Recognition, Craft, and the Elusiveness of 'Good Work'

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This article seeks to challenge existing understandings of good work. It does so through a critical exploration of recognitive and craft conceptions of work, which are among the richest and most philosophically nuanced of extant accounts. The recognitive view emphasises work's recognitive value through the social esteem derived from making a valuable social contribution. But by making recognition foundational, it is unable to appreciate the irreducible ethical significance of the objective quality of one's work activity. The 'craft ideal,' by contrast, promises to provide a powerful basis for understanding the importance of rich, rewarding, and morally educative activities, but is undermined by a laudable but misdirected egalitarian impulse which prevents it from being able to properly distinguish good from bad work. One underlying aim of our discussion is to provoke deeper reflection from business ethicists regarding what we might want from an account of good work.

Key Words: craft, recognition, good work

This article seeks to explore the, perhaps surprisingly elusive, concept of good work. It proceeds negatively, by identifying and elucidating the challenges faced by two of the most nuanced and rich fundamental conceptions of good work in the literature. Rather than proposing a positive conception of good work, we aim to highlight the insufficiencies of existing theoretical conceptions of the topic. While not solving the problem, we hope this undertaking will provoke productive further reflection from business ethicists regarding good work.

Insofar as the conversation within business ethics has focused on the goods of work, it has tended to be broadly divided between accounts of those goods which focus on the recognition of work as making a social contribution—the 'recognitive account'—and accounts which focus on the practical dimensions of work that make it intrinsically worthwhile—the 'craft ideal.' This distinction between recognitive and craft dimensions of the goods of work is an analytical one, which must be qualified by acknowledging the concrete interrelatedness of these dimensions. However, the extant recognitive and craft accounts are drawn into the

tensions of this entanglement by their own commitments. While both kinds of account prioritise one dimension, they are immanently drawn towards incorporating the other as well: recognitive accounts find themselves compelled to try to integrate elements of the craft ideal, while craft accounts feel the pull towards recognitive elements.

Yet, we will argue, such moves turn out to be unsustainable, with both sides unable to properly capture the ethical potential of work. This characteristic of the debate suggests that the concept of good work is much more elusive than is typically assumed. While we do not attempt here to offer a positive conception of good work, we hope that bringing clearly into view the elusiveness of the concept of good work will help inform and focus work within business ethics onto this central and recalcitrant problem.

The recognitive view has roots in the work of Hegel (1991) and, in recent critical theory, Honneth (1996, 2010, 2014). It emphasises work's recognitive value through the social esteem derived from making a valuable social contribution, while attempting to incorporate the craft idea as an artefact of our recognitive privileging of craftlike work. It thus advocates liberation from unrecognised work via the liberation of work, by expanding our conception of social contribution to include a wider range of apparently under-appreciated forms of employment. The recognitive view plausibly tracks a genuine need—to make, and know that one is making, a genuine contribution to the good of others: a human contribution to the human. But by making recognition the bedrock, the recognitive view is unable to properly appreciate the irreducible ethical significance of the objective quality of one's work activity. This is a problem that is immanent to the recognitive paradigm: the so-called 'craft ideal' irrupts in recognitive texts as a problem that is never adequately incorporated.

After exploring why this is, we turn to accounts of work that attempt to combine recognition and craft, albeit in a way that grants recognition primacy. This view advocates a liberation from unrecognised work through the expansion of our conception of skilled work, through a recognition that all work involves an irreducibly 'ergonomic' aspect (Smith & Deranty, 2012; Dejours, Deranty, Renault, & Smith, 2018; Deranty, 2022). In trying to properly recognise the craft-like nature of all work, this view ends up being unable to properly account for what is wrong with bad work in itself, beyond the lack of recognition it attracts, and thus is unable to sustain a distinction between good and bad work.

Finally, we turn to the craft conception of work itself, and focus largely on the work of MacIntyre (2007). MacIntyre's work has been widely used by business ethicists (Ferrero & Sison, 2014; Akgün, Keskin, & Fidan, 2022), particularly by those interested in the ethical quality of work. MacIntyre's conception of practices promises to provide a powerful basis for understanding the importance of rich, rewarding, and morally educative activities, but is caught between excessively demanding and excessively undemanding conceptions of how 'practice' might apply to work, a problem that is especially pronounced in business ethicists' applications of his work. We ultimately locate the problem with such accounts in their laudable but misdirected egalitarian impulse, which holds them back from properly

identifying the badness of work, for fear of diminishing or being "disrespectful" (Celikates, Honneth, & Jaeggi, 2023: 322) to those who do such work.

THE GOOD WORK DEBATE

The concept of 'work' has been an important part of the conversation in business ethics. But precisely what constitutes work is no easy question to answer. The word 'work' has many meanings (Ciulla, 2000; Gini, 2001), but so too do many terms that pick out important features of human life and culture. The word 'art,' for example, can be used in a categorical sense, which allows us to understand why certain objects are appropriately displayed in galleries even when we have a low estimation of their artistic merit, and in an evaluative sense, as when we might say of something that it is "a real work of art" despite being obviously unsuitable for display in a gallery. The latter evaluative sense gains its sense from the value and esteem typically attached to the concept of art, and itself applies to artworks, as when we may want to distinguish between paintings and great paintings, or novels and great novels. But the same conceptual point holds of much else besides: a particularly fine meal, a well-crafted letter, a beautiful goal, and so on. Likewise, the term 'work' can refer to paid employment of any kind, as well as unpaid burdensome activities, leisure activities that involve particular toil, and, importantly, leisure activities that are deservedly treated with great seriousness and devotion. While our discussion is partly informed by the aspirational vision of how human beings might spend their lives that this distinction implies, clearly paid employment has a primacy in conversations about the nature and value of work (Mejia, 2023), a primacy that derives from how our existing work-world operates.

Within this context, a number of scholars have explored decent work (Alzola, 2018; Monteiro, García-Sánchez, & Aibar-Guzmán, 2022; Holzberg, 2024) and dignified work (Sison, Ferrero, & Guitián, 2016; Agassi, 1986). Other scholars have explored fair work (Schaff, 2017; Honneth, 2023) or work as a calling (McPherson, 2013; Potts, 2022; Wightman, Potts, & Beadle, 2023). However, the concept of 'meaningful work' has dominated the discussion (e.g., Beadle & Knight, 2012; Michaelson, Pratt, Grant, & Dunn, 2014; Yeoman, 2014; Vu & Burton, 2022; Tyssedal, 2023). This is perhaps in large part because the other goods of work can be understood as contributors to 'meaning,' which has ensured that a broad range of topics have been grouped together under this heading. As a result of this breadth, it is perhaps unsurprising that Bailey, Yeoman, Madden, Thompson, and Kerridge's (2019) review of the meaningful work literature found little consensus on the nature of meaningful work. This breadth also ensures that the interests and concerns of research into 'meaningful work' are rather heterogeneous. As Bykov notes "[a]lthough 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" (2024: 409).

Part of the problem, too, is that the concept of 'meaningfulness' is inherently subjective: different things are meaningful to different people (Michaelson, 2009: 30). Furthermore, 'meaning' need not be positively valanced. Painful experiences

are plainly sometimes meaningful but are not the sorts of things we would seek out nor want our work to provide (except, perhaps, when viewed as necessary steps towards some greater good). A cruel punishment or a broken heart might be experienced as *meaningful*, but such experiences are not *good.*

In contrast to literature on meaningful work, we focus instead on good work, in a more objective and holistic sense. The notion of objectively good work has played a part in debates about meaningful work (Yeoman, 2014; Michaelson, 2021), but, we suggest, the concept remains deserving of further scrutiny because such 'objectivist' accounts have only suggested that an objective element is necessary, rather than articulating what it amounts to.

