusing especially on the role of resistance to objectified technologies' control.

The recent global pandemic crisis dramatically changed the sphere of work and, undoubtedly, reinforced the digitalization process, particularly for office workers. Many employees became physically separated and had to work from home using internet technologies, which also carries considerable risks for losing meaningfulness, as the two sociological perspectives might have suggested. Among those risks, one group is related to the possibility of increased technologically mediated control of employees, including considerable threat to work–life balance because of the eroding border between the two domains. Another group is associated with the risks of losing the authenticity of communication (Habermas, 1984) by its increased instrumentalization—for example, via planned conferences in video chats, as opposed to spontaneous and informal talks with colleagues and clients at workplaces. How these changes affect meaningfulness of work is not yet quite clear, as there might be certain positive effects as well, such as the increased flexibility in time management. Yet, I suppose that it would be fruitful to investigate the impact of distant communication on feelings of alienation and to clarify the role of physical copresence and, generally, the corporeal aspects of work relations in providing one with a sense of community and belonging.

### Relevance for Organization Studies

Giving its due to the perspective of critical theory, including a deeper analysis of such phenomena as alienation and reification on the societal level, could help business ethics scholars conceive the external impact of the meanings and technological conditions imposed by the "system" on individual perceptions of work. This certainly adds another dimension to the problem of "objectivity" of meaningfulness, not in the sense of philosophical arguments, but in the sense of the inescapable social, cultural, and technological forces individuals in capitalist societies face.

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### Implications for Normative Business Ethics and Management Practice

The objective—at least in the sense of being out of employees' control and perceived by them as alien—social and technological transformations should be considered as important sources of the problem of meaningful work. Accordingly, theorizing the structural and cultural causes of alienation and reification could give business ethics an alternative vison of autonomy, one linked not to presumably universal moral imperatives (Bowie, 1998) but to individual resistance to the external social forces. Reeves and Sinnicks's (2021) analogy with bad and good Hollywood movies might be helpful in this respect: mass market film production, motivated by profit making, is usually quite uniform and dumb, but occasionally it gives birth to true masterpieces. In the same vein, the "reified" social processes may sometimes produce certain cultural meanings and technological means that can be used to subvert the effects of the same "dehumanizing" capitalist system—a phenomenon worth considering by those interested in conceptualizing genuinely meaningful work.

In terms of applied business ethics, this complex of problems might lead to the necessity to lessen managerial and technical control over employees and provide more space for their subjectivity, autonomy, corporeality, and sincerity at work—at least to the extent that the whole capitalist system allows for it.

#### *Juxtaposing Subjective Meaningfulness and Far-Reaching Societal Consequences of Work*

Finally, introducing this last direction, I would like to conclude with a more optimistic vision of the future of meaningful work, one that is related to the most ultimate values that can be found in the sociological understanding of social reality. Despite considerable differences, both perspectives discussed in this article emphasize the crucial importance of transcending individualized practices, aimed at maximizing pleasure and utility and adhering to a greater goal as the very foundation of genuine meaning. The perspective of community sees the ultimate causes of human actions in benefiting other individuals, and society as a whole, which is reflected in individuals' sense of living a moral life and contributing to a greater good (Durkheim, 2010). The perspective of autonomy advocates for reflexivity and collective efforts aimed at radically revising the dominant ideology of efficiency and consumption imposed by the reified forces of contemporary market culture, in favor of constructing a society that would allow for developing the really creative human potential and building sincere relationships (Fromm, 1976; Marcuse, 1964). This suggests that the role of perceived long-lasting effects of one's work on the well-being of community, sustaining environment, and advancing humanity should be seriously considered as the sources of meaningfulness of work.

Perhaps some important ideas concerning the societal effects of work as the correlates of its subjective meanings, as well as the latter's links to societal morality, could be found in such widespread business ethics literature notions as corporate social responsibility and sustainable development. Yet, the sociological perspective begs the set of questions that can help place work-related experience into a much larger context of meaningfulness. For instance, what are the large-scale implications

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of one's job in terms of its positive or negative impact on the prospects of future generations and how this affects one's sense of purpose? Or how is meaningfulness related to working for a company led by a CEO like Elon Musk, who claims that his aim is to foster technological development to radically transcend the current human condition? Such a comprehension assumes that meaningfulness could be found not only in the immediate social or organizational environment but also in a sense of contributing to something that lasts longer than any individual life and, howsoever indirectly, transforms humanity into something qualitatively better.

### Relevance for Organization Studies

Linking meaningfulness of work not only to psychological traits or immediate organizational environment but to its far-reaching societal consequences can help situate the problem within the context of human mortality, yet, not in the sense of pure existentialism but by considering individual work as a means for transcending one's life through contributing to society and the whole of humanity. It is worth investigating whether those working in different spheres experience their contribution to sustaining social order and progress as a crucial component of meaningfulness.

### Implications for Normative Business Ethics and Management Practice

Objective positive consequences for the well-being of society can serve as a foundation of a normative approach to meaningful work, suggesting that it can be a sufficient criterion to consider work genuinely meaningful even if an employee—sporadically or continuously—thinks otherwise. In this regard, I suggest it would be promising to integrate certain metaethical conceptions that see positive consequences of individual moral beliefs for society's functioning as a basis for moral realism (e.g., Copp, 2007) into normative meaningful work scholarship. Also, consulting with a Durkheimian analysis of the close relations between the social and the sacred might be particularly helpful for further conceptualizing this issue.

For management's part, this might also result in practical actions aimed at fostering the idea of contributing to society's progress and the well-being of future generations as a fundamental attribute of meaningful work.

## CONCLUSION

Over the past decades, scholars across different disciplinary perspectives and traditions have fruitfully examined various forms, antecedents, and outcomes of meaningful work, a phenomenon (justly) considered by many to be worthy both of investigating academically and of fostering practically. Although organizational psychologists have gained much valuable knowledge about the personal and contextual factors of experiencing work as meaningful, such a subjectivist approach does not account for the role of societal cultural values in meaning making. Normative ethical accounts, on the other hand, cast doubts on the arbitrariness of what genuinely worthy work is, suggesting that there might be objectively good reasons to consider work meaningful regardless of an employee's own opinion; however, this

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perspective also neither addresses the role of external social structures and cultural patterns as necessary prerequisites for constructing meaningfulness of work in modern societies nor considers the societal externalities of work as possible criteria for its genuine meaningfulness.

In this article, I suggested going beyond subjective interpretations and organizational correlates of meaningful work to consider broader social and cultural contexts, to which individual meaningfulness owes much of its symbolic matter. I argued that the sociological tradition, with its perspectives of community and autonomy, can help further advance the field of meaningful work studies by addressing the role of "external," cultural sources of meaningfulness, allowing us to link the perception of work to the most essential problems of human existence in society. Although other promising approaches aim at overcoming sheer subjectivism, it is my contention that only by addressing these grand and ultimate issues will the study of meaningful work reach comprehensive and genuine meaningfulness.

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