



The Normative Value of Making a Positive Contribution–Benefiting Others as a Core Dimension of Meaningful Work

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Received: 11 December 2020 / Accepted: 25 January 2023 / Published online: 9 February 2023
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Abstract

Most normative accounts of meaningful work have focused on the value of autonomy and capability for self-development. Here, I will propose that contribution—having a positive impact on others through one’s work—is another central dimension of meaningful work. Being able to contribute through one’s work should be recognized as one of the key axiological values that work can serve, providing one independent justification for why work is valuable and worth doing. Conversely, I argue that having to do work that has no positive impact, or where one is separated from such impact, is an underrecognized type of alienation. Such alienation as pointlessness can be as harmful as the more recognized types of alienation such as powerlessness. Recognizing contribution as a core dimension of meaningful work is compatible with both subjectivist and objectivist accounts of meaningfulness, but I come to support a mixed view where the subjective sense of contributing must be sufficiently warranted by the facts of the situation. Recognizing the inescapable interest humans have for being able to contribute and engage in work that is not pointless has implications for the duties societies, organizations, and individuals have as regards ensuring that work conducted includes a recognizable positive impact. Along with autonomy and self-development, contribution should thus be seen as an independent axiological value that work can serve, its frustration being associated with a specific type of alienation, and it itself playing a key role in what makes work valuable and meaningful.

Keywords Alienation · Autonomy · Contribution · Meaningful work · Meaning of work · Prosocial behavior · Prosocial impact · Values

Introduction

Modern societies are built around work as a means of ensuring the sustenance of the people and keeping the nation running. Most adult citizens spend a substantial amount of their waking hours, days, and years doing work, defined as an occupation involving income of some kind, a pattern of working hours, and structured job responsibilities (Roessler, 2012; Walsh, 1994). However, if work is a substantial and necessary part of life for reasons of individual survival and for reasons of fulfilling one’s duty toward upholding the society, this makes the *content* of work a normative concern (Michaelson, 2021; Yeoman, 2014): accordingly, in addition to the stream of research around meaningful work

that examines it psychologically as a subjective experience (e.g., Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Lysova et al., 2019; Steger et al., 2012), much recent work has focused on the normative significance and moral implications of meaningful work (e.g., Michaelson, 2021; Yeoman, 2014). This work has argued that rather than being a mere individual preference and means to something else of value, meaningful work ought to be seen as independently valuable, even a fundamental human need (Yeoman, 2014), with the employer having a moral responsibility to ensure the meaningfulness of work (Bowie, 1998), or at least a negative duty to not deprive the worker of the possibility to choose meaningful work (Michaelson, 2011).

These normative accounts of meaningful work have been mostly built around autonomy, capability for self-development, and the avoidance of alienation, with the normativity and objective value of meaningful work derived from all human beings’ “inescapable interests in freedom, autonomy, and dignity” (Yeoman, 2014, p. 235), from the crucial importance of “autonomy, alienation, and dignity” (Roessler,

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2012, p. 90), from the necessity of a just society to respect “all its members as autonomous agents” (Schwartz, 1982, p. 635), and from the importance of autonomy in ensuring the moral agency of employees and that they are treated as an end and not merely as a means (Bowie, 1998). Roughly summarized, and brushing aside their individual differences, these accounts see that alienation arising from powerlessness is inherently harmful for the individuals, while having a certain degree of personal autonomy over one’s life and a chance to develop one’s capabilities and character is a moral necessity. Thus, given the practical and normative necessity to spend a significant amount of one’s time working, it is a moral duty of a just society, and accordingly also the duty of the employers, to ensure that employees have a degree of freedom and choice over how one wants to work based on personal reasons, motives, and values.

In contrast to these autonomy- and self-development-focused accounts of meaningful work, in this article I will focus on the normative implications of another separate dimension of meaningful work: the moral value of contributing, doing work that has a positive impact in the lives of other people. I will argue that being able to contribute through one’s work makes work more valuable for the one doing it, providing one key justification for the worthiness of such work. In my view, meaningfulness of work is determined, to a significant degree, by how much that work matters and has some positive impact in the world around the worker. If one’s work has a clear positive impact on other people, like saving human lives, this positive impact is typically taken as a key reason for why that work is valuable, admirable, and worth doing. Thus, contribution should be recognized as an axiological value that makes work more valuable as such. In contrast, having to engage in pointless labor with no recognizable positive impact is frustrating to the degree of being sometimes labeled as a “bullshit job” (Graeber, 2018). Indeed, engaging in socially useless jobs is associated with decreased well-being at work (Dur & Van Lent, 2019; Soffia et al., 2021), giving rise to the proposal that having to engage in pointless work with no positive impact should be recognized as a type of alienation, further emphasizing the intrinsic value of having at least some degree of positive impact through one’s work.

