GOOD WORK:
DEVELOPING A FLOURISHING-BASED ACCOUNT

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ABSTRACT

Because it plays such an outsized role in our lives, it's important to reflect philosophically on good work and how we can find it. Until now, such inquiries have focused mainly on some aspect of work—its meaningfulness, whether it's exploitative, whether it gives workers the status or recognition they deserve, etc. In this paper, we will take a more expansive view, building on a few recent contributions to the literature. Using a broadly virtue theoretic framework, we identify three constituents of "good work," work that contributes in an appropriate way to the flourishing of the one doing it. We contrast this with "bad work," and identify three big threats in modern society to our ability to find, and engage in, good work.

INTRODUCTION

Because it plays such an outsized role in our lives, it's important to reflect philosophically on good work and how we can find it. Until now, such inquiries have focused mainly on some aspect of work: its meaningfulness, whether it's exploitative, or whether it gives workers the status or recognition they deserve, to name a few. Though often helpful in isolation, these particular inquiries seldom offer a clear path toward understanding what work itself is and the impact it can have, for better or for worse, on the lives of the persons who undertake it.

There are two projects, however, that are exceptions to this rule. In her 2016 book, *Meaningful Work*, Andrea Veltman develops an Aristotelian account of meaningful work by articulating the ways in which work can help us express essentially human capacities (or frustrate such expression).[1] And in his 2017 paper, *Good Work*, Samuel Clark attempts to ask and answer the questions, "[W]hat kind of work is good for human beings, and what kind bad?

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1. Andrea Veltman, MEANINGFUL WORK (2016).

What work is to human flourishing as eating your greens and doing thirty minutes of exercise a day is to human health? What work is, in contrast, analogous to fatty food, cigarettes, and too much beer?"[2] Like Veltman, Clark is interested in "the relation between work and human flourishing,"[3] and, like Veltman, Clark articulates his account largely in terms of the development and expression of essential human capacities.

In this Article, we will contribute to the inquiry begun by Veltman and Clark, expanding its scope and challenging it in a few concrete ways. Whereas Veltman is more narrowly focused on articulating one aspect of good work (meaningfulness), our account incorporates meaningfulness as one of three necessary constituents of "good work" more generally. Like Clark, we do not argue that the constituents we identify are comprehensive, though we do argue that they are necessary for work to count as good. Unlike Clark, we also argue that they are essential to understanding particular ways in which much of contemporary work falls short of the ideal of "good work." Our account goes beyond Clark's by articulating, in greater detail, how work that falls short of this ideal constitutes distinctively bad work. We identify three big threats in modern society to our ability to find, and engage in, good work, and use our constituents to diagnose these cases as cases of distinctively "bad work."[4]

We begin our discussion by defining work in general, as well as our understanding of "flourishing" as it relates to human activity. In the next section of the Article, we articulate our definition of "good work," identify three necessary constituents of good work, and define "bad work" by way of contrast. In the third section, we use this framework to diagnose three contemporary threats to good work. We will conclude by looking ahead to some concrete ways that the framework we have proposed can help us identify and facilitate good work in today's world.

I. Definitions

Before we discuss what constitutes good work, we ought to first articulate simply *what work is*. As others have pointed out, there's significant ambiguity in the way we use the term and a deep richness to the concepts we use it to express.[5] For our purposes, though, we want to hone in on the activity of working, rather than on its characteristic products or outputs.

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2. Samuel Clark, *Good Work*, 34 J. APPLIED PHIL. 61, 61 (2017).

3. Id. at 62.

4. In taking up this project, we set aside other important approaches, like Hannah Arendt's important treatment of work and action in political life, HANNAH ARENDT, THE HUMAN CONDITION (1958); Raymond Geuss's recent explication of our culturally constructed concept of work, Raymond Guess, *A Philosopher Looks at Work*, *in* A PHILOSOPHER LOOKS AT (2021); Kwame Appiah's treatment of work and flourishing in contemporary political philosophy, Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Philosophy of Work*, 7 OXFORD STUD. POL. PHIL. 1 (2021).

5. *See, e.g.*, Geuss, *supra* note 4; Tom Angier, *Aristotle on Work*, 70 REVUE INTERNATIONALE DE PHILSOPHIE 435 (2016) (on the complex etymology and many senses of the word "work").

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

Sometimes, as when we are cooking a meal, this good is more closely and obviously conducive to the continuation of our human life. In other cases, like that of the worker in an assembly line at a pin factory, the good is somewhat further removed; but even in cases like this, the worker could tell you a story about how, by attaching pinheads, they are earning wages that will keep a roof over their family's heads. So in broad strokes, we can define work as "productive activity undertaken in order to secure some essential good or goods."

Since we hope to develop an account not just of work, but of "good work," our discussion will draw crucially on the concept of flourishing. But what exactly is human flourishing? For Aristotle, the chief thinker from whom we have inherited this language, flourishing is "the activity of a soul in accord with virtue,"[6] that is, the activity of a person who possesses in their soul the virtues or excellences befitting their human nature.

