



technology, children, schools and families

The meaning of work

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the notion of meaning as it relates to working life, with a view to extrapolating some implications for thinking about the future of education to 2025 and beyond. The paper comprises five sections. First, it examines some of the difficulties of the phrase “the meaning of work” and the different senses and contexts that scholars employ the term; second, it looks in more depth at meaning as a matter of interpretation – what work means to the people who do it; the third section examines meaning in the related, but perhaps more up-tempo, personal sense of “meaningful work” or “the quest for meaning” – in essence work as an expression of one’s inner life and a source of fulfilment; the fourth section introduces some criticisms of these ideas and some theories of historical change around notions of meaning that have received attention in recent years, in particular the idea that searching for meaning is becoming more of a preoccupation as societies and production systems advance and develop; and finally, the last section concludes the paper and suggests, albeit tentatively, what the discussion of the meaning of work implies for the future of education.

Keywords: economics, work, employment, education, friendship

Section 1: Meaning and Meaningfulness

The difficulty with the question “what is the meaning of work?” is not so much coming up with possible answers – there is no shortage of those – but understanding what the question is really inquiring after. Inevitably, the meaning of work strays into related but distinct questions such as “what is work?” or “why do we work?” Work obviously means

many different things. On an individual level, it can be a job, a career, or a calling. There is the economic work of earning a living and the cultural work through which people come to define their identity - with a lucky few going on to enjoy experiences we associate with the word "meaning" such as interest, stimulation, friendship, fulfilment, and generally feeling useful, connected and respected. On a social and historical level, work is key to understanding social change - perhaps especially the effect of technology (Gamst, 1995; Joyce, 1987). And on a philosophical level, the concept of work raises issues not just to do with the pursuit of the good life, but also the barriers we create around work and leisure, work and play, time and space, market-work and the work of raising a family (Appelbaum, 1992; Tilgher, 1931). Many issues are encompassed by the polysemic little term "the meaning of work". And it is due to this elusive character that theoretical approaches to issues around the meaning of work often appear to be incompatible - indeed seem to be talking across each other. As the social psychologist Marie Jahoda has put it: "A theory designed to explain the physiological concomitants of work or unemployment cannot encompass data on their subjective meaning; a theory concerned with social comparisons cannot deal with the phenomena of intra-psychic conflict; a theory about alienation as a consequence of the division of labour is unsuitable for explaining individual attitudes to work." (Jahoda, 1982, p7)

Nevertheless, for our purposes here, "the meaning of work" would seem to be used in two separable, but clearly related senses. In a great deal of the scholarly writing, what is at issue is broadly what might be called cultural interpretation using the traditional tools of social science. To write of "the meaning of work" is to refer to the significance of work to the individuals who do it, or to some aggregate of individuals such as groups, sectors or societies. What work *means*, in this sense, is concerned with attempting to answer the question: "what does work mean to you?" The question seeks interpretations and to understand differing orientations towards working. And perhaps the only credible answer to the question of what work means is that its meanings are radically ambivalent and highly diverse, as will be explored more fully in the next section. "Work may be a mere source of livelihood, or the most significant part of one's inner life; it may be experienced as expiation, or as exuberant expression of self; as bounden duty or as the development of man's universal nature," wrote the sociologist C. Wright Mills. "Neither love nor hatred of work is inherent in man, or inherent in any given line of work. For work has no intrinsic meaning." (Mills, 1951) Let us call this sense of the meaning of work the "interpretation" mode.