Many accounts of meaningfulness and meaning in life associate meaning with contribution (Audi, 2005; Levy, 2005; Singer, 2010; Smuts, 2013), defined as “the positive contribution beyond itself that this particular life is able to make” (Martela, 2017a, p. 232). And many psychological accounts of meaningful work have demonstrated that having a sense of positive prosocial impact increases people’s subjective sense of the meaningfulness of their work (Allan, 2017; Allan et al., 2018; Martela & Riekkilä, 2018). The close association between contribution and meaningfulness has thus been recognized, with psychological accounts of

meaningful work highlighting how the *experience* of prosocial impact is associated with the *experience* of meaningful work. However, even though a psychological association has been noted, key normative issues remain unanswered, as such psychologically oriented research typically aims not to get involved with normative questions.

Accordingly, the role of contribution in normative accounts of meaningful work remains undertheorized: is there inherent value in the ability to contribute? What are the moral implications of recognizing contribution as a key dimension of meaningful work? Should we understand contribution subjectively or objectively? Who has the duty to ensure that work involves a positive contribution? Offering a normative account of meaningful work as contribution that answers such key questions is the task of the present article. In particular, I will make three contributions to research on meaningful work. First, I will propose that contribution is one of the key axiological values that work can serve. Being able to contribute is thus by itself enough to justify why work is valuable and worth engaging in. Second, I will propose that work lacking contribution—either because one’s work does not have any positive impact or one is separated from such impact—is a thus far underrecognized form of alienation causing estrangement and dissatisfaction. Third, I will argue that recognizing contribution as a key axiological value of work is compatible with both subjective and objective accounts of meaningful work, but come to propose a mixed view according to which the subjective sense of contributing must be sufficiently warranted by the facts of the situation—one actually being able to contribute through one’s work. In addition, I will touch upon the societal and organizational obligations arising from recognizing contribution as a key dimension of meaningful work, and clarify the relation between morality and contribution, arguing that they represent two separate axiological values that sometimes overlap, but that there are situations where they give different judgments about the praiseworthiness of a certain action.

The Normative Importance of Meaningful Work as an Axiological Value

Meaningful work has been approached from disciplines ranging from psychology, economics, and management research to sociology, political theory, and philosophy (Lysova et al., 2019; Michaelson et al., 2014; Yeoman et al., 2019). Definitions of meaningful work vary, but following two recent reviews of such definitions (Both-Nwabuwe et al., 2017; Martela & Pessi, 2018), I see meaningful work in the broadest sense as being about how existentially significant and valuable the work is for the employee in question. While meaningful work is sometimes treated as a mere preference

and means to something else, many perspectives emphasize the normative importance of meaningful work as such, seeing it as “normatively desirable” (Yeoman et al., 2019, p. 3), and arguing that subjective perspectives of meaningful work are “conceptually incomplete” in not accounting for the intrinsic value of meaningful work as such (Michaelson, 2021, p. 413). Various normative accounts of meaningful work approach it from a diverse set of philosophical backgrounds (e.g., Beadle & Knight, 2012; Bowie, 1998; Roessler, 2012; Yeoman, 2014), but what they have in common is the belief in the non-instrumental value of meaningful work. Work being meaningful should be treated as normatively important as such; meaningfulness is something to be valued and pursued for its own sake.