It is interesting that Michaelson's account, ostensibly setting out to be substantively 'normative,' actually proceeds *via negativa*, that is, through a critique of rival accounts, reaching the conclusion that the value of work must be independent of "personal experience and social perception" (2021: 422) without being able to fully specify the basis, or bases, of this value. In this way, Michaelson's ambition notwithstanding, his account ironically ends up being somewhat similar to Tyssedal's (2023) later, self-consciously minimalist 'meaningful work is work that is worth doing' thesis. Indeed, Michaelson says "[m]eaningful work is purposeful activity that one has good reasons to experience as meaningful" (2021: 422). Nevertheless, Michaelson concedes that he has not "set forth a comprehensive and definitive characterization of meaningful work", though we do agree that he has "given a general account of the form of what a Normative account would require and why it may be desired" (2021: 424).

Similarly, Yeoman, drawing on Wolf's suggestion that "meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness" (Wolf, 2010: 9) adopts a pluralist and non-committal conception of what is objectively valuable. The focus instead is on the capacities needed for objective valuation (Yeoman, 2014: 245–247) which can help us "identify which activities have the *structure* for meaningfulness" (Yeoman, 2014: 245, our emphasis). Meaningful work must be structured in an objectively meaningful way, whatever that might mean.

This is not to impugn such attempts to argue for an objective standard in our conceptions of good or meaningful work. Indeed, the notion that we want an objective standard, coupled with a tacit admission that spelling out precisely what that standard amounts to is very difficult, aligns with the argument we develop here. As business ethicists interested in the nature of good and meaningful work, we do want to account for what, really, objectively amounts to good work. Yet extant accounts either opt against making substantive normative claims—perhaps due to worries about 'elitism' (Wolf, 2010: 40)—or instead feel compelled to offer claims that end up unable to properly rule out bad work, that is, for fear that the derogation of bad work entails the derogation of workers that perform such work.

In the latter case we suspect a fear of being 'elitist' is again part of what shapes such accounts. This reluctance is in one sense, as we note below, laudable, and yet it nevertheless threatens to undermine efforts to account for what really constitutes the ethical potential of work. Such fear of 'elitism' can motivate a form of inadvertent condescension whereby to avoid diminishing those less fortunate than oneself one

insists that they are not less fortunate at all—that their lot is really every bit as good as one's own. Everyone's work is good—"who am I to say otherwise?" goes the thought. The assimilation of good work to 'meaningful' work serves this move well: if someone finds meaning in their work, who am I to say they are wrong?

But, as we have seen, the idea that we might develop an objectivist notion of meaningfulness has serious appeal. It may sit uneasily with us, but the idea of meaningfulness does implicitly refer to the objective meaningfulness of something as the standard by which subjective meaning is to be judged. We can see this best from the first-person case: when we find something meaningful, it is a live question for each of us whether it really is meaningful, that is, whether we are right to find it meaningful. None of us wants to find an illusory meaningfulness in something that is not really so meaningful and end up like those who divine meanings in the patterns of tea leaves or the movements of celestial objects.

Given that this is a live issue for us, we can all conceive of finding something subjectively meaningful that is not objectively meaningful, which is an error we hope to avoid. We should then be willing to countenance the possibility of this sort of error generally, for others, and beyond 'meaningful' work, to the broader category of good work per se. Moreover, the reluctance to be 'elitist' can lead to a different kind of elitism which discounts the experience of those workers who have and do protest against the dehumanised form of their work. Rather than rationalising cases of 'bad work' as good work so as to avoid feeling elitist, it is better, we suggest, to honestly diagnose 'bad work' where we see it, while acknowledging that such substantive diagnoses are fallible, tentative, and open to challenge.

Because it would not be possible to individually address every facet and potential facet of good and meaningful work, we focus on two in particular: recognition and craft. We take these to be particularly rich and attractive possible accounts of good work. By exploring these conceptions of good work, we aim to lay down a challenge to those interested in good and meaningful work by showing how such lines of thought struggle to fully accommodate our intuitions about the potential goodness of work. Accounting for what we might want from a conception of good work is challenging, not least because we need to take seriously the possibility that good work and our social and economic system are in deep tension (on this, see Michaelson, 2021; Brixel, 2024; Spencer, 2024).

As well as being rich and attractive, the concepts of recognition and craft capture and disentangle the essential elements animating the existing research. As Lysova and colleagues put it, "Although scholars rarely agree on a precise definition of meaningful work … the term generally refers to work that is personally and/or socially significant and worthwhile" (Lysova, Tosti-Kharas, Michaelson, Fletcher, Bailey, & McGhee, 2023: 717). There are two senses of 'meaningful work' here. As we employ the term, 'recognition' describes much of what is regarded as being 'socially significant,' and 'craft' covers, in virtue of its connotations of work that is intrinsically worthwhile and engaging for its own sake, at least some of what might be thought of as the objective aspect of the 'personally significant.' While discussions of meaningful work are, the pessimist would say, often framed "in terms of minimum conditions that preserve the worker's autonomy to choose work that is

personally meaningful" (Michaelson, 2021: 417), the two strands of thought we focus on promise to offer richer and fuller accounts of the ethical potential of work that foreground the objective features of work.

The socially significant aspect of work we discuss in terms of recognition, and the 'spiritual advantages,' to use Hegel's term, that are associated with work partly in virtue of its social contribution (Althorpe, 2023; Martela, 2023). The concept of recognition itself has perhaps been somewhat underexplored within the business ethics literature (though see Bernacchio, 2023), and yet it is at least implicit in many accounts of good and meaningful work. Recognition is, for instance, bound up with dignity. According to Sison, Ferrero, and Guitián, dignity "implies the need for consensus or *mutual recognition* among fellow human beings. Dignity demands respect," (2016: 506, emphasis added) and since decent work expresses our inherent dignity (Sison, 2024: 173), we might also detect recognitive elements in discussions of decent work, fairness at work (Honneth, 2023), as well as more broadly in accounts that make sense of the goods of work in terms of the common good to which workers and businesses contribute (e.g., Frémeaux, 2020; Frémeaux, Grevin, & Sferrazzo, 2023; Sison & Fontrodona, 2011).

Additionally, there is the personally significant aspect of work which we understand in terms of the intrinsic richness of the activity of work itself. We follow Honneth in labelling this the 'craft' conception of work (Honneth, 2010). This conception is associated with discussions that focus on the 'ergonomic' aspect of work (Smith & Deranty, 2012) as well as accounts of work that draw on MacIntyre's (2007) concept of a practice. This conception is of course related to research that expressly sets out to examine 'craft' work too, both as a general category (Sennett, 2008) and in individual instances (Kroezen & Heugens, 2019; Raffaelli, 2019; Holt & Yamauchi, 2023; Holt & Wiedner, 2023).

We cannot hope to be comprehensive, but in challenging these rich and wide-ranging implicit conceptions of good work, we hope to uncover the internal insufficiencies of both main strands of the debate about good work, and thereby to contribute to the debate. Without proposing a positive alternative conception, elucidating the inadequacies of both main strands of the debate will, we intend, reveal shortcomings in the way the whole debate is set up, and in turn point to ways forward, by provoking further reflection from business ethicists on the nature, scope, and availability of good work.