However, to speak of experiencing "meaning" in work, or that work gives "meaning" to the rest of life - or any of the other permutations of "meaningful work" or "meaningless work" - is to use the word in a subtly different way. Meaning, here, relates to whether purpose and significance is *felt*, as in the more personal and more urgent question "do you consider your work to have meaning to you?" The question seeks more than an interpretation of work, but rather asks whether work has substance, significance, value and importance as lived experience. The "search for meaning" is that yearning for a feeling of wholeness and harmoniousness with the world, between day-to-day activities and some animating purpose that gives direction to life as a whole. Meaningful work is expressive of one's nature or personality, to do with fulfilment and the realization of potential and the sense of a life cohering; it is more philosophical or experiential in character than meaning in the mode of interpretation. Meaning in this sense is captured by Studs Terkel's oft-quoted finding from the foreword of his book, *Working*: "Work is about a daily search for meaning as well as daily bread; for recognition as well as cash; for astonishment rather than torpor; in short for a sort of life, rather than a Monday-to-Friday sort of dying" (Terkel, 1974). Or again: "Meaningful work and leisure consist of activities that aren't just instrumental, but are rewarding or pleasurable in their own right," as Joanne Ciulla has claimed (Ciulla, 2000). By extension, meaninglessness is an absence of harmonious relation between work and wider life-values.

The two modes of meaning - the interpretation version and the philosophical-experiential version - are obviously closely related to each other (although on occasion,

social scientists who study “the meaning of work” may experience a sudden desire to stow their clipboards at the moment when the concept of “meaningful work” raises its head because the latter would seem to call for normative value judgements anathema to many in the field). However, the difference in perspective is important to what will follow. Over recent years, writers on work have produced a substantial number of new texts concerned with understanding the issue of “meaningful work” more directly (Ciulla 2000; Svendsen 2008; Martin 2000; Overell 2008). The tone of some of this material is rather different from an older tradition of writing about “job satisfaction” or “the quality of working life” (see Weir, 1976): heightened expectations surrounding work have become increasingly culturally obvious. Even a UK government strategy paper was called “Full and Fulfilling Employment” (HMP, DTI, DWP, 2002).

Section 2: The Meaning of Work – Work as Interpretation

When people are asked casually why they work, or when inquisitive children ask their parents why they have to go to work, the answer that seems most successfully to fend off further questioning is to explain work in terms of income. We do it to earn a living; it is a means-to-an-end; what the jargon terms “the cash nexus”. In different generations the answer has also held good in many studies as offering a primary motivation underlying work (Goldthorpe, 1965; MOW, 1987; Baldry et al, 2007). For many, work is clearly driven by its external consequences rather than its intrinsic satisfactions. Nevertheless, writing on the meaning of work has arguably been less concerned with the economic rationale underlying work and rather more fascinated with the psycho-social and cultural issues surrounding it (Klein, 2008).

This balance between the economic rationale and other rationales for work has been well demonstrated in surveys. According to one study, asked if they found their work to be a “means-to-an-end”, 51% agreed. The same survey found 69% saying their work was a “source of personal fulfilment” and 78% that it was “stimulating and/or challenging” (The Work Foundation, 2006). Meanwhile, there was very strong resistance (86%) to the notion that work was meaningless.

The broad pattern has been echoed in more substantial investigations of the meaning of work, too. A study of 15,000 workers from the US, UK, Japan, West Germany, Sweden and Israel found that the “economic rationale” was pre-eminent for just over half of the sample respondents. But the survey also uncovered deep commitment to the value of working. Fractionally under half the respondents favoured the “expressive” rationale – that work offered interest, friendship, identity, a chance to be useful. Two out of three had a strong attachment to working as a life goal, with work coming second only to family when people were asked the importance of different roles in their lives (MOW, 1987).

Even a recent book which criticised some of the work-rhetoric of recent years about “de-alienated knowledge work undertaken within non-hierarchical networks and information flows” noted that the economic meaning of work is overlain by many other interpretations and needs. “Wherever possible people at work look for something beyond that, a sense of purpose or redemption, a source of challenge or enjoyment, or the ability of the work to confer or reinforce social identity or identities.” (Baldry et al, 2007)