Meaningfulness is thus taken to be something intrinsically good, something that makes the life that has it better on its own accord, not just because it provides something else for that life (Audi, 2005). This non-instrumental value of meaningfulness is sometimes called *intrinsic value*, but given the many separate uses of that label (see Bradley, 2006; O’Neill, 1992), I prefer to call this quality of being good “as an end,” “in itself” and “in virtue of its own nature” (Feldman, 2000, p. 320) an *axiological value*, axiology being the study of values and the ways in which a life can be judged as valuable (Feldman, 2000; Hart, 1971). The reasoning is that there are several separate ways in which a life can be good: a life of happiness is preferable to a life of suffering, other things being equal. Happiness is typically taken as the prototypical axiological value in terms of being preferable for its own sake. But happiness as the presence of positive feelings and emotions is not the only way to evaluate the goodness of a life, there are also other “final values” or basic varieties of goodness (Haybron, 2008; Martela, 2017a; Matheson, 2020). Several scholars have argued that meaningfulness is a separate way of judging how good and choiceworthy a life is: given lives of equal happiness, the one judged as more meaningful would be preferable (Metz, 2012; Wolf, 2016). Wolf notes how we sometimes struggle, much beyond what is good for our own well-being, to achieve beauty in playing the cello, in caring for our garden, or—in her own case—agonizing over a philosophical article to get it just right (Wolf, 1997, 2016). When we engage in such “projects of worth” (Wolf, 1997, p. 210), we care so deeply about the object of that project—music, art, gardening, justice, or helping the vulnerable—that we sometimes are willing to self-sacrifice and endure suffering to serve that object (see also Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Search for meaning is thus typically contrasted with prudential concerns for one’s own well-being. Instead, happiness and meaningfulness are seen as two separate axiological values that are not reducible to each other, as each presents a separate type of value that the life in question can have to various degrees, with the choice

between these two values sometimes involving significant trade-offs.

This understanding of meaningfulness as an axiological value allows more clarity in defining meaningful work. Meaningfulness of work is about the work having value that is not reducible to its instrumental value of helping the person to survive, make ends meet, and be happy. Meaningfulness of work as a “human good” (Walsh, 1994), “internal good” (Breen, 2019), and a “fundamental human need” (Yeoman, 2014) is defined as being about some intrinsic, axiological value that the work has in addition to any prudential, survival- and happiness-related value of such work. This is inherent in definitions of meaningful work as “intrinsically valuable and worth doing” (Martela & Pessi, 2018, p. 1), as “personally significant and worthwhile” (Lysova et al., 2019, p. 374), and as justifying “the worthiness of work” (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017, p. 106). However, having recognized meaningful work as an axiological value, one also needs an account of its content: What is it about meaningful work that makes it so valuable?

Meaningful Work as Contribution

Normative accounts of meaningful work have given several different explanations for why meaningful work should be seen as normatively valuable. Walsh (1994) associated meaningful work with eudaimonian activity involving the development of skills and capacities, arguing it to be one of the distributive human goods that social institutions have a duty to allocate to people. Bowie (1998, p. 1083) attempted to build an “objective normative definition” of meaningful work upon Kant’s second formulation of categorical imperative, according to which one should always treat the humanity in a person as an end and never as a means. Roessler (2012) highlighted the inherent value of being able to live autonomously—“being able to reflect about how one wants to live on the basis of reasons, beliefs, motives, and desires which are one’s own” (p. 73). Given the inescapability of work in most subjects’ lives and the harmfulness of work that is alienating, undignified, and thus meaningless, she argued that a theory of justice of work has to encompass meaningful work. Beadle and Knight (2012) approached meaningful work from a virtue ethical point of view, arguing that such work ought to provide employees the chance to exercise their virtues, while Tablan (2015, p. 301) emphasizes how meaningfulness of work arises from the essential role of work in our “development and flourishing” and actualization of our capabilities. Yeoman, in turn, claims that meaningful work is a fundamental human need because “it identifies and satisfies what is of profound importance for living a human kind of life” (Yeoman, 2014, p. 241). Fundamental needs

in this account are non-derivative and inescapable necessary conditions that human life must fulfill in order to not undergo serious harm (Thomson, 2005). Meaningful work is a fundamental human need in this sense because “it addresses our inescapable interest in living a life of human quality” (Yeoman, 2014, p. 241). Generalizing across these accounts, they thus seem to emphasize autonomy and capability for self-development as the dimensions that make work meaningful and imbue it with value.