RECOGNITION

The recognitive theory of work has appeal because it tracks a deeply intuitive aspect of social experience of the worth of work: that work is valuable in providing reassurance that one is making a valuable contribution to others, and thus one is sustaining oneself by sustaining others. As Sison et al. put it, "The opportunities for growth and the sense of accomplishment work brings are very important for people's sense of self-worth and social esteem" (2016: 519). Indeed, for Bernacchio, "recognition should be among the central notions in any theory of business ethics" (2023: 1; see also Bernacchio, 2024), and indeed, this conception of work is implicit

in suggestions that social contribution is a central determinant of good work (Althorpe, 2023; Martela, 2023).

Recognition implies intersubjectively shared assessments of worthiness, and hence the *social* nature of work. Recognition and esteem are often held to be central goods of work (Tyssedal, 2023: 542; Veltman, 2016: 117), and sometimes discussed in relation to human capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011: 34; see also Bertland, 2009) and the responsibility of good leadership (Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2022: 57). For "a majority of people in this day and age paid employment provides by far the most opportunities for gaining social recognition" (Gheaus & Herzog, 2016: 78). Peer recognition is often regarded as more important than pay, even amongst CEOs (Hendry, 2012). Indeed, some of the major cultural problems of the present have been attributed in part to the structural breakdown of work-based recognition structures in contemporary post-industrial societies (Edin, Nelson, Cherlin, & Francis, 2019).

Hegel introduced the idea of recognition, as constitutive of self-consciousness and intimately related with freedom and happiness, into modern social philosophy. Far from being restricted to professional peer recognition, however, in *The Philosophy of Right* Hegel saw the market as the fundamental mechanism of recognition, by which people acquire "that feeling of right, integrity and honour which comes from supporting oneself by one's own activity and work" (1991: §244; see Pippin, 2008; Wood, 1990; Herzog, 2013; Bernacchio, 2022).

However, Hegel's discussion also appreciates what is wrong with much contemporary work. The division of labour makes work increasingly "abstract" and "mechanical" (1991: §198), and the "specialization and limitation of particular work … increase … [which] in turn leads to an inability to feel and enjoy the wider freedoms, and particularly the spiritual advantages [i.e., recognition], of civil society" (1991: §243). The mechanical nature of much contemporary work is worth remembering, but that recognition is an important facet of work is not in dispute. The question is how to make best sense of it, and the recognitive view, we suggest, cannot convincingly explicate the significance of this recognitive dimension of work's worth. The recognitive component of work's worth depends on the connection of two aspects of recognition: 1) who does the recognising, and according to what criteria? 2) what is recognised, and by what criteria? These aspects are distinct but inseparable, but recognition theory, we claim, fails to do justice to this fact, and moreover cannot deal with either side even on its own terms.

Hegel (1991: §189) presents the market in capitalist civil society as the full actualisation in ethical life of the potential of work as the means by which one becomes able to recognise oneself in the collectively self-sustaining life of humanity, and thus to see one's activity as "objective" and universally valid (1991: §198). In selling my work in the labour market, I can see myself as both expressing my freedom to structure my own life in some concrete way (Bernacchio, 2024: 546) and as making a contribution that others value, since the fact that I can sell my labour must mean that it contributes to the fulfilment of others' needs in the consumer market (1991: §196). And in this, work contributes to the actualisation of freedom as rational agency—in work I can see myself as realising universal ends, that are neither

merely subjective, because the market orients my work to other's ends, nor alien, because through work I fulfil my own satisfaction as well as that of others (on which see Bernacchio, 2022: 525, 530).

Thus, work fulfils for me the role of reassurance that I am pulling my weight rather than freeriding; I am not surplus to requirements or a mere burden on others, but, rather, a load-bearing piece of the architecture of humanity or *spirit.* It is because I work, because I can sell my labour, that I get the 'spiritual advantages' of civil society, the integrity, and honour of sustaining myself by contributing rather than depending on others without doing anything useful in turn.

Hegel's account thus lays the ground for the modern appreciation of work as a powerful determinant of identity and self-esteem, as well as a contributor to social well-being—issues highlighted as being of the utmost importance by Michaelson et al. (2014: 85). In the *ethos* of the traditional working class, there is little that is more important than this: that one sustains oneself, supports oneself and one's dependents, by one's own work (see Guitián, 2009; Sison et al., 2016). Without this, someone can come to feel useless or irrelevant. To participate in the life of spirit is to be able to contribute something rather than merely to receive something.

The contemporary force of this idea should not be underestimated. The problem is that it is, as stated, radically incomplete. For implicit in this intuition is the notion that one is contributing something really of worth without qualification, a contribution— we might say—to the human. Despite Hegel's argument, the market does not reassure us that we are contributing something to the human; it does not reassure us that—in Hegel's sense—we are, in our work, acting freely, realising objective and universal ends, rather than acting in a merely subjective or alien mode. For it is entirely possible for someone to have a 'good job' that is well paid but wonder whether they are really doing anything worthwhile for humanity: the marketing expert who is good at convincing people to spend more money on online gambling, the engineer who specialises in military weapons, or the CEO of an oil company who has overseen an increase in extraction. Such people may wonder whether what they are doing really contributes to the good (Sinnicks, 2023), and ultimately we all may intelligibly ask ourselves the same sort of question.

Beyond the question of the goodness of any particular job, there is the ineliminable realisation that the fact that one's labour finds a willing and lucrative market, and attracts a good price, does not resolve the question of whether one is making a genuine contribution to the human. Even those who view capitalist enterprise as generally contributing to the common good, and indeed even those who regard pay as being strongly correlated to one's service to society (Brennan, 2021: 5), must acknowledge that such enterprise sometimes undermines that good (Brennan, 2012: 319).

For as Hegel observes, in the consumer market "a need is … created not so much by those who experience it directly as by those who seek to profit from its emergence" (1991: §191). Consumer markets tend toward generating preferences that capital can most profitably satisfy, rather than to fulfilling existing needs, which suggests that "the market's social utility declines as inequality increases" (Reeves & Sinnicks, 2024: 287). But this observation undermines the potential for work in

market society to fulfil the recognitive role Hegel accords it: if the market does not necessarily address human needs so much as manipulate them for the sake of profit-creation, then the fact that I can sell my labour-power tells me nothing about whether I am making a genuine contribution to humanity. All it tells me is that I am making a contribution to the existing society, based on the creation of needs for profit, while such a society may be radically at odds with the all-things-considered interests of humanity. And the more our existing social arrangements, via the market, diverge from any specific orientation to human needs and flourishing, the greater will be the potential for doubt that the recognition of our labour by the market mechanism means anything.

This does not change the fact that people need actual recognition in the here and now, but it hints that such recognition is ultimately valuable only derivatively in a way that the recognitive theory cannot accommodate. In *The Struggle for Recognition* (1996), Honneth frames work recognition—social esteem—in terms that restrict the object of recognition to a normative frame of reference defined by a particular social world. He writes:

> In order to be able to acquire an undistorted relation-to-self, human subjects always need —over and above the experience of affectionate care and legal recognition—a form of social esteem that allows them to relate positively to their concrete traits and abilities (1996: 121).

This leaves open what might be required for me to 'relate positively' to my own capacities and contributions. It is plausible because it is compatible with the thought that I need recognition of myself as making a genuine, humanly worthwhile, contribution—such that I can think of what I achieve as good in an unqualified sense. But this openness is immediately shut down:

> Self and other can mutually esteem each other as individualized persons only on the condition that they share an orientation to those values and goals that indicate to each other the significance or contribution of their qualities for the life of the other (1996: 121).