It can sometimes come as a surprise to read news stories about lottery winners who choose to carry on working. Yet their decision is consistent with the weight of research findings. In 1955, two sociologists, Nancy Morse and Robert Weiss, first asked the question, “If by chance you inherited enough money to live comfortably without working, do you think you would work anyway?” A total of 80% answered yes. The question has

been repeated by others in large-scale research exercises in 1969 (67.4%), 1974 (73%), 1977 (71.5%) and 1987 (86%) (Gini, 2000). On the other hand, it could be argued that the question does not distinguish significantly between work in an abstract, idealised form and the particular, concrete job situation individuals find themselves in. Still, when people are asked about how "satisfied" they are with their jobs overall the answer that approximately two thirds are either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" has been broadly consistent through time, albeit with some modest fluctuations (Brinkley, Coats, and Overell, 2007; Green, 2005). Such findings appear to indicate surprisingly warm feelings towards work. Yet the notion of "satisfaction" has been criticised for revealing little about the nature of the work and indicating rather more about the immense flexibility of people in adapting to their circumstances – in other words, a willingness to put a brave face on things (Weir, 1976).

The idea of work fulfilling a "psychological need" has a long history. Arguably, a lot of the social-psychological literature on this point can trace its roots to the classics. Immanuel Kant noted, "If a man has done much he is more contented after his labours than if he had done nothing whatever; for by work he has set his powers in motion."¹ In other words, what makes the category of work so humanly important is that through it, and around it, life can take on its wider purposes; we have an existential need for work. It has been noted that almost all the great visions of utopia down the ages do not envision the elimination of the institution of work altogether, but rather suggest shortening the working day, increasing variety, and sharing the dirty work as if the absence of work is beyond the limits of human understanding. Furthermore, philosophical traditions with outwardly little in common with each other have frequently placed a high valuation on the activity of work. For example, Catholic social thought and historical materialism unite in viewing in work an activity that is fundamentally human in the sense of species-specific to the human race (contrast Karl Marx, 1973, and John Paul II, 1981) Yet whether this valorisation of work is something that holds good for all human time or is a specific consequence of the historical process of change – in particular post-Enlightenment, post-Reformation thinking and its links with the beginnings of industrialisation. According to Kumar, the roots of the tendency to let work define human identity lie in technological change. "With industrialism, work is placed at the centre not just of man but of history. Work is the means by which man makes himself ... The question 'who am I?' which would formerly have been answered almost everywhere in terms of religion, family or place of origin could now really be answered only in terms of the occupation a man worked in." (Kumar, 1973)

The notion of human beings having a strong dependence on work for self-esteem, identity and a sense of order was repeated frequently in both theoretical and empirical explorations during the twentieth century (Maslow, 1954; Herzberg 1959; Kornhauser, 1954). Indeed, in the early 1970s, the sentiment propelled a series of government interventions in Western democracies around the subject of the meaning and quality of working life, which attempted to address concerns that alienation was squandering both human and economic potential (see *Work in America*, 1973; Weir 1976). Yet the importance of work to people has emerged not just from studying people who had it, but perhaps more powerfully from studying those who did not – a point that may reassert itself as the economic climate worsens in 2008-9. In fact, generalising about the experience of the unemployed has struck scholars as more valid than generalising about the much more diverse experience of employment (Jahoda, 1982). In a famous study of what happened in the village of Marienthal not far from Vienna during the early 1930s, researchers attempted to provide greater understanding to the oft-noted phenomenon that people with time on their hands after losing their jobs did not suddenly begin to take up the violin, read more books or spend more time with their families. It led them to believe work gave people their fundamental "sense of reality". Without work, workers lacked a sense of time structures; they felt little contact with others; they did not

participate in collective activity or purpose; they suffered from a lack of status and a consequent loss of identity; and they lacked all regular activity (Jahoda, 1982).

Work, then, undoubtedly means an income. But if much of the scholarship on the question is to be believed, it means much more: the basis of modern social life, the premise of psychological wellbeing, the grounding of "reality". We turn next to examine the related notion of "meaningful work".