However, there is another key dimension of meaningful work evident in many definitions of meaningful work (reviewed by Martela & Pessi, 2018), but rarely discussed in the normative literature on meaningful work: the contribution or broader impact of work. This dimension of meaningful work is about whether the work makes a positive impact beyond the individual in question; whether it contributes positively to the wider world. Making a contribution is thus about benefitting someone else than myself through my work. This is a very broad notion capturing anything from making a customer smile to serving humanity through one’s art or research. One can make a positive impact toward a particular individual, toward a community, toward more abstract goals such as beauty or justice in the world, or even toward non-human targets such as animals and nature more generally. In the section on subjective and objective contribution, I will return to the question of who defines what counts as a positive impact and how do we recognize it. But the main point about contribution is that the beneficiary is someone beyond myself—I am able to do something that brings value to someone else than me. Contribution takes place whenever somebody else than me benefits from and gets something positive out of my actions.

My key argument is that contribution should be recognized as one of the axiological values that can justify the value and worthiness of work. When one’s work is “serving some greater good or prosocial goals,” this alone imbues work with value, making it more worth doing as such. Suppose you ask someone “why are you doing this work, what makes it worth doing?” Answers such as “I am serving the community by helping these people” or “I am able to save human lives” seem perfectly good answers, no further justification is needed to understand the value of such work. Furthermore, if the person would have had the option to work in some better compensated position, these answers seem perfectly legitimate and even admirable reasons to justify why they chose to work for a smaller salary. Work making a positive contribution thus provides an independent source of value for that work. All other factors being the same, the work making a greater contribution toward other people makes it more valuable. I am thus proposing that work contributing positively to the lives of other people is by itself enough to make that work more intrinsically valuable and worth doing. In other words, contribution should

be recognized as an axiological value of work and a central dimension of meaningful work, providing a key justification (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017) for why work is valuable and worth doing.

The key role of contribution in meaningfulness has been recognized by many thinkers analyzing meaning *in life*. In his contribution account of meaningfulness, Martela (2017a, pp. 232, 233) argues that “the meaningfulness of a life should be seen to be about the positive contribution beyond itself that this particular life is able to make. Asking about the meaningfulness of a life is akin to asking to what, beyond itself, does it contribute.” An activity is typically taken as pointless, if it doesn’t contribute to anything, and meaningful if it contributes to something of value. Similarly, life is argued to be meaningful to the degree that it is able to contribute to something beyond itself. For example, Smuts (2013, p. 536) provides a theory of meaning according to which “one’s life is meaningful to the extent that it promotes the good,” Nozick (1981, p. 610) sees that meaning is about whether one’s life has “a connection with an external value,” and Levy (2005, pp. 178–179) proposes that life is meaningful “just in case it is devoted to (or is unified by) the pursuit of goods which transcend the limitations of individuals” (see also Audi, 2005; Singer, 2010; Taylor, 1988).

Given that the contribution account of meaningfulness has been applied to both individual activities and to whole lives, it is not radical to suggest that it can be also applied to something in between these two: work. When we ask about the meaningfulness of a certain work, quite often what we are asking is what contribution does that work make. For example, popular advice on how to find meaningfulness during times of crisis such as a pandemic tend to highlight the importance of identifying ways to contribute (BBC, 2020; Martela & Kent, 2020). People struggling with questions about the lack of meaning in their work are typically questioning whether their work contributes to anything beyond itself. The work might be fun and well compensated but if nothing of lasting value comes out of it, it can still feel meaningless. In contrast, when the work one is doing has some clear positive impact on other people, this typically infuses the work with a strong sense of meaningfulness. This is visible in the typical examples of particularly meaningful jobs that people give, such as firefighters, nurses, and doctors. For example, an article in *The Atlantic* (Rosen, 2014) highlighted doctors, community workers, and social service workers as highly meaningful occupations (while noting that “for work that doesn’t feel meaningful, become a lawyer”). What unites these examples of particularly meaningful occupations is that in them the positive impact on others is especially tangible. Of various occupational groups, people in community and social service occupations indeed experience most meaningfulness at work (Bryce, 2018).

Contribution is not all there is to meaningful work—as noted, self-development and autonomy seem important too—but it is arguably a significant part of what we think about when we think about meaningful work. There is thus a relatively strong case to be made that a key dimension of meaningful work is about whether that work contributes positively to the world beyond the individual in question.