That may well be true, but it does not follow that I can get the recognition I need from just any social framework of values that I happen to inhabit. For Honneth, the societal mechanisms of recognition rest on a "symbolically articulated—yet always open and porous" (1996: 122) framework of ethical values that constitute a society's self-understanding. However, a crucial question remains: is the cultural self-understanding of the shared goals of my society one that I can sincerely find reassurance in? What if I happen to live in a society whose recognition-mechanisms express entirely inadequate 'values and goals'?

The recognition given by the labour market to my contribution to society's values and goals can only aid my positive relation to my qualities and contributions if the market is a reliable mechanism for tracking what qualities and contributions are really important, are really contributions to human needs and flourishing. But it is not. Honneth finds it "astounding" that Hegel did not pursue this "almost clairvoyant" insight into the manipulation of needs by the market further (Honneth, 2014: 200) yet

declines to pursue it any further himself. By contrast, we think the insufficiencies of the consumer market are crucial.

Since consumer markets cater to 'effective demand' rather than preferences, they prioritise the whimsical and depraved preferences of the wealthy over the vital needs of the poor. Moreover, they motivate steering even the most deprived towards preferences whose satisfaction is more profitable and away from vital needs whose satisfaction may be less profitable. Any mechanism that privileges the depraved over the deprived warrants scepticism.

This inevitably undermines the recognitive significance of labour markets: in a social world governed by a mechanism that directs resources away from the fulfil-ment of the most fundamental human needs and towards the manipulation of people's preferences for the sake of creating profit (Lippke, 1999), the fact that my labour sells provides me with insufficient grounds to be reassured that I am making a real contribution of worth to my fellow humans. I might, for all I know, be accelerating the eventual self-destruction of humanity; that my labour currently fetches a good price on the market gives me no reason to think otherwise, because the market in capitalist society simply does not track such things.

What the market mechanism is able to communicate is that my labour generates surplus value for someone right now. And that fact is quite independent of whether I am making a contribution in the service of humanity or facilitating social harm, as would appear to be the case when businesses rely on slavery (Crane, 2013), sweat-shops (Berkey, 2021), and practices which contribute to environmental degradation (Edelson, 2019). The apparent 'spiritual advantages' of the recognition of work, that is, knowing that one is pulling one's weight, contributing to the human, would seem to be undermined if that weight is being pulled against the true interests of humanity.

The recognitive failure of the market bears not only on the contribution one makes, but also on the intrinsic quality of work—raising the question of what it is that is being recognised. Unsurprisingly, accounts of business ethics which focus primarily on providing an explication of the norms implicit in the market (e.g., Heath, 2014, 2023) have had little to say about the ethical quality of work: from the perspective of the market, the ethical quality of work is just one more factor which might, or might not, play an important role in market actors' decisions to enter particular employment or consumer contracts.

An equivocation runs through recognition theory in this regard also. Hegel had recognised that "man, as a consumer, is chiefly concerned with *human* products, and it is human effort which he consumes" (1991: §196, original emphasis), implying that the recognition of one's labour has a qualitative dimension: it is implicitly recognition of a *human* contribution. But he was unable to deal satisfactorily with the tension in capitalism according to which the recognition of this human effort is tied, via the market-driven intensification of the division of labour, to the increasing mechanisation and simplification of work. The "practical education of work" allows the worker to actualise the objectivity and universality of their activity as self-consciously participating in sustaining spirit, but it does so through the "self-perpetuating need and *habit of being occupied* in one way or another, in the *limitation of one's activity* to suit … in particular, the arbitrary will of others"

(1991: §197, original emphasis). The market tends to so dehumanise work that the worker might become "eventually able to step aside and let a machine take his place" (1991: §198; see also Kim & Scheller-Wolf, 2019), undermining any contribution to 'human flourishing' which might be made by good or meaningful work (Bankins & Formosa, 2023: 728). This "specialization and limitation" of work, Hegel acknowledges, deprives the worker of any recognitive benefit, leading "to an inability to feel and enjoy the wider freedoms, and particularly the spiritual advantages, of civil society" (1991: §243).

So, far from being the realisation of the universality and truth of work, work's increasingly abstract and so mechanical character deprives the worker and excludes them from the universal—from the freedom and recognition that were supposed to be the market's vindicating characteristics. The same process of "abstraction which confers a specific character on means and needs and hence also on production, so giving rise to the division of labour," supposed to be the ground of "the universal and objective aspect of work" (1991: §198), is also work's downfall. This tension regarding work's ethical quality remains unresolved in Hegel's discussion.

This tension also runs through Honneth's work. In *The Struggle for Recognition*, he describes social esteem as covering "the forms of social regard in which subjects are recognised according to the socially defined worth of their concrete characteristics" (1996: 121), and writes that "unlike modern legal recognition, social esteem is directed … at the particular qualities that characterize people in their personal difference" (1996: 122). This seems to situate the recognitive target of work in a qualitative way, one which sounds very far from the idea of carrying out tasks so simplified, repetitive, and mechanistic that they could be replaced by a machine.

But from talk of social esteem as bearing on recognition of one's distinctive personal characteristics, Honneth slides to talk of recognition of one's contribution to the "common welfare and prosperity of the political community" (Honneth, 2023: 2). This is an illicit collapse: much tedious and mechanised work surely makes a valuable contribution to "socially shared goals," but the question is whether someone, through such work, can feel recognised as making a human contribution, that is, contributing via their distinctive personal qualities. The notion of "the significance or contribution of [the individuals'] qualities for the life of the other" is immediately collapsed into "the *socially defined worth* of their concrete characteristics," in terms of a shared conception of "societal goals" (1996: 121, emphasis added). Now the reference to the individual's particular characteristics and qualities in their 'personal difference' has been dropped in favour of talk merely of their concrete characteristics relative to socially defined goals. This slide fits with Hegel's story, where

> *Practical education* through work consists in the self-perpetuating need and habit of being occupied in one way or another, in the *limitation of one's activity* to suit … in particular, the arbitrary will of others, and in a habit, acquired through this discipline, of *objective* activity and *universally applicable* skills (1991: §197, original emphasis).

That is, the "socially defined worth of [individuals'] concrete characteristics" in market society paradoxically turns out to depend on their *not* being distinctive—but,

rather, on their being abstract, limited, and adapted to the arbitrary will of others. Recognition theory thus seems unable to avoid an equivocation about the qualitative character of work, and thus to require the invocation of a 'craft-like' element too. It is to attempts to incorporate the craft ideal into recognition that we now turn.

RECOGNITION AND CRAFT

Despite his earlier equivocation, in "Work and Recognition" Honneth explicitly rejects the "ideal of craftsmanship" (2010: 227) as being rooted in aestheticist and romanticist speculations, and as unrealistic given the advanced division of labour characteristic of contemporary society. It is naïve to imagine that work could ever live up to the craft conception's ideal of self-determining, creative, enriching work. However, in *Freedom's Right* (2014), in a move Jütten calls "perplexing" (2015: 200), Honneth seemingly U-turns. He acknowledges that the craft conception played a central role in early twentieth-century workers' struggles "against the hollow and one-sided nature of the labour process" (2014: 236) under the rationalisation of production, and that:

> from this point on, the 'humanization' of the work world would become a crucial part of the vocabulary of the labour movement … [and] continue[s] to resurface today whenever secure employment allows workers to question the quality of their working conditions. (2014: 236–237)

But even here Honneth interprets such actual "struggles for 'meaningful' and 'humane' work" against "mechanical activities that do not challenge the worker" (2014: 237) in purely recognitive terms: the problem is that "work that requires neither skill nor initiative deprives workers from *seeing themselves as making* a valuable contribution to social cooperation" (2014: 237, emphasis added).