Section 3: The Meaning of Work – Meaning as Fulfilment

There is perhaps rather less of a scholarly tradition of writing specifically concerning the notion of "meaningful work" - indeed, to this author's knowledge, there are no books or scholarly articles with the phrase "meaningful work" in their titles prior to 1982 (see Schwartz, 1982), though more have been written since. There are, of course, many formulations of what might be called "good work" or what the International Labour Organisation calls "decent work", which might be viewed as the necessary preconditions of the individual search for meaning at work and are rooted in industrial relations and human rights perspectives (see ILO, 1998; Coats, 2008).

However, the notion of meaningful work would seem to be gesturing towards an idealised norm of work that looks at issues beyond traditional ideas of "job quality". After all, having a good job and being well-treated is no guarantee of work's meaningfulness. Meaning is in a sense what happens after the material and moral conditions of work have been addressed (see Ciulla, 2000).

It is self-evidently very difficult to generalise about what is meant when a person seeks or experiences meaning as by its nature it is highly subjective; in addition, pursuing meaning can seem a little elitist, even luxurious. However, some writers have sought to establish criteria for meaningful work either through survey evidence or through philosophical first principles - and from very different perspectives. The Work in America report, for example, ventured that, "When it is said that work should be 'meaningful' what is meant is that it should contribute to self-esteem, to a sense of fulfilment through the mastering of one's environment and to a sense that one is valued by society" (Work in America, 1973).

Writing from a managerial standpoint which attempts to marry the individual's search for meaning - some 70% of respondents to its survey claimed to be looking for meaning - with an organisation's interest in performance, Roffey Park Management College has suggested meaningful work has a number of underlying qualities (Holbeche and Springett, 1984). Work becomes meaningful when it is "inherently worthwhile" - personally compelling jobs which allow people to lose themselves in tasks; it relates to a feeling of interconnectedness and trust shared with other people at work; to autonomy and respect - the freedom to make choices and be fairly treated; to balance - the management of personal commitments outside work; it is about an idea of doing something for the common good and benefiting others; and, finally, the alignment between personal values and the values that pertain in a place of work.

According to Estelle Morin, six key categories have emerged from studies since 1997. They are social purpose (doing something useful to others); moral correctness (the justifiability of work processes and results); achievement-related pleasure (enjoying one's job and developing one's potential); autonomy (use of skills and judgements to solve problems and make decisions); recognition (adequate salary and affirmation); and positive relationships (trust and interesting contact) (Morin, 2002). It is, of course, quite possible to challenge these features as over-idealised - unconnected from the reality of working life, even. In response, we might reply that it is necessary for societies in

general and policymakers and educators in particular to think about what kind of work they would like to create.

In an innovative argument, the philosopher Mike Martin has contended that meaning in work is primarily concerned with motive (Martin, 2000): meaningfulness necessitates a trinity of inter-related motives to be present. First, there are *craft* motives; individuals seek after and embrace professional ideals that evoke their talents and interests. Second, there are *compensation* motives; these might include pay, but go much wider, into areas such as power, authority, leadership and recognition – self-interested concerns, but not necessarily egotistical ones. Third, there are *moral* motives; these involve trust, caring and vocation. Each of these sets of motive is a wellspring of intrinsic satisfaction in work.

A notable feature of such lists is the mixture of essentially self-interested motives and other-directed motives in work. Martin has argued that motives are invariably mixed. Meaning flows from our understanding of our own identity, but the exercise of defining a self, if it is to be more than merely cynical, involves reference to goods that extend beyond ourselves. The judgement about which activities are worthwhile is never entirely subjective: our notions of meaningfulness in work tend to descend from an assumption of shared values about public goods. Meaning struggles to be meaning if it is a matter of personal pleasure and preference alone (see also Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon, 2001).

Meaningful work can be further been illuminated through a contrast with older ideas of “vocation” or “calling”. A vocation can be seen as connoting with an unshakable ethic of public or community service, a practical ideal of activity in which a person’s work becomes morally inseparable from his or her life; it “subsumes the self into a community of disciplined practices and sound judgement whose activity has a meaning and value in itself, not just in the output or profit that results from it” (see Bellah et al, 1985). The concept of vocation certainly explores very similar territory to meaningful work. But there does also appear to be a difference because vocation is premised on a sense of other-directedness and self-denial while meaningful work is very concerned with self-making and self-reference. Experience has to be personalised to have meaning. The contrast between vocation and meaningful work is at its sharpest if we think of vocation as a calling to the service of others and meaningful work as the personal experience of that service (see Overell, 2008).