Contribution in Psychological Accounts of Meaningful Work

While normative accounts of meaningful work have typically focused on autonomy and self-development, psychologically oriented researchers have been more prone to recognize the role of positive impact in the experience of meaningful work. Steger et al. (2012, p. 322) argue that one of the primary facets of a subjectively meaningful work experience is “perceiving one’s work to benefit some greater good.” Bailey et al. (2017, p. 416) examine how organizations aim to “manage the meaningfulness employees experience,” defining meaningful work as being about work that “is personally enriching and makes a positive contribution,” while Martela and Pessi (2018, p. 1) see broader purpose as a key dimension of the subjective experience of meaningful work, defining it as “work serving some greater good or prosocial goals.” Rosso et al. (2010, p. 115) identify contribution, doing work in “service of something greater than the self” as one of the main pathways to foster the psychological experience of meaningful work, while Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012, p. 673) argue that one of the central content dimensions that make up the subjective experience of meaningful work is serving others, defined as “making a contribution to the well-being of others (and the world we live in).” These accounts focusing on the subjective experience of meaningfulness at work thus see that having a sense of positive contribution is so closely associated with meaningfulness as being almost a definitional aspect of it.

The association between experiencing a sense of contribution and the experience of meaningful work has also been demonstrated empirically. In Hackman and Oldham’s (1976) Job Characteristic Model, task significance, defined as “the degree to which the job has a substantial impact on the lives or work of other people” (p. 257), is one of the job characteristics making work more meaningful, with empirical studies demonstrating a strong relationship between task significance and experienced meaningfulness of work (Fried & Ferris, 1987). Grant (2007) has argued that employees have a motivation to make a prosocial difference, demonstrating how nourishing this motivation leads to increased work performance (Grant, 2008a, 2008b). Blake Allan and his colleagues showed both in a three-wave longitudinal study (Allan, 2017) and

in three experiments (Allan et al., 2018) that helping others increases the participants’ experience of meaningful work. For example, participants asked to perform five new things to help other people at work on two Tuesdays in a row reported increases in their sense of work meaningfulness compared to a control condition. Beyond research on meaningful work, empirical examinations of meaning in life have similarly found in several experimental studies that positive contribution makes individual tasks (Martela & Ryan, 2016) and whole lives (Klein, 2017; Van Tongeren et al., 2016) feel more meaningful. Furthermore, the most popular scale to measure meaningful work, Steger et al.’s (2012) Work and Meaning Inventory, includes work benefiting some greater good as one of the three key facets of meaningful work along with experiencing positive meaning and making meaning through work, demonstrating in a structural equation model that these three factors are highly inter-correlated and all load on a higher-order factor of meaningful work.

While these researchers have thus recognized the close psychological connection between the subjective experience of meaningful work and a subjective sense of contribution, they typically don’t examine this issue from a normative point of view. Within the psychological paradigm, meaningful work is examined as a subjective experience and thus the key claim they are making about contribution is that having a sense of contribution is either a part of the experience of meaningfulness or an important antecedent to the experience of meaningfulness. While such research is important in empirically examining employees’ subjective *experiences about* meaningfulness, they don’t make claims—or even attempt to make claims—about the normative value of contribution. Instead of examining the experience of contribution the focus in this article is on actually making a contribution and what normative value that might have.

In other words, I have wanted to take the psychological insight about the close connection between the experience of contribution and the experience of meaningful work, and bring it to bear on the more normative issues around work and the actual contribution made there. Most importantly, I have claimed that having a contribution is an axiological value of work—something that makes work more worth doing as such. Contribution is thus not just another feeling we can experience at work, but a normatively important factor in its own right in attempts to estimate the value of work. Contributing has value beyond any good feelings that being able to contribute can sometimes provide for the helper. Contribution may produce a “warm glow of giving” and other positive feelings (see Aknin et al., 2013a, b; Hui et al., 2020), but the normative value of making a contribution goes beyond these feelings and is not dependent on them. Instead, having a positive impact through one’s work can be claimed to be its own justification, something that by its very nature makes

the work more worth doing. I thus build on the insights of the psychological research stream about the experiences of contribution and meaningfulness being closely connected, but focus on the normative sphere and on the value of actual contribution, not mere experience of it.