In the case of non-human living things, it can be fairly easy to recognize flourishing. Even a novice gardener can tell when their flowers are flourishing and when theya re not; an experienced botanist will be able to diagnose exactly why a given plant may not be flourishing and the steps needed to help it thrive again. For living things, flourishing is the activity by which they maintain their life in the manner that befits the particular kind of thing they are. A flourishing peony grows and nourishes itself in a distinctively peony-like way, while a flourishing squirrel senses and moves itself in its own squirrelly way.

For human beings, on the other hand, our added capacities for thought and freely chosen action complicate the picture a bit. Flourishing for us will have to involve exercising those capacities in an excellent manner while integrating this activity into our embodied life as a whole: for our human nature is physical and biological as well as intellectual. When we flourish, we live and act in a manner such that all these facets of ourselves are functioning well, in harmony with one another. As we will explain below, this notion of flourishing will be one of the key ways of distinguishing good work from bad.

II. GOOD WORK

A. *Flourishing and Good Work*

Some work sucks; perhaps most of it does. But some work is actually quite enjoyable. Work can provide us with meaning, structure, stability, and joy. In this section, we will offer a way of more generally characterizing the

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6.   ARISTOTLE, NICOMACHEAN ETHICS (c. 384 B.C.E.) 1098a, 16–17 (Robert C. Bartlett & Susan D. Collins trans., Univ. of Chi. Press 2011).

difference between work that falls into two, broad evaluative categories. As a starting point, here's a definition:

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

Good work, so defined, is good for the person undertaking it, is good *qua* work, and is good from the first-person point of view.

Some work is "good", in some sense, even though it's clearly bad for the person undertaking the work. Farming certain crops in a pre-industrial society might serve as an example, as would those dangerous jobs that often result in bodily harm for workers yet provide for the basic needs of some particular population. There's obviously a sense in which such work is "good work," but it is not the sense we're interested in here. Likewise, we're not just interested in work that is *morally laudable*, which defines "good work" in another sense. It's an open question whether "good work" in our sense will always be morally laudable work, and whether there's any immoral work that still counts as "good work" for us.[7] One thing our definition of good work is ultimately meant to help bring out is that there are forms of work that—given our nature, and given what it takes for creatures like ourselves to flourish—are good in and of themselves; that some work is more appropriate to the kinds of being that we are.

Our definition of "good work" is meant to be universal, but—as stated—it's relatively thin. Given our definitions of "work" and "flourishing" above (or, indeed, given any plausible definitions of these), we think it follows pretty straightforwardly. That is to say, we think that almost anyone willing to grant to us that there's something such as flourishing, and some distinctive activity we can pick out with the concept work, will grant that there's a sense of "good work," definable in just that way we have defined it here.

Thus, the more interesting theoretical questions will only arise when we put this definition to work. Here, we propose to do just that. We will do it by first arguing for three necessary constituents of good work. Then, in the conclusion to this section and in the next, we will use this more substantive account of good work to define "bad work," and then identify three characteristic threats that contemporary work presents to the flourishing of workers.

B.   *Three Constituents of Good Work*

To substantively characterize good work in a way that will allow us to accomplish our aims, we will identify three necessary constituents of flourishing-promoting work. No good work will lack these conditions (at least to some degree). They are particularly relevant for our discussion, however, because their absence results in some of the distinctive challenges workers face today in their pursuit of flourishing. We will briefly define each of these three conditions and explain how without it, work cannot be (on our account) truly "good."

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7.   See Clark, *supra* note 2, at 61–62, for a similar distinction and his discussion thereof.

Meaningfulness: Good work is *meaningful* to the worker performing it.

Let's consider an extreme example from Albert Camus as support for this point. Struck by the difficulty of finding genuine meaning in work, Camus is pessimistic about whether good work is possible. To illustrate, he recounts the myth of Sisyphus, a figure whose "scorn of the gods, . . . hatred of death, and . . . passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing."[8] In Camus's telling, the gods condemn Sisyphus to an eternity of rolling a rock up a mountain, just to watch it roll back down again. In Camus's memorable phrase, "[t]hey had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor."[9] Reflecting on the myth of Sisyphus, Camus concludes that work, like life more generally, can only be dealt with by embracing a kind of cynical absurdism.[10]

But supposing for the moment that good work *is* possible, one need not be a philosopher to understand that work can't be good if it's not meaningful. Most people grasp this necessity intuitively: when asked to explain why their work isn't good or isn't promoting their wellbeing, one of the most common answers is that the work lacks meaning.[11] Even more intuitively: it's hard to deny that if one finds one's job (or career, or industry) pointless, useless, or devoid of any value that might generate meaning, it's hard to see any sense in which one could still characterize what they're doing day-to-day as "good work."