Section 4: Criticisms of the Search for Meaning and Theories of Social Change

Explaining the rise – if that is the word – of meaningful work remains a key task and the subject of considerable theoretical debate. It has been argued that the concept of meaning and concomitant concerns about the loss of meaning from a culture in which instrumental reason is paramount arise only in the context of “modernity” or “advanced modernity”. Meaning is related to the search for identity or what, after the 1960s, has come to be called the “project of the self” (Taylor, 1992; Taylor, 2007; Giddens, 1999). It flows from a narrative of expressive individualism – of people each with special potentialities and unique characteristics who seek out experiences which help tell of the personality and create an identity. The philosopher Charles Taylor has argued that the way we talk about identity and meaning today would have been incomprehensible to our forbears of a couple of centuries ago. “To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary.” (Taylor, 2004) Moderns, he has claimed, are engaged in a constant “act of

becoming" utterly unfamiliar to previous generations and he has criticised this stance as being symptomatic of a slide towards self-referential subjectivism.

Richard Sennett has expressed related concerns about the pursuit of meaning as a recipe for unhappiness, not to mention vacuity (Sennett, 1976; Sennett, 2007): the old-time stress on "character" has come to be replaced by a much newer emphasis on "personality". "Today", he wrote, "impersonal experience seems meaningless and social complexity an unmanageable threat. By contrast, experience which seems to tell about the self, to help define it, develop it or change it, has become an overwhelming concern. In an intimate society, all social phenomena, no matter how impersonal in structure, are converted into matters of personality in order to have a meaning." Because all personalities are to some extent a "cabinet of horrors" setting out to pursue meaning directly can lead to an "uncivilised" clamour for "authenticity". (Sennett, 1976)

Some 32 years after he published these words, Sennett has more recently attempted to steer the debate about work and its meaning towards a revival of the old notion of craftsmanship. Although he has used the term in a new sense of standing for the pleasures of work for its own sake – an "active, creative" phenomenon – much of his book nevertheless dwells on the bodily experience of tools and physical objects as "steadily adding value" to a person's life. The question of how well the craft ideal translates to "thin air", immaterial type jobs – in call centres, trading futures, software integration, spin doctoring – remains an interesting one.

Other writers have been more explicitly concerned to tie meaning to industrial and social change. The argument has frequently been made that the process of industrialisation – given paradigmatic expression through the production and assembly lines so often associated with Fordism and Taylorism – resulted in a loss of meaning from work, variously attributable to the division of labour, the segmentation of whole tasks, deskilling, technology, time and motion men and the allegedly overweening power of machinery (see Braverman, 1974; Sievers, 1994). However, over recent years a more popular argument has emerged that technology, and in particular information and communications technology – often travelling under the sobriquet "the knowledge economy" – has been the cause of higher demand for skilled workers educated to a relatively high level, more interesting and potentially fulfilling work, and new organisational forms. (Blauner, 1967; Drucker 1968; Bell, 1974;). The adoption and dispersion of ICT has tended to reduce the need for people to do routine tasks while increasing the need for people in areas that required intellectual problem-solving and complex communication (Castells, 1996; Levy, Murnane and Autor, 2003). Some 42% of workers in the UK are now counted as professionals, managers, or associate professionals (the top three official occupational categories), while a third now have a degree (Brinkley, 2007). Naturally, more knowledge-intensive work does not entail more meaningful work. However, it is arguable that it helps create the conditions in which questions of meaning and fulfilment occur for more people.