Honneth's account then, accommodates workers' socio-historically actual demands for 'meaningful' or 'humane' work—inspired by "the traditional crafts-manship ideal" (2014: 236)—only by construing those as derivative of workers' desire for recognition of "what they actually contribute to economic value-creation" (2014: 241). The demands of the craft ideal are allowed in only as parasitic on the "historically established hegemonial interpretation of the principle of achievement … according to which a given labour activity's social value rises with every apparent increase of intellectual creativity and initiative" (2014: 241). It is the dominance—instituted in the market through disparities in pay and conditions, plus 'softer' forms, for example prestige—of the craft conception itself that makes un-craftlike work dehumanising, and its defenders are only exacerbating the problem.

The implication of Honneth's account here is that 'dehumanised' work should be construed as a problem not of the conditions of work per se, but of the social organisation of recognition of work. What makes mechanical work dehumanis-ing is not that it lacks the intrinsic practical qualities of craft-like work but, rather, an internal failure of the avowedly meritocratic market arising from the way in which the dominant societal principle of achievement denigrates un-craftlike work's social worth. If only we stopped treating un-craftlike work

as privative, it would cease to be so, as workers became convinced that their work merited esteem (Honneth, 2023: 9). While there are, for Honneth, limitations to how "mindless and monotonous" work can be and still allow workers to enjoy recognition, such work only takes place at the very lower end of service and industrial work (Honneth, 2023: 9).

This view does not seem wholly plausible. After all, workers' struggles for more humanised work have—as Honneth acknowledges—typically been rooted not in insecurity about, but rather in confidence in, the social value of their contribution. Such struggles to "humanize the working world" (Honneth, 2014: 241), then, do not seem to be primarily about getting more social recognition for the social value of one's work, so much as getting more practically fulfilling work. That is, they are more plausibly about people's need to feel they are making not merely a socially valuable contribution but a human contribution. Much modern work is dehumanised in this sense: however valuable its social contribution may be, it is difficult—for those who do it—to interpret it as a human contribution, a contribution in which they get to express their humanity through their distinctive personal qualities and capacities. It is in this sense that such work is, arguably, bad work—bad, that is, for the worker, as well as for everyone else.

In addition to the difficulty of seeing one's work as a contribution to the human good discussed above, it seems plausible that mechanical, repetitive work prevents the worker from seeing themselves as making a truly human contribution. One possible explanation for this is Smith and Deranty's (2012) proposal, informed by both Honneth and the work of Dejours (2009), that social norms and structures of recognition simply overlook the fact that all such supposedly mechanical work actually involves all manner of truly human elements and aspects. As Sison et al. put it, work becomes part of the "sphere of dignity insofar as it was acknowledged to be a 'human act,' an act of the rational and free person, which reflected his intrinsic worth" (2016: 512).

On this view, the problem is not that our hegemonial societal principle of achievement unfairly privileges work involving creativity and initiative but, rather, that it underestimates the degree of creativity and initiative involved in even the most supposedly mechanical work. In other words, Smith and Deranty recommend an expansion of our conception of the 'craft ideal'.

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, "Marginalized work, such as care work and provisioning work, has come into public view and despite continuing to be precarious and poorly paid, has acquired status and meaning" (Deranty, Rhodes, & Yeoman, 2023: 800). For the recognitive-craft view under examination here, this is just the start of a process that would ideally be expanded yet more widely. On this view, "organisations should provide workers with not only Honnethian recognition of who they *are*, but also of Dejourian recognition of what they *do*" (Newlands, 2022: 825, original emphasis). Accordingly, there is really no such thing as 'mechanical' or 'dehumanised' work; on closer inspection, any candidate for that category will turn out to involve myriad dimensions of complex and subtle judgment, creativity, and initiative. The problem is that our social norms and structures fail to properly recognise and integrate those dimensions, especially where 'vertical'

recognition structures in firms and the wider labour market marginalise 'horizontal' peer-recognition structures (Smith & Deranty, 2012: 60–61).

Now it is no doubt true that our society underrates the human effort involved in a wide range of work, in particular in forms of stigmatised employment, so-called 'dirty work,' such as refuse collection (Hamilton, Redman, & McMurray, 2019), funeral direction (Jordan, Ward, & McMurray, 2019), and so on. Proper recognition of socially valuable work is of course important, and something that involves both 'vertical' esteem from society as a whole, and 'horizontal' peer esteem. Clearly something is amiss with National Health Service (NHS) workers in the UK being clapped on the streets during the Covid pandemic, and yet still forced to use food-banks on account of insufficient pay (Wood & Skeggs, 2020). However, a misalignment of recognition structures is not the only way in which work can be inadequate.

We suggest that recognitive accounts are led astray by a laudable but misdirected egalitarian impulse, that discourages the derogation of forms of work as though that must also derogate or disrespect those who perform such work. In respecting all workers equally, this impulse dictates that we respect all forms of work equally, or at least similarly. It thus encourages commentators to emphasise the humanity in even the most dehumanised kinds of work, through the laudable desire to respect and honour those who do such work, and, moreover, encourages promoting tweaks to the work-world which, Dejours (2009) suggests, can meaningfully enhance workers' well-being.

However, another explanation for actual workers' struggles to 'rehumanise the working world' is that monotonous work prevents the worker from feeling they make a *human* contribution. Monotonous work may of course be very honourable, socially valuable, and dignified work, deserving of the highest esteem, admiration, and appreciation; the point would be that it is, for all that, bad for the worker themselves. Indeed, in our globalised division of labour much of the work that is most essential to satisfying people's basic needs—farming, manufacturing, distribution, care work, and so on—goes least well recognised on the market, and is often the most dominated by the managerial and administrative control that contributes to boredom at work (Johnsen, 2016: 1405).

That such work is especially important for others but bad for the worker might suggest that it merits *particular* esteem and appreciation: such workers are sacrificing their own fulfilment for the sake of providing a social benefit. That the market typically accords them less esteem—less appreciation of the value of their social contribution—than it accords those who do more fulfilling work ought thus to be seen as a grave injustice and challenged. But this is no reason to conclude that workers who feel their work is, in itself, meaningless, hollow, and dehumanising are simply misguided by a hegemonial societal principle that privileges creativity and initiative; they appear to be suffering—over and above this—from the lack of opportunity to make a *human* contribution through their own personal, distinctive, human powers and capacities, and we ought surely to take this seriously. Even work which clearly makes a social contribution can be experienced as bad work, after all (Belanger, Chreim, & Bonaccio, 2024).

It is not merely that we need to change our recognitive standards, as if better pay and status would entirely transform cleaning or factory work. Such changes should, of course, be promoted, as enhancing such workers' material position and esteem. But they would not address the more fundamental problem that such work can be ultimately stifling and unfulfilling.

This is the fundamental problem with taking good work to be derivative of social recognition. On such a view, it seems impossible to properly criticise the intrinsic, objective character of much modern work (i.e., as lacking the characteristics that make work engaging, fulfilling, etc., which we associate with the craft ideal). Such work may, on this view, be bad for people because it is under-recognised, but not because it is bad for them in itself. Honneth's critical recognitive conception, then, appears to appreciate that much contemporary work is bad because it is un-craftlike, but because it insists on interpreting *this* fact in recognitive terms, it relinquishes the essential insight of the craft view. And this problem persists into Honneth's (2023, 2024) recent argument that acknowledges the value of craftlike work but only derivatively of its impact on possibilities for democratic participation, the value of which is ultimately derivative of recognition. Nowhere is the intrinsic ethical significance of good work allowed to come into view on its own terms, and this remains unsatisfying.