But what exactly is it that makes work meaningful? Here, we will draw on an account by Andrea Veltman to sketch out how we are thinking about this condition.[12] Veltman provides a pluralistic account of meaningfulness in

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8. ALBERT CAMUS, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *in* THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS AND OTHER ESSAYS 23 (Justin O'Brien trans., Vintage Books 1991) (1942).

9. *Id.* at 23.

10. *Id.* at 24. For Camus's take on the nature of work, in particular, consider: "[t]he workman of today works everyday in his life at the same tasks, and his fate is no less absurd." *Id.*

11. This squares with the research of Scott, who found that "[w]ork meaningfulness was significantly correlated with purpose in life and personal growth. . . . In other words, when participants perceived that their work was often meaningful or important, they experienced more purpose in life overall and a sense of continued development and realization of their potential . . . ." Kimberly S. Scott, *Making Sense of Work: Finding Meaning in Work Narratives*, 28 J. MGMT. & ORG. 1057, 1072 (2019).

12. *See* VELTMAN, *supra* note 1, at 105–41 (2016). We draw on Veltman, in part, because hers is the most systematic treatment of meaningfulness *in the context of work.* There are some others who have grappled with the question of meaning in work, but these treatments are typically offered in the context of broader ethical arguments about the ethics of, e.g., how different types of work are distributed in particular economies. *See, e.g.*, Beate Roessler, *Meaningful Work: Arguments from Autonomy*, 20 J. POL. PHIL. 71 (2012). Other treatments, like Matthew Crawford's excellent *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, explore the topic at great length, but not in the systematic, analytical way provided by Veltman. *See generally* MATTHEW B. CRAWFORD, SHOP CLASS AS SOULCRAFT (2009).

work.[13] In her view, meaning in work is determined by the extent to which it develops or exercises human capabilities, supports virtues, provides one with a sense of purpose, or embeds them in communities and relationships of mutual esteem.[14]

The pluralistic character of this account means that particular instances of good work may be meaningful to greater or lesser degrees, as they involve one or more of the dimensions of meaning noted above. Certainly, too, there can be meaningful work that utterly lacks one or more of these dimensions: an unskilled laborer, for example, may not be developing any distinctively human capacities or virtues, but may be working on a project that benefits his family or community and draw deep meaning and satisfaction from that goal.[15] Or a tenured professor may acknowledge that producing journal articles in well-ranked journals does not constitute anything near "producing something of enduring value,"[16] but may, nonetheless, enjoy this aspect of her work and find meaning in the various other goods that this, and other aspects of her job, affords her.

If, however, some instance of work does not develop along any of the dimensions of meaningfulness Veltman lays out—neither building social or communal ties, nor developing capacities or virtues, nor achieving some substantive purpose or product—it is difficult to see how such work could promote the worker's flourishing, if by flourishing we mean well-ordered, characteristically human life and activity. And, on our account, such work simply cannot be "good work."[17]

Here's a second constituent of flourishing-promoting work:

Ownership: Good work properly aligns a worker's efforts with her ownership over its products, and in a way that characteristically gives rise to a feeling of ownership.

Here, we can draw (albeit somewhat metaphorically) on John Locke's influential account of private property:

Though the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men, yet every man has a *property* in his own *person*: this no body has any right to but himself. The *labour* [sic] of his body, and the *work* of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he

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13. Veltman draws explicitly in her account on Susan Wolf's work on (the) meaning in (and of) life. *See generally* SUSAN WOLF, MEANING IN LIFE AND WHY IT MATTERS (2010).

14. The specifics of Veltman's excellent account need not concern us here, but it's worth mentioning the parallels between her virtue theoretic approach, Clark's, and our own.

15. VELTMAN, *supra* note 1, at 119.

16. Id. at 117.

17. Perhaps we should clarify, too, that we need not always think that work is good, *qua* work, in order to have reasons to engage in it. Perhaps one simply finds some work diverting, and, while they may admit that it's not particularly meaningful or good work, enjoys undertaking it from time to time as part of a broader nexus of activities aimed at helping them achieve some other good, e.g., relaxation. Perhaps tending a field in a pointless video game would fall into this category, though there are also good questions about whether such activity really ought to then be characterized as "work" at all.

removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *labour* [sic] with, and joined to it something that is his own . . . .[18]

Locke's picture is so influential in the contemporary world that it's practically second nature; it's almost become our common intuition about how work, and labor, generates a right to ownership.[19] Leaving aside, for the moment, the less intuitive metaphysical framework Locke seems to be working within, the basic picture is just this: if I make something, if I create some product, then that thing is mine. Assuming I have not acquired the materials illegitimately (and setting aside questions about the commonality of things like natural resources), this seems to be the way we think about the connection between work, its products, and ownership. If I use my clay to throw a pot, that pot is *mine* in some important sense.