However, it is also important to focus on the other side of the coin, which tends to be less recognized: how having to engage in work that lacks contribution is a type of alienation. Next, I will argue that lack of contribution causes inherent harm—an insight that could advance also the more psychological research around meaningful work.

Being Separated From the Positive Impact of One's Work as a Type of Alienation

In discussing the opposite of meaningful work, many researchers have come to talk about alienation (e.g., Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Roessler, 2012). Karl Marx famously saw the wage worker as separated from the means of production, one's work being commodified, leading to a condition of alienation, where the worker is related to labor and its products “as to an *alien* object (Marx, 1977, p. 68). Besides Marx, alienation has featured in classical sociological writings from Weber and Durkheim to Adorno and Fromm (see Seeman, 1959; Shantz et al., 2015). It has been used to denote various negative conditions, with Seeman (1959) identifying five alternative and conceptually independent meanings of alienation. Of these, the type of alienation most clearly associated with autonomy is *powerlessness*, which Seeman sees as being about the individual being separated from the “means of decision” as regards one's own work. Alienated work, in this sense, is about the employee having no say about what work to do and how to do it. Other types of alienation discussed by Seeman (1959) include *normlessness*, the loss of commonly shared values to guide one's endeavors, and *isolation*, feeling socially separated from the group (see also Dean, 1961). What these various types of alienation have in common is a sense of “estrangement, or disconnection from work, the context, or self” (Nair & Vohra, 2009, p. 296) leading later research to define the core of alienation as being about “a dissociate state of the individual in relation to the product or process of work” (Shantz et al., 2015, p. 384). Alienation can thus be seen as a state of dissociation and estrangement, which can arise due to various work-related factors such as powerlessness, social isolation, or normlessness.

Here I want to propose that contribution has as its counterpart a specific type of alienation: The employee being separated from the positive contribution one's work is making. Alienation as lack of contribution comes from the fact that one is dedicating a significant proportion of one's waking hours, and even getting paid for, something that

ultimately doesn't seem to have any point. One toils away but one's activities make no positive difference, nobody benefits from them, and thus they feel like a waste of time and effort, as they seem to ultimately serve no end. Pointless labor, like digging holes and then filling them up, was reportedly used as a form of torture in concentration camps, as making people struggle in activities with no impact was seen as especially demoralizing.

Lack of contribution might mean that one is working for an organization while knowing that what they offer has no positive impact on the clients or the wider world. An employee might grow disillusioned and realize that one is selling insurances the clients don't need, dieting advice that doesn't work, or online advertisements that no one will see. The clients are willing to pay for the service, but the employee is convinced that what one is offering to them has no positive impact whatsoever on their lives. Research shows that employees in sales, marketing, and public relations are one of the occupational groups most likely to report their own job as not useful to society (Dur & Van Lent, 2019). Alternatively, one might realize that the tasks one is doing for the organization are so trivial—filling out unnecessary forms, moving papers from one pile to the next—that were the job to disappear that “would make no difference whatsoever” (Graeber, 2018, p. 6). Richard Graeber (2018, pp. 2–3) defines bullshit job as one that is “so completely pointless that even the person who has to perform it every day cannot convince himself there's a good reason for him to be doing it.” He sees that large bureaucratic organizations tend to create pockets of red tape and unnecessary paperwork that somebody has gotten the role of fulfilling—but that actually doesn't create any value for the organization itself or any of its clients. He emphasizes that the job has to be so pointless that even the one carrying it out can't convince oneself of there being any value in the job. Subjective awareness of the pointlessness of the work is thus a key feature of what he calls bullshit jobs. Later research utilizing large international surveys have indeed found that some 5% of workers in European Union (Soffia et al., 2021) and 8% of workers in a sample of 47 countries across the world (Dur & Van Lent, 2019) perceive their own work as socially useless, this condition thus affecting millions of employees across the world. Moreover, feeling one's job is socially useless is strongly associated with less job satisfaction, heightened turnover intentions (Dur & Van Lent, 2019), and lower well-being (Soffia et al., 2021), demonstrating that the employees have an aversion for this kind of work. Dedicating 40 h a week (or even more) of one's waking hours to do something one is well aware is completely pointless and serves no positive ends counts as a form of alienation, as such work lacks any justification of its worthiness (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017), becoming just meaningless motions to acquire a paycheck.