This point is not lost on other recognitive theorists who have been influenced by Honneth. For example, Smith and Deranty attempt to correct Honneth's recent view in favour of the *sui generis* value of craft. According to this view, work's significance "has to do with the quality of the work, with the experience of working, rather than the social estimation of the worth of the work" (2012: 59). Work is ethically significant in a pre-recognitive, intrinsic sense—Smith and Deranty employ the word "ergonomic" (2012: 59)—because of fundamental psychological needs and challenges subjects face. Such elements help us to understand why work is of enduring value, and not something we should seek to abolish (Deranty, 2022). In craftlike work,

> the subject demonstrates and indeed develops his or her practical intelligence and manual skills, and thus increases his or her sense of self … before any larger social dimension is taken into consideration, work matters normatively in its primordial 'praxeological' aspects, as a task that challenges the subject in his or her very identity because of the strong constraints, objective and human, defining and surrounding it (Smith & Deranty, 2012: 60).

This captures the thought that the character of work activity has an irreducible ethical significance. It thus appears to sustain the very essence of the craft conception of work, which Honneth's recognitive incorporation of craft forsakes. However, it is ultimately developed in such a deflationary way that it is deprived of real critical purchase. This is because, following Dejours, the 'ergonomic' or 'praxeological' dimensions of work—the "internal normative dimensions of working activity *qua* activity" (Smith & Deranty, 2012: 59) are interpreted in such an undemanding, minimalist way that they turn out to be ubiquitous:

> there is hardly any kind of work that simply involves the direct application of externally produced directives. There is an infinite number of ways in which contingencies can derail even the most precise and 'scientifically' established working procedures, or complicate tasks that appear on the surface to be very simple … it nearly always involves the bridging of a gap, on the part of the agent, between the prescribed tasks and the actual performance of the tasks … All these challenges make of work an activity that can sustain and indeed enhance subjective identity (Smith & Deranty, 2012: 59–60)

It is probably true that work nearly always involves the 'bridging of a gap' but this gap may often be that imposed by a barely feasible set of targets and timeframes. The warehouse operative struggling to hit such targets while sticking to strictly timed toilet breaks no doubt has their identity shaped by such an experience but not, one suspects, in a way that helps them to appreciate their 'craft.' Hence, from the promising thought that craft-like work is intrinsically valuable, the recognitive-craft view moves to the idea that virtually all work is *already* craft-like. This diminishes the meaning and normative force of the sense of activity appealed to: if almost all work even as it exists in our social world qualifies, then such a conception must be far too thin to illuminate our aspirations for work.

In *Freedom's Right*, Honneth notes that the division of labour renders most people's work increasingly "mechanical" (2014: 237), leading to the "monotony … and complete lack of creativity of work" (2014: 241). For Honneth, much existing work is mechanical, and so is bad—but only because our existing societal norms of esteem denigrate mechanical work. While recognising that much existing work is bad, he cannot bring himself to let go of the recognitive banister and diagnose such work as objectively, intrinsically ('ergonomically' or 'praxeologically') bad.

Smith and Deranty sustain the irreducible importance of the intrinsic quality of the activity, and so can accommodate the thought that mechanical work would be bad not just recognitively, but in itself. However, their manner of so doing leads them to construe the concept of good work in so permissive a way that there is virtually no work that does not *already* amount to good work. The problem is not that much work is mechanical and so deprives workers of proper esteem recognition, but that much work is misrecognised as mechanical when in fact it is good work.

In this sense, while it advances beyond Honneth's account in one respect, Smith and Deranty's recognitive-craft account remains vulnerable to the criticism of the recognitive view we outlined above. Since they resist the thought that modern work, in itself, falls short, they are forced to construe the problem as still, ultimately, a recognitive one: in representing much work as mechanical and dehumanising, our society incorrectly deprives many people of the esteem—respect and admiration—their work in fact merits. In particular, it has eroded the institutionalisation, via the market mechanism, of structures of 'horizontal' recognition—that is, the recognition of peers, participants in the activity who, because they are inside it, understand how rich and complex it really is and so appreciate the depth of one's activity in ways that outsiders cannot (Smith & Deranty, 2012: 61).

Accordingly, for Smith and Deranty, the problem is not that most work is, qua activity, privative, but that our market societies systematically *mischaracterise* such

work as privative. There is little wrong with the *intrinsic* character of modern work; it is our appraisal of the recognition such work warrants that is inadequate. And the same problem arises in a new form in Honneth's latest move to an instrumental critique of work from the impact of workplace conditions on possibilities for workers' democratic participation (Honneth, 2023, 2024). Rejecting concepts of non-alienated or meaningful work as inevitably invoking standards that are "either too perfectionistic or too trivial" (Celikates et al., 2023: 329), Honneth allows craftlike features significance only instrumentally. Honneth's conception regards work as being valuable primarily "as a means and in a mediated fashion" (2024: 15). The demands of 'craft work' are thus construed fairly minimally so as to make them 'realistic' in the advanced division of labour. For such views, the status quo is tantalisingly close to the proper object of our aspirations, a claim apparently at odds with the central insights of the craft view, to which we now turn.

CRAFT

The recognitive view captures the importance of the social nature of work, and, relatedly, the importance of seeing oneself as making a valuable contribution to others. But in so doing, it struggles to retain the insight that much work in present society is bad, as well as the thought that work's worth lies not merely in social esteem, but in its objective quality as activity. The latter is the central insight of the craft view, which focuses on the intrinsic quality of the work itself. The craft view emphasises the "desire to do a job well for its own sake" according to Sennett (2008: 9), whose work has been held up as an example of the sort of craft conception which might avoid Honneth's charge of utopianism (Tweedie, 2017).

The craft conception, somewhat like Michaelson's 'normative' account of meaningful work, focuses on work valuable "independently of personal experience and social perception" (2021: 422). Indeed, the relatively rare instances of accounts of meaningful work and work-as-calling, which emphasise the objective quality of work (e.g., Beadle & Knight, 2012; Potts, 2022, respectively) do so because they ultimately presuppose a craft conception.

Unlike mechanical work, and indeed the heavily rationalised administrative and bureaucratic work that dominates contemporary organisations, 'craft' connotes a distinctively *human* element, in which skill, mastery, judgement, and embodied engagement are to the fore, and result in distinctively *human* products (see Crawford, 2010) coupled with a distinct aesthetic sense (Fillis, 2012). These elements are fundamental to critiques of contemporary work. As Schwalbe puts it, "Without a concept of craftwork, it is hard to see what's wrong with routinization, rationalization, and deskilling" (2010: 109). In this respect, the craft view seems capable of confronting the ills of work that recognitive accounts like Honneth's are liable to miss.

Recent research has used the concept of craft to explore not only forms of work which intuitively fall under the heading of 'craft work,' such as brewing (Kroezen & Heugens, 2019), watch-making (Raffaelli, 2019), or vinyl record manufacturing (Holt & Wiedner, 2023), but has also been appealed to in discussions of such forms

of work as management (Mintzberg, 2009; Taylor, Ladkin, & Statler, 2015) and leadership (Ciulla, 2011; Bauman, 2018), as well as to the subversive behaviours of service workers (Tweedie & Holley, 2016; Tweedie, 2017), and indeed activities associated with roles such as citizenship, and parenting (Sennett, 2008: 9). However, the evident elasticity of the traditional craft conception hints at its over-inclusiveness: like the recognitive position, standard discussions of craftwork remain unable to properly retain the insight that repetitive, mechanical work is inadequate, and thus remains unable to properly critique the ethical shortcomings of much contemporary work.