Importantly, whatever the rights or privileges such a process bestows upon me are, it also characteristically leads to a *feeling* of ownership. In ordinary cases, this feeling is appropriate; it tracks these rights and privileges. I made the pot, so I feel invested in it as a product of my labor. It feels like my own. If someone takes it without asking, I get angry. And my anger typically reflects this feeling of ownership, "You shouldn't have done that, that's mine." Similarly, if someone admires the piece, that admiration reflects back on me. The bowl is my handiwork. It's an expression of my agency or creative powers. It's something *I* did, and for which I might feel any range of appropriate attitudes (pride, shame, etc.).

The virtue theoretic framework within which we have been operating makes it clear how an instance of work where this sense of ownership is absent cannot, in principle, be a "good" one. For on our account, work (or any human action, for that matter) will only be intelligible to the degree that it springs from the character of the agent. This principle has its roots in Aristotle's philosophy, in which a finite, temporal being can only come to be what it is—to possess its determinate form or actuality—through the action of an agent that already possesses that form in some way. So in human craft, for example, the form of an artifact and the relevant know-how (or *techne*) to make it must pre-exist in the mind of the artisan. An architect must have the plan of the house in mind, and possess the requisite architectural know-how, before he or she can initiate the building process and impart that form to the physical matter of the house itself.

Moral actions proceed similarly: the principle by which a person acts courageously is the virtue of courage, a stable, habitual characteristic in their soul (and the same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for vicious action). What this means for the philosophy of work is that we only feel ownership over the products or outcomes of our work to the extent that we see those outcomes as proceeding from ourselves in some way, from our skills, our talents, or other practical

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18. JOHN LOCKE, SECOND TREATISE OF GOVERNMENT 19 (C. B. Macpherson ed., 1980) (1689).

19. For now, we will leave to one side influential critiques of labor that build from (or reject fundamental parts of) Locke's picture of ownership and private property.

capabilities (what Aristotle would call our *technai*). If we have not "put something of ourselves," so to speak, into our work, it feels like something is lacking.

More recently, Alasdair MacIntyre has taken a similar tack, noting that humans, as rational beings, are held accountable for their actions in a way that other beings are not; hence "[t]o identify an occurrence as an action is in the paradigmatic instances to identify it under a type of description which enables us to see that occurrence as flowing intelligibly from a human agent's intentions, motives, passions and purposes."[20] When, in contrast, a worker lacks a sense of ownership, the product or outcome of their work appears incongruous with their needs, desires, and identity. Not only is their action all but unintelligible, but it also fails to engage and fulfill their human nature and virtues, and thus fails to promote flourishing.

Here's the final constituent of flourishing-promoting work:

Integrity: Good work is an activity that's integrated (or integrable) into the worker's life as a whole, and into her attempts to make that life a good life.

The necessity of this condition is fairly straightforward. If it's impossible for a given instance of work to be integrated into the broader aims, essential projects, or even just the narrative of a person's life, then in no way can it be conducive to flourishing, which is (by definition) activity where a person's human nature as well as their particular virtues and capabilities are harmonized and properly ordered. And if an instance of work is incapable of promoting flourishing, then (again by definition) it cannot be good on our account.

We have not yet considered any of the numerous complications that arise when we start thinking about the way our work or labor can be instrumentalized, traded, or commodified, but reflecting on this condition provides a good inroad.

Whereas I might not feel particularly *called* to create pots (I recognize that the world could do just as well without my pots, or perhaps without pots at all), I need to feel like creating pots through the work of my hands is part of what it means for me to live well. If I am forced to create bowls on the factory floor at a pace that outstrips my ability to ensure their quality, or if I find myself needing to spend so much time creating pots that I miss each and every one of my children's developmental milestones, the work of creating pots (in these circumstances) is not, for me, good work.

This condition allows for significant flexibility in the way actual workers integrate their work into their lives. In part, this is because it recognizes that work is instrumental in a dual sense. First, it's activity that aims to produce something (it's not activity we engage in for its own sake, even when we are simply doing that work for the fun of it). But it's also activity that workers *instrumentalize for other ends,* e.g., making a living. And this allows for trade-offs with the other conditions of good work within a certain range. If my work is not *especially meaningful* (but meaningful enough), I might choose to do it anyway, because it allows me to secure essential goods in life that are less work-related, e.g., having time and space for leisure and contemplation. It also allows

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20.   ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, AFTER VIRTUE: A STUDY IN MORAL THEORY 209 (2007).

us to diversify the work that we do in complex ways, "Yes, I make bowls during the day, but I really live for my gigs as a jazz saxophonist." Someone might, then, have multiple jobs—all of them part of her "work"—that individually meet the necessary conditions in different ways, but that come together to form a stock of "good work" that allows her to flourish, in a general way, in and through her work.