Besides situations where the job has no positive impact at all, one might be in a job where people are actually benefitting from the work one is doing, but they remain remote or invisible to oneself. In discussing relational job design, Grant (2007) proposes that in addition to the actual positive impact of the employees' work, it is important to consider how the relational architecture of the jobs allows one to perceive that positive impact. Grant contrasts firefighters with janitors, arguing that the former typically have enriched relational architectures in having meaningful contacts with the beneficiaries through physically and emotionally close interactions, while the latter have relatively depleted relational architecture in having little positive interactions with the people whose living or office spaces they keep clean. Grant (2007) proposes that having more contact with the beneficiaries, and making the impact more tangible and visible are ways of enhancing the sense of positive impact, with later research confirming the positive effects on motivation and performance such enriched sense of positive impact can provide (Aknin et al., 2013a, 2013b; Grant, 2008a, 2012). Research has also shown that managerial practices such as showing respect and giving positive feedback to the employees are associated with employees being less likely to feel their job as socially useless (Soffia et al., 2021), while helping the employees to see how their work contributes to the ultimate aspiration of the organization can enhance meaningfulness of work (Carton, 2018). Alienation as estrangement from the positive impact of one's work is thus not only about the actual positive impact as such, but about how well the relational architecture of one's workplace allows one to be in touch with this positive impact. "Division of labor into highly specialized parts" where the worker has no visibility to the positive impact of one's labor "can make meaningful work look meaningless," as Dur and Van Lent (2019, p. 11) argue. In commodified work where the employee has a narrow role far removed from being in touch with the customers who ultimately benefit from one's work, the employee can suffer from this type of alienation, no matter how big the objective contribution of one's work. While research has long recognized how being separated from seeing the complete product can be alienating (Marx, 1977; Shantz et al., 2015; see also Hackman & Oldham, 1976), here I have emphasized that, to fully appreciate the value of one's work, one needs to see not only the end-product but also the end-user benefitting from the product. Grant (2011, p. 102) provides the example of a tractor company that gives assembly line workers the chance to hand over the keys to the farmers, to see them "start their tractors for the first time." This enriched relational architecture arguably enhances the meaningfulness of the assembly line work more than merely seeing the completed tractors being shipped off.

Work can be alienating in many different ways (Dean, 1961; Seeman, 1959). Here I have emphasized that similar

to how autonomy and contribution are two separate dimensions of meaningful work, we can distinguish between two separate forms of alienation: a subject can be alienated from work by having very limited discretion to make decisions as regards how one is conducting one's work. This type of *alienation through powerlessness* diminishes one's autonomy. But a subject can be alienated from work also by having very little positive impact or very little visibility to the impact one's work is making. This type of *alienation through pointlessness* diminishes one's sense of contribution. Both forms of alienation—powerlessness or pointlessness—thus can lead to work becoming meaningless for the employee in question.

One implication of this distinction between different forms of alienation is that work can be meaningless in more than one way. Here I have focused on situations where work is meaningless because it lacks any positive contribution. However, also powerlessness and lack of autonomy can lead to a sense of meaninglessness. This means that there could be situations where work makes a significant positive contribution but still feels meaningless due to a complete lack of autonomy. Working under a visionary yet abusive manager—say, building electric vehicles—could be one example: the employee would feel that one's work is making an important contribution to the fight against global warming. However, the controlling work environment where the employee feels they are just a disposable cog in the machine that their manager ruthlessly utilizes without any concern for their health, wellness, and individuality would make, in the long term, them lose touch with any sense of meaningfulness their work might provide. While positive contribution is a key dimension making work meaningful, it alone is not able to guarantee meaningfulness, if the work is found too much wanting on other dimensions of meaningfulness.

Warranted Subjectivism—Combining Subjective and Objective Points of View in Evaluating Contribution

When talking about contribution as an axiological value, the focus is on the value of the work for the one doing the work. *Being able to contribute* is one way of work becoming valuable for the employee, in the same way as *feeling happy at work* is another valuable aspect of the work for the employee. We thus need to separate two issues: the actual contribution made toward someone else, and the ability to be the one doing that contribution. A certain work, being a nurse for example, might involve a tangible contribution through helping certain people. From the point of view of the society, and from the point of view of the people helped by the work, there is thus clear value in the nurse's work. But this ability to offer help is also one of the things that makes

the work more valuable *from the point of view* of the nurse. What is of value is thus not just that someone got help, but that the nurse in question was the one *providing* that help; the nurse deriving from this act of helping a sense that what one is doing matters, makes a difference, and is important for others. Meaningfulness as contribution is thus not about the contribution as such, from an external point of view, but about being able to make that contribution as something that enhances the value and meaningfulness of the work for the one conducting it.