One of the most notable examples of this position is that developed by Alasdair MacIntyre, whose work, in particular his account of "practices," has been taken up with some enthusiasm in the business ethics literature (Beabout, 2012; Garcia-Ruiz & Rodriguez-Lluesma, 2014; Moore & Beadle, 2006; Sinnicks, 2019; Bernacchio, 2021). MacIntyre defines a practice as:

> any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially defin-itive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (2007: 187).

In developing this richly suggestive concept, MacIntyre provides a platform for an understanding of good work that, particularly in virtue of its emphasis on internal goods, would fall under Honneth's notion of the crafts ideal. Indeed, MacIntyre's concept has somewhat misleadingly been accounted for in terms of "productive crafts" (Moore, 2002: 23). It is true that MacIntyre's illustrative examples of his concept of practices includes productive crafts such as farming (2007) and fishing (1994, 2016), but he also offers as exemplars many activities which are clearly not productive crafts, even if they remain broadly consonant with the ethos of the 'craft ideal' as we employ it here—for example, physics, portrait painting, football, family life, exploration of the wilderness, and so on.

But in addition to the notion of internal goods, the concept of practices also has a recognitive side: practitioners must recognise the contribution of others, must have the courage to submit their own efforts to the judgement of other practitioners, and there is also a strongly recognitive aspect to the emphasis on the importance of practice-based communities and associated networks (Bernacchio, 2018). This is particularly so in the case of productive activities of the kind susceptible to increased mechanisation as a result of the division of labour (Sinnicks, 2019). Much of this appears to accord with Smith and Deranty's notion of horizontal recognition, although the historical aspect also hints at an additional richness. After all, not all activities are sufficiently rich to make their histories worth engaging with.

But this historical richness appears to be inconsistent across different practices, and within MacIntyre's account of practices and practice-based communities, there appears to be two distinct ways in which recognition operates: that is, recognition of the truly great masters of particular practices whose creative initiatives move those

practices forward historically by systematically extending our conception of the ends and goods involved—W. G. Grace in cricket, Picasso in painting, Beethoven in music, and so on—and the more prosaic and widely available form of recognition that is involved in contributing properly to one's local community, including within the typical workplace. Both constitute capacity recognition, in Bernacchio's (2023) sense, but they remain quite distinct. While the latter is valuable, clearly it falls some way short of revolutionising how we see cricket, or fine art, or music. Systematic extension is, by its very nature, available only to a few since most of us are unlikely to ever invent a new artistic technique or revolutionise a field of scholarly enquiry.

MacIntyre does talk about the "rediscovery of ends" (2007: 273; see also Sinnicks, 2019), thus lowering the bar for meaningful engagement in practices and making room for those of us unlikely to end up making historically significant interventions in any particular practice. But this move also eases off the recognitive aspect for certain kinds of practices. If someone decides to go through old chess matches with the aim of *rediscovering* the conceptions of goods and ends that Capablanca originally discovered, it may well be a rich and rewarding experience, it is likely to involve the exercise of many important human qualities—for example, the kind of strategic imagination that is an internal good of chess—but it is not clear that the reward derives from any particular recognition, nor is it apparent that it entitles the chess-lover to any particular recognition. This is not, in itself, a problem for MacIntyre. Just as not every good is a good internal to practices, not every good must be, or indeed can be, reducible to recognition, and not every good can or should have an attendant recognitive aspect. But it does create a problem for attempts to understand MacIntyre's concept of practices as illuminating the ethical worth of work.

Within those activities that are not susceptible to the systematic extension MacIntyre applies to in his definitive practices—that is, within productive practices like fishing and farming, and indeed many other kinds of work—playing one's role in the community, including that of the workplace, by, for example, being reliable, competent, honest, doing one's fair share, pulling one's weight, and so on, entitles one to proper recognition. But to understand the worth of work primarily in this way is to depart from the craft ideal, as well as from the more demanding elements of MacIntyre's definition of a practice. Indeed, such a move appears to return us to something like the recognitive conception of craft work we examined above, which is in turn difficult to reconcile with the aim of elaborating the ethical potential of work as such. Most participation in workplace communities simply has nothing to do with the 'systematic extension' of ends and goods internal to some form of activity, and the thought and creativity such extension requires. Pulling one's weight so as not to free ride, however, is to the fore in such participation.

There is also the thorny issue of the availability of community, in a rich sense, within capitalist society. MacIntyre himself is somewhat ambiguous on this. The opening of *After Virtue* (2007 [1981]) offers a striking account of the ethical barrenness of modernity:

> Imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe. A series of environmental disasters are blamed by the general public on scientists. Widespread riots

occur, laboratories are burnt down, physicists are lynched, books and instruments are destroyed. Finally a Know-Nothing political movement takes power and successfully abolishes science teaching in schools and universities, imprisoning and executing the remaining scientists. Later still there is a reaction against this destructive movement and enlightened people seek to revive science, although they have largely forgotten what it was. But all that they possess are fragments: a knowledge of experiments detached from any knowledge of the theoretical context which gave them significance; parts of theories unrelated either to the other bits and pieces of theory which they possess or to experiment; instruments whose use has been forgotten; half-chapters from books, single pages from articles, not always fully legible because torn and charred (MacIntyre, 2007: 1).

While perhaps dishearteningly plausible today, this imagined scenario is the basis for MacIntyre's "disquieting suggestion" (2007: Ch. 1):

The hypothesis which I wish to advance is that in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I described. What we possess, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived (MacIntyre, 2007: 2).

Clearly MacIntyre is deeply critical of contemporary social reality, which is why the recognitive structure of the kinds of practices found in the ordinary workplace appears to focus on horizontal recognition: the 'vertical' judgements of the market have little worth, for the reasons we outlined above. At the same time, however, there are numerous passages in MacIntyre's work which indicate that a rich kind of practice-based community is, at times, available to some workers within modernity. Initially, examples are typically limited to pre-modern social formations—for example, farmers, fisherman—though the notion is applied somewhat more broadly in the post-*Dependent Rational Animals* (1999) works, where neighbourhoods (2008), and even fairly standard firms (2016), are given as examples.

These rare, hard-won glimmers of hope in MacIntyre come to be seen as ubiquitous features of capitalist society in applications of MacIntyre in the business ethics literature. Moore even suggests that MacIntyre's hostility to management—for the latter one of the dominant 'characters' in the lamentable drama of modern social life—makes him "his own worst enemy" (Moore, 2002: 19), as if the central aim of MacIntyre's project is to articulate the virtuousness of contemporary business. Such applications to activities such as finance (Rocchi, Ferrero, & Beadle, 2021), retail (Fernando & Moore, 2015), and investment advising (Wyma, 2015), as well as the supposition that all or almost all businesses house a "core practice" (Moore, 2012a: 309; Tsoukas, 2018: 331), often suppose that contribution to wider society to be indicative of a flourishing practice, partly echoing Hegel's recognitive account addressed above in the assumption that a contribution to our social world is a contribution to the human. Some scholars working on MacIntyrean business ethics also emphasise the 'good purpose' of a firm (e.g., Moore 2012b, 2017; Tsoukas, 2018); this again suggests a potentially all-encompassing applicability of the MacIntyrean schema, and indeed threatens to substitute craft for recognition as a result of

good purpose being explicable in terms of social contribution rather than any intrinsic quality of work, insofar as good purposes are those that do contribute to society. This conception of 'practice-based' work would thus seem to fail to sustain the central insight of the craft perspective and come instead to align more with the recognitive-craft conception of work discussed above.