This is why Aristotle defines human flourishing not merely as "an activity of soul in accord with virtue," but adds, "in addition, in a complete life."[21] Human life is necessarily temporal and embodied; wea re simply not the kind of creature that achieves happiness (i.e., flourishes) in a single, definitive action. In addition to our intellectual needs and desires, we have material, animal needs that must be met if we want to live excellently as *human* beings. Thus, a flourishing life consists in a diverse series of activities performed over time, in which all these needs are met and our various capacities exercised in an integrated, harmonious manner.

C.   Bad Work

Now that we have simply defined good work as flourishing-promoting work, and provided three constituents of work that promotes flourishing, we will turn our focus toward why so much work falls short of this ideal in the contemporary world. It's worth noting two things at the outset, though. First is a simple conceptual signpost. Given our definition of good work, our definition of bad work will be defined in simple contrast:

Bad work is work that prevents or inhibits flourishing.

Given this definition, it's easy to see why most "jobs" (which involve many different kinds of work in a single role) will be a mix of good and bad work. A teacher is often able to engage in good work—meeting with students, helping facilitate deep personal and intellectual transformation, presenting conceptual material about which they care deeply—but they also have to deal with bureaucratic nonsense, sit in time-wasting meetings, and grade papers even when doing so is not going to lead to their goals as a teacher, or to the self-improvement of their students. Across the landscape of one's whole life, one will surely find some work that's good (yardwork, perhaps, or the raising of one's children), and some work that's less so. After surveying particular threats to good work in contemporary society, however, we will turn our attention to how we can make more general judgments about work, both in the context of an individual's life, i.e., whether someone's work is bad enough that they should consider finding another career if possible, and across industries, i.e., whether some work is just inherently exploitative in the sense that it cannot but be bad work.

III.   THREE CONTEMPORARY THREATS TO GOOD WORK

A.   Meaninglessness in Work: Bullshit Jobs

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21.   ARISTOTLE, *SUPRA* NOTE 6 AT 1098a, 17–19.

David Graeber defines a bullshit job as "a form of [paid] employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case."[22] Here are just some of the real-life examples Graeber provides:

- [As a concierge,] *[h]alf my time was spent pressing a button to open the front door for residents and saying hello as they passed through the lobby. If I didn't get to that button in time and a resident had to open the door manually, I'd hear about it from my manager.*

- *I called people up to hock them useless shit they didn't need: specifically, access to their 'credit score' that they could obtain for free elsewhere, but that we were offering (with some mindless add ons) for £6.99 a month.*

- *I have a bullshit job, and it happens to be in middle management. Ten people work for me, but from what I can tell, they can all do the work without my oversight. My only function is to hand them work, which I suppose the people that actually generate the work could do themselves.*[23]

Graeber is clear that these jobs don't just affect people in one or another socio-economic class. Bullshit jobs do not just crop up in the service work industry (which often employs people in crucially important roles, even if laborious or difficult in other ways), or in sales, or in middle-management. The examples Graeber gives span the socio-economic spectrum, and many of the most poignant cases come from those in extremely well-paid roles.

At the heart of Graeber's account, then, is a bit of a puzzle. As he puts it, "Why does having a pointless job so regularly cause people to be miserable? On the face of it, it's not obvious that it should. After all, we're talking about people who are effectively being paid—often very good money—to do nothing."[24]

On our view, bullshit jobs are bad for a host of reasons. First, the internal aim of such work is often obscured, contradictory, or may not even exist. Engaging in activity with no aim is inherently unpleasant, partly because it is meaningless. Being asked to do something you don't know how to do is unpleasant in part just because you don't know what you're doing. Similarly, being given an unclear objective, or an impossible objective, or an objective that's self-undermining, is frustrating in just this way.

Relatedly, bullshit jobs definitionally involve pretense, i.e., "pretending" that one's work is not meaningless even though one knows that it is. Such pretense is mentally taxing, and at odds with habits necessary for virtue. Deceit and associated feelings of shame and guilt wear on a person morally and psychologically, and make bullshit work unpleasant or worse; they might be directly in conflict with one's flourishing. They do not provide one with an opportunity to develop skills or virtues, and often involve degrading one's will,

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22. DAVID GRAEBER, BULLSHIT JOBS: A THEORY 8 (2018).

23. *Id.* at 30, 39–40, 51.

24. *Id.* at 67.

since such jobs often require one to placate a manager (or more than one) in order to remain a source of employment. And, finally, if the pretense is so elaborate, and the job so thoroughly pointless so as not to be necessary for any reason at all, it's not even clear that such jobs count as "work" at all (rather than "make-work" or "pretend-work"). To be required to secure life's basic necessities by pretending to work is degrading, potentially embarrassing, and undignified.

Our diagnosis is that bullshit jobs are bad work because they inhibit flourishing along at least the following dimensions.

First, it's not even clear that they are work (vs. "make-work" or some other degrading performance); it's not even clear that they are integrated action under a description we could count as work. So, bullshit jobs challenge a worker's identity as someone contributing to the world in a positive (or even neutral way). And they are not integrable into any sort of identity that would allow her to make sense of her life in morally thick, positively valanced terms.