Among the most important steps towards substantiating the idea that peoples' needs from work have changed in the course of the late 20th century has been the work of Ronald Inglehart and the World Values Survey he pioneered. The instrument purports to cover some 70% of the world's population in 43 countries and has been used annually since 1970. The central finding of his research has been that values in advanced societies differ markedly from those that pertain in less advanced ones. Economic growth, security, and faith in the power of science and technology that are the most important priorities for countries in the process of industrializing are not the priorities are of those that have reached a stage of advanced, or as he put it, "post-industrialization". Among these, "post-materialist priorities" such as self-expression, the quality of life become progressively more pronounced within the culture as a whole, and this in turn has a bearing on the motives and meaning of work: "There is also a gradual shift in what motivates people to work: the emphasis shifts from maximising one's income and job security towards a growing insistence on interesting and meaningful work ... [and] we find a growing emphasis on more collegial and participatory styles of management."

As has been noted, his theory can be viewed as a socialized version of that advocated by Abraham Maslow and it remains highly controversial (see Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2004).

Section 5: Conclusion and implications

Anyone who emerges from the education system blinking into the contemporary world of work is likely to feel the pull of two separate meanings attached to the activity of work. The instrumental view of work as a means-to-an-end remains very strong and, as is well-known, pay correlates strongly with education level. The role of education in leading to better paying work is a foundational relationship in any society which values social mobility. However, only modest acquaintance with the culture of modern work is enough to alert participants to the huge psychological hopes that have become invested in work over recent generations. Work is where people “realize their potential”, in the phrase beloved by the human resources profession; it is where people “make a difference”. Google, the search engine, has even attempted to woo recruits through the boast, “come and be part of a community doing meaningful work”. (Overell, 2002) It is surely true that this emphasis occurs much more in certain sectors of the labour market – especially those employing a lot of graduates. Nevertheless, it is this tension between the material and non-material benefits of work that ought to offer strategic direction to the education system, viewed at least in part as a preparation for working life.

Few would wish to remove the incentive of material reward at the end of the passage through the education system. If there is an important truth attached to the idea of the knowledge economy, it is that as societies advance, higher levels of education and skill will be increasingly in demand from the world of work, and still carry the promise of greater material comfort and wellbeing for individuals as they seek to negotiate a route through a career. The message that income buys choice is increasingly powerful. Many, however, might wish to add that seeing in work the “closed meaning” of income maximisation is to miss some of the most important cultural cues of what is happening in the world of work. The literature concerning meaning has become very closely entangled with the literature on the knowledge economy. The inward resonances of work – how we feel about it and the effect it has on our motives and behaviour – has become a prominent consideration, both from the perspective of the individual and from the perspective of employers looking to enhance organisational effectiveness. The emphasis on self-making work rather than means-to-an-end work has become marked. Political messages often seek to speak to this tension. The UK government’s “full and fulfilling” jobs sits alongside the Lisbon Agenda’s “more and better jobs”.

The dimensions of meaningful work that might be brought to bear on the education system are broad. Profound ethical questions are raised by seeking or finding meaning in work: to do with the use and passage of time; the balance between self-interested motives and other-directed motives; the formation of character and calling; to do with the kind of society we wish to encourage; and to do with psychological health and happiness – the nature of the good life. Meaningful work brings these potentially abstract questions up close to individuals and groups. Indeed, it is perhaps work that is the most obvious vehicle through which individuals come into practical contact with these issues at various points of the lifecycle.

The urgency and busyness of working life can prevent much dwelling on such matters - and perhaps that may be a relief. Yet the argument could be made that the education system broadly conceived is a good place to think through them. In historical terms, people are starting work later and working longer. Much of life is consumed by work. So

from a commonsense perspective it makes sense to think how one's work might rank as a useful, productive contribution and as personally rewarding and fulfilling, even though the reality of work tends, one way or another, to fall short of the aspiration. Trend-spotting is a notoriously dangerous game. Yet if one were forced to hazard a prediction, it is that the new emphasis that has occurred over recent years on meaning, identity and self-making in work is likely to become more intense rather than less – even if a recession as deep and long as is currently feared at the time of writing erodes the employment rate significantly. The appetite for understanding meaning, particularly among younger, more educated workers, is too great.

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