Beadle and Knight claim that "redesigning of jobs endows them with practice-like features" (2012: 439), a suggestion which can be applied to almost any job. According to Beadle and Knight, "work can begin to approximate to what MacIntyre intends by 'a practice' when workers' power of practical reasoning and action frees itself from managerial design" (2012: 439; see also West, 2025). The example Beadle and Knight offer is that of enriching the work of a cleaner. Such enrichment is clearly a worthy aim, but it again seems to rely on the supposition that MacIntyre's concept of a practice can be applied to any form of work, no matter how monotonous or mechanical.

According to Beadle and Knight, when we reflect on expanding the job of the cleaner, "practical reasoning begins to become political … as workers—cleaners, as well as lecturers—are brought into decision-making and negotiation about the purpose and organization of the university" (2012: 439). However, there is a conflation here of two distinct possible applications of 'practical reasoning.' Allowing cleaners to have some say over work design is one thing, inviting them to participate in debates about the purpose of a university is quite another. From what Beadle and Knight say, it is not clear that their argument really supports the latter expansion of the cleaner's role, despite the fact that the latter expansion is precisely what gives this move its appeal. Contributing to debates about the *purpose* of a university clearly has the potential to be a rich and rewarding activity: the wide scope of possibilities, the rich history of universities, and so on, demonstrate the breadth and creativity such debates might encompass. Having the opportunity to make decisions regarding how cleaning is organised and carried out within the university clearly does not possess such richness, despite whatever subjective satisfaction might attach to it (Léné, 2019). The argument here about the power of expanding work through job design relies on a conception of craft, or of MacIntyrean practice, that cannot ultimately be supported with the example of the cleaner. Inviting a non-academic employee such as a cleaner to participate in debates about the purpose of the university may lead to insights that would be unavailable without such participation, but it is not part of the activity—we hesitate to use the term 'practice'—of cleaning any more than delivering lectures or conducting research would be. To replace the various elements of tic-tac-toe with the various elements of chess is not to enrich tic-tac-toe but to play a different game.

The broader applications one finds in MacIntyrean business ethics are sometimes difficult to reconcile not only with MacIntyre's critical comments, but also with some fairly generic observations about work under capitalism regarding precarity and the general decline of workers' rights, the monitoring and domination of employees, the often trivial and sometimes downright bad outputs of many forms of work, and so on. At the societal level there is also, as we noted above, the prevalence of slavery (Crane, 2013), sweatshops (Berkey, 2021), and environmental degradation (Edelson, 2019). To the young person, stripped of traditional workplace

rights (Anderson, 2017), unable to afford a home or to start a family (Wetzstein, 2017), work is likely to seem like a means to mere survival, and perhaps a contribution to the good of one's landlord, rather than a contribution to one's own good, or to a hostile wider society which constitutes an unconvincing simulacrum of a genuine community.

As a result, while MacIntyre offers grounds for recognising the very best practitioners of the most intrinsically rewarding activities (W. G. Grace, Picasso, Beethoven, etc.), and while his concept also offers ground for properly recognising the good enough contributions of those engaged in generally good forms of work, and their contribution to the supporting community, there is something of a schism between this account of the very best activities, which allow for a systematic extension of the ends and goods involved, which motivate a concern with the history of the practice, and the recognition appropriate to ordinary workers, playing their part even within mundane, and perhaps mechanical, jobs. Such work can clearly be potentially virtuous, but insofar as it is, it is for broadly recognitive reasons. Indeed, in a sense, we see here a collapsing of craft back into recognition that stems from an unwillingness to properly sustain the apparent benefits of the craft account. This problem is more significant in the literature that applies MacIntyre to business ethics, with many such applications apparently unable to distinguish between the very best activities and good enough forms of work, even if it is perhaps merely an oversight for MacIntyre, whose own discussion of practices is, at times, able to properly account for the shortcomings of standard forms of work.

This is, of course, a critique of the debate within business ethics. MacIntyre's conception of practices was always meant to provide an account of moral development through rich and rewarding activities, such as games, arts, and sciences, rather than as an account of work per se, even if there may be a tension between MacIntyre's critique of modernity in *After Virtue* (2007 [1981]), and his more affirmative comments on work in *Ethics and Conflicts of Modernity* (2016). Unless we remain wary of the excessive inclusiveness of the MacIntyrean conceptions of recognition qua contributor to almost any workplace community, we become unable to make sense of how 'practices' are supposed to underpin human flourishing. If we treat 'practices' as being ubiquitous, applying to almost any form of work, then the concept becomes vacuous. Again, we see here a laudable but misdirected egalitarianism: an attempt to outline good work without being able to properly accept that real work falls short.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has attempted to act as a gadfly to existing theories of good work, highlighting problems with the aim of provoking further reflection. The concept of 'good work' turns out to be surprisingly elusive. Neither recognitive or craft accounts, which appear to be among the most philosophically sophisticated accounts available, and which between them seem to capture much of what is understood as meaningful, decent, dignified, or good work, are adequate to the task. Ultimately, neither is capable of properly distinguishing good from bad work. Part of the issue

here is that 'thick' ethical concepts (Williams, 1985; Abend, 2011)—including 'goodness,' 'flourishing,' 'meaningful work,' and so on—resist easy definition, and have a conceptual richness that render them inherently open-textured. But there is also an issue that stems from the fact that philosophical accounts of the goods of work appear to want to critique the badness of much existing work, without which the imperative to explore the nature of good work would be less pressing, while also holding that our economic and social framework, including the modern workplace, provides at least the minimal conditions we need to flourish.

Underpinning this tendency seems to be a worry that if we derogate the work, we must end up derogating the worker. However, recognition that can just as easily attach to a repetitive and mechanical job well done, and a craft conception that appeals to physics and philosophy for its intuitive appeal but ends up valorising work that is far less auspicious, suggests that something has gone badly awry with our reflections of what might make work truly good.

The laudable but misdirected egalitarian impulse, which encourages us to attempt to uncover the good elements even in bad work, threatens to undermine the very purpose of reflecting on good work, both practically and theoretically, and might also threaten to support a kind of political quietism that would prevent us from confronting the question of why bad work is so persistent. Our attempt to challenge current thinking about good and meaningful work does not flow from insensitivity to the value of modest, incremental improvements. It is rather that we are not fully satisfied by them. We want all workers to be recognised, and we want all jobs to be designed such that the craft-like, practice-like, or ergonomic elements are as prominent as they 'realistically' might be. But we ought to want more than that too. And we ought not let this desire prevent us from confronting the badness of work wherever it exists.

The deflationary conception of good work found in existing accounts threatens to deny many workers' own experiences of the emptiness of their work, and risks embodying a disempowering culture of low expectations. Ironically, it thereby itself risks elitism, handing down to alienated workers the patronising reassurance that, contrary to their own experiences, their work is really meaningful and craftlike, that their work really is worthy of recognition, if only they could see it. By obscuring unjustified disparities of opportunities for work that is genuine, craftlike activity, such a levelling strategy is liable to inadvertently entrench those disparities. Glossing a bad situation as 'okay really' only makes improving it more difficult. This is no way to be an egalitarian.

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