Secondly, bullshit jobs don't give rise to a feeling of ownership in part because there is nothing the worker is producing such that it could be owned (by her or anyone else). At the very least, there's nothing being produced that's worth owning or taking responsibility for, and the worker is in the very best position to know and appreciate this fact. When one's work consists in unproductive activity, there's nothing in which the worker can take pride, and her pretense, indeed, requires that she hide her shame in part by pretending that there is.

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, bullshit jobs are meaningless (both objectively and for the worker). They are the closest thing to the Sisyphean task we can find in contemporary work. In this way, they resemble (albeit to a much smaller moral degree) the kind of forced labor Veltman uses as a contrast to meaningful work on her account:

> When prisoners of Nazi concentration camps were made to toil in ways that resemble the torture of Sisyphus, arduously carting sand from one end of a plant to another, only to repeat the work in reverse, eventually some began screaming in agony and committed suicide by running into electric fences. Purposeless labor tortured the prisoners in a way that its simplicity did not . . . . As one contemporary commentator remarks on the meaningless toil Nazis inflicted on prisoners after prisoners had previously been put to purposeful work in making fuel additives for war efforts, "men will cling to life with dogged resolve while working meaningfully, even if that work supports their hated captors. But purposeless labor soon snaps the mind."[25]

B.   *Alienation in the Knowledge Economy*

In writings about the nature and value of work, Karl Marx uses the notion of "alienation" to set out a distinctive way in which one's work life can go

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25.   Veltman, *supra* note 1, at 119–20.

wrong. For Marx, alienation occurs as part of any work process in which the worker becomes detached or separated from the product of his or her labor. Because work always has a characteristic product—for Marx, but also on our account—the point here is that the relationship between the worker and this product matters a great deal. But while Marx was writing during a time in which labor, and especially hard, manual labor, was becoming increasingly mechanized and divided, and when the worker herself was becoming more obviously commodified than she is in the contemporary world of work, we will need to say a bit about how this concept applies in the contemporary context.

For the contemporary knowledge worker, the product of one's labor is often abstract and intangible. It might be the data or information contained in a report one is commissioned to write, or the ideas one publishes in an academic article. It might, similarly, be a certain "process" of training that one is asked to develop and implement. In such cases, the risk of alienation is more present in the sources of the worker's motivation than in the products of her work being detached from her efforts. (Though, of course, cases of the latter exist, as when a patent one develops in one's free time at work is claimed by the company as its own intellectual property.) So when, as a condition of one's employment, one is consistently required to produce work objects that one finds meaningless or worse, one is at risk of experiencing alienation. Or when one produces creative or intellectual products that do not then properly reflect on the one who created them—as when an artist is forced to create corporate logos and not properly recognized as creator—one is at risk of experiencing alienation. Similarly, when one's efforts are consistently devoted to work processes that are so finely divided that one cannot appreciate these efforts or connect them with any greater whole, one is at risk of being alienated:

> Here's a particularly striking example of alienation in knowledge work:
>
> [The] company [I worked for] had gotten its start by providing libraries with a subject index of popular magazines like *Sports Illustrated*. Through a series of mergers and acquisitions, it now found itself offering not just indexes but also abstracts (that is, summaries), and of a very different kind of material: scholarly works in the physical and biological sciences, humanities, social sciences[,] and law. Some of this stuff was simply incomprehensible to anyone but an expert in the particular field covered by the journal. I was reading articles in Classical Philology where practically every other word was in Greek. . . . In some of the titles I was assigned, articles began with an abstract written by the author. But even in such cases I was to write my own. The reason offered was that unless I did so, there would be no "value added" by our product. It was hard to believe I was going to add anything other than error and confusion to such material.[26]

Before diagnosing Crawford's dis-integrated worker, we don't want to pass it by without failing to recognize that there are several resonances between

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26.   Matthew B. Crawford, *The Case for Working with Your Hands*, N.Y. TIMES (May 21, 2009), https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/24/magazine/24labor-t.html.

the way he describes his work here and the way Karl Marx describes the kind of alienation characteristic of manual labor in capitalist societies organized around economies of scale. For Marx, there are three key, interrelated ways in which the worker can be alienated from her work: objectification, the alienation of the activity of labor, and self-estrangement:

Objectification, for Marx, describes the process by which:

the object which labour [sic] produces—labour's [sic] product—confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. . . . Labour's [sic] realisation [sic] is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realization of labour [sic] appears as loss of realisation [sic] for the workers; objectification as loss of the object and bondage to it; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation.[27]

For Marx, the instrumentalization of one's agency in work, and the way this is divorced from the way one relates to the characteristic product of that work, is itself alienating for the worker. This leads to an inner-impoverishment for the worker (which defines alienation in his second sense): "the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes, the less belongs to him as his own."[28]

The result of these kinds of alienation is, in Marx's terms "self-estrangement,"

How could the worker come to face the product of his activity as a stranger, were it not that in the very act of production he was estranging himself from himself? The product is after all but the summary of the activity, of production. If then the product of labour [sic] is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation. In the estrangement of the object of labour [sic] is merely summarised [sic] the estrangement, the alienation, in the activity of labour [sic] itself.[29]

While Marx was dealing primarily with the mental, psychological, phenomenological, and perhaps even metaphysical effects of the alienation of workers under conditions of hard manual labor after the Industrial Revolution, it seems apt to see Crawford's description as a case of alienation updated for the worker who finds himself prey to the contemporary knowledge economy in a time of unprecedented technological revolutions. In the contemporary "knowledge-economy" it can be easy to identify with the factory worker cranking out individual pieces of some machine that one will never see come to fruition.   The hallmarks of alienating work are all there: repetition, fragmentation, objectification, boredom, exhaustion, and a loss of a sense of one's agency as a worker.

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27.   KARL MARX, *Estranged Labour*, *in* THE ECONOMIC AND PHILOSOPHIC MANUSCRIPTS OF 1844, at 68 (1977) (emphasis omitted) (footnote omitted).

28.   *Id.*

29.   *Id.* at 70.

Our Aristotelian virtue theoretic framework gives a clear diagnosis of the cause of this alienation. For work, on this framework, ought to proceed from the stable, habitual character and knowledge of the person who does that work. Success and excellence in human activity, of which work is a particular kind, does not perfect the thing produced so much as it perfects the virtue or faculty of the person producing it. This kind of excellence, then, is impossible to achieve when the product of work is an abstract on Greek philology and yet the one writing the abstract lacks the knowledge that would enable them to write such an abstract accurately and excellently. The activity of philology-abstract-writing cannot perfect a person who does not even possess the faculty of philology-abstract-writing in the first place. On the contrary, alienating work dis-integrates the worker. Like bullshit work, then, it cannot be integrated into one's project of folding one's work into pursuit of a well-lived, flourishing life.

Secondly, such work feels (and often is) meaningless. But even if it's not, objectively, failing to serve some purpose, it is impossible for a worker in such a situation to internalize this meaning, given the disparate means and ends structure into which it is embedded. In this way, it fails along all of Andrea Veltman's criteria of meaningful work. It diminishes the capacities of the worker and fails to cultivate any genuine skill (technical or moral), it blocks the development of genuine virtues, and it lacks any enduring purpose and value that could be integrated into the worker's life more broadly.

Finally, the product of alienating work, though clearly "ownable," is not something the worker sees as in any sense worth owning; it's not something they'd likely even want to take responsibility for, and thus fails to meet the ownership condition on good work as well.

C. Burnout

"Burnout" is a concept—partly psychological, partly psycho-social—that can be hard to define, but that is immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with the contemporary workplace and its characteristic practices. Marked by a feeling of de-motivating exhaustion, burnout is—as the philosopher Byung-Chul Han puts it—partly constituted by an "no longer be able," by the persistent feeling that one's efforts are meaningless or doomed to fail.[30]

Though our generation is certainly not the first to feel this way, Han believes that the phenomenon of burnout has been exacerbated by a shift in our societal outlook. We have become an "achievement society," he says, where "the drive to maximize production inhabits the social unconscious."[31] More than ever we place emphasis on positivity, a "can-do" attitude: "the sky's the limit" to what we can achieve in our work. Yet this outlook has a dark side: when we fail to measure up to our supposedly limitless potential, we despair of being able to achieve anything at all. In Han's words, "the complaint of the depressive individual, 'Nothing is possible,' can only occur in a society that

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30. Byung-Chul Han, The Burnout Society 10 (Erik Butler trans., Stan. Univ. Press 2015) (2010) (emphasis omitted).

31. *Id.* at 9 (emphasis omitted).

thinks, 'Nothing is impossible.'"[32]   Burnout, then, is the characteristic social pathology of a society that emphasizes achievement and positivity above all else.

Thus defined, burnout is antithetical to flourishing: for to flourish is to excellently live out one's distinctively human capacities for action. So, work that leads to burnout is bad work. And there are a few things we can say about such work.

Work that lacks meaning or purpose tends to lead to burnout, as does work that requires more of the subject than she is physically, mentally, or emotionally able to give. One reason burnout is so common amongst those in the "caring professions" (e.g., nurses, doctors, and teachers) is not that such jobs lack purpose, but—rather—that such providers often feel like they are not in a position to fulfill this purpose. A teacher in an under-resourced school, who finds herself experiencing the constant stressors that attend such work, and who finds herself identifying so many concrete needs to which she is unable simultaneously to attend, is a prime candidate for burnout. So, too, though, is the infinitely ambitious manager, or the elite academic, who finds goals outmatched by time and effort, or who realizes that achieving their dream will come at the cost of the quality or integrity of their work. Such an experience is often debilitating or paralyzing. Without a clear path forward, the subject sinks into depressive rumination (or a mentally taxing anxiety). Burnout, then, seems to be partly a function of the lack of good work.

Burnout is more complex, however, than simply dissatisfaction with one's job.[33]   In their seminal study on the phenomenon of burnout, academic psychologists Christina Maslach and Susan E. Jackson distinguish multiple axes according to which workers report that they experience burnout: Emotional Exhaustion, Personal Accomplishment, and Depersonalization.[34]

Identifying these aspects of burnout shows how it follows from work that lacks one (or more) of its good-making components. If a person's work depletes their emotional reserves, leaving them too exhausted to adequately engage in the other activities and relationships that constitute their life, then that work is not integrable into their life as a whole. Work that lacks meaning, on the other hand, clearly will fail to provide the worker with a sense of personal accomplishment, leading instead to the kind of Sisyphean absurdity that Camus identifies.[35]   And if one feels no ownership or responsibility for the work they have done, they will understandably feel depersonalized, replaceable, or lacking in personal agency. In individual cases of burnout (as Maslach and Jackson note in their findings), most workers self-report more than one of these issues, conspiring together in varying degrees to leave them feeling incapable of performing good work.[36]

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32.   *Id.* at 11.

33.   *See* Christina Maslach & Susan E. Jackson, *The Measurement of Experienced Burnout*, 2 J. OCCUPATIONAL BEHAV. 99, 109 (1981).

34.   *See id.* at 102–03.

35.   See generally Camus, supra note 8.

36.   See Maslach & Jackson, supra note 33, at 100–01.

IV.   CONCLUSION: RECOVERING GOOD WORK IN TODAY'S WORLD

Having identified these various threats, should we conclude that good work is therefore impossible in today's world? Given the diversity we see among fields of work as well as among individual employers and workers themselves, there certainly will not be a single, one-size-fits-all solution to these issues. But that's already a given within the framework of virtue ethics, which emphasizes the concreteness and particularity of every human action. We need to cultivate virtues within ourselves precisely because we need to be able to reason to the correct means of achieving our ends in life, taking into account the multitude of particular circumstances that characterizes every choice we make. Further, the way we grow in the virtues conducive to our flourishing can look very different depending on our state of life as well as our own particular dispositions and capacities.

This means that the steps one ought to take toward recovering good work may vary widely depending on one's circumstances and role in the workplace. Keeping the goal of flourishing in mind, we'd like to articulate some concrete suggestions for what this recovery might look like.

For example, the importance of meaningful work suggests that managers and supervisors should structure projects with an eye to making sure tasks are not scattered across too many people or teams. Too much fragmentation in collaborative work can make individual workers' tasks seem meaningless. In contrast, work becomes more meaningful to the extent that the individual can perceive the way their work is ordered toward and integrated into the project as a whole. This also means that when collaborative projects do occur, individual employees can help articulate this meaning for themselves and their colleagues by attending to the ways that their work builds upon or complements others (and vice versa) and by sharing these observations with their group.

In a similar vein, it's important for larger businesses to recognize the limitations of their perspective: although those in authority may be positioned best to understand overall company goals, they often lack particular knowledge of how to best compensate individual employees in the way they need. Accordingly, businesses should emphasize and provide more choices to employees with respect to the ways they can receive compensation, status, and recognition.

The responsibility to promote good work and human flourishing extends beyond individual employers and employees, however. Policymakers, too, ought to think strategically about the distribution of good jobs and income, and think about how public goods (like education) can be leveraged to this end. Further, policies that ensure adequate parental leave and compensate families with appropriate tax credits would help citizens to integrate work and family life (in addition to acknowledging the importance of care work, which our society too often overlooks or undervalues).

In addition to these more practical suggestions, our account of good work also allows us to gesture toward some bigger-picture questions to be pursued in the philosophy of work. Do people have a right to good work, given the ordering of such work to a flourishing human life? How closely is work connected to wages? Should all work be compensated, and if so, what standards

should we use to determine just wages for domestic and care work?[37] How can today's technology be responsibly used to help modern workers flourish in and through their work, and can this be accomplished without massive external (social, corporate, or governmental) interference?

We believe that defining good work in terms of human flourishing offers a promising framework within which to study such questions. From a purely philosophical point of view, this framework has the potential to provide order to the currently somewhat scattered landscape of the philosophy of work. But it offers practical advantages as well: identifying good work and its constituents equips us to diagnose particular issues in today's workplace and suggest viable solutions that can be implemented by the many different entities with a stake in good work, from individual employees to public policymakers.   Both theoretically and practically, then, philosophy has a valuable contribution to make toward the understanding and promotion of good work in today's society.

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37.   Feminist-marxists, in particular, have discussed this question at length. *See, e.g.*, SILVIA FEDERICI, WAGES AGAINST HOUSEWORK (1975).