This clarification helps us also approach one of the key questions of normative research on meaningful work: whether meaningfulness of work is subjective or objective? The account offered here is in a certain sense subjective: it examines the ways in which work can be valuable *for the person doing the work*. There is thus a subjective component as regards the *bearer* of the value in question: we are talking about the value of the work for the one doing the work. But we need also to ask *from what point of view* we make this evaluation. An objectivist would claim that work is meaningful to the employee to the degree that it makes an objective contribution to the world. For an objectivist, meaningfulness is about “the realization of objective value in the world, impersonally considered” (Kauppinen, 2016, p. 286). The meaningfulness is determined by whether work has a *real* a positive impact, no matter whether the subject in question is aware of this impact. Classic example here is Sisyphus pushing the rock up the hill, while the activity, unbeknownst to him, scares away vultures who otherwise would terrorize a nearby village (Wolf, 2010). Sisyphus himself would perceive the activity as meaningless but it nevertheless would have a large objective contribution, making it actually meaningful. A subjectivist, in contrast, would see such meaningfulness that the person in question is completely unaware of as strange, instead arguing that what counts is the subject’s own awareness and evaluation of the contribution in question. For the subjectivist, it is the subjective sense of contributing that counts. Without any subjective experience or awareness of one’s positive impact, a person could “reasonably feel that their lives lack something that might be referred to as meaning” (Wolf, 2010, p. 21), no matter how big the objective contribution they are making.

Both pure subjectivism and pure objectivism seem to lack something. It is strange to suggest (as pure objectivism seems to imply) that a person could live a highly meaningful life, while not having any awareness of this meaningfulness, personally seeing one’s own life as pointless. On the other hand, if we would encounter a person who has grand illusions about helping the humanity by selling alternative medicine that is actually poisonous, we might be ready to conclude that the given work lacks meaning, no matter the person’s own conviction of a great positive impact. Pure subjectivism thus seems also lead to conclusions that are hard

to accept. Accordingly, philosophers such as Susan Wolf have been arguing for a mixed view, where meaningfulness must involve both a subjective and an objective condition. For Wolf, meaning arises when “subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness” (Wolf, 1997, p. 211), when one is able to derive a subjective sense of meaning from actively engaging in “projects of worth” with some objective value (Wolf, 2010, p. 26). In here, the subjective experience of meaningfulness is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for work to be meaningful—the subjective feeling of meaningfulness must also be merited by the actual situation.

One can thus hold a subjectivist, an objectivist, or a mixed theory about from what point of view meaningfulness of work should be evaluated. Similarly, one can hold a subjectivist, an objectivist, or a mixed theory about from what point of view contribution as a central dimension of meaningfulness should be evaluated. A subjectivist about contribution claims that the contribution of work is judged based on the employee’s own perception of it, an objectivist about contribution claims that what counts is the objective amount of positive impact one’s work is able to make, and a supporter of a mixed view would argue that both count: the employee must be aware of the contribution one’s work is making, and the contribution must be real.

Given these alternatives, my own preferred view builds on Wolf’s (2010) insight that meaningfulness must involve a subjective component while also being responsive to the reality of the situation (see also Tablan, 2015; Yeoman, 2014). When we talk about the meaningfulness of work for the one conducting that work, omitting the subjective perspective completely would be a mistake. Having some accidental positive contribution, without any knowledge of it, is not enough to make a job meaningful. As long as the person conducting the job would have no awareness of any positive impact, the job would remain meaningless for that person. The importance of this subjective component is emphasized by perspectives on meaningful work emphasizing the harmfulness of non-meaningful work (e.g., Yeoman, 2014). The harm of not making any objective contribution (while subjectively believing one is making a contribution) is rather abstract, while the harm of subjective sense of alienation derived from believing one is engaging in pointless labor, with associated depressive or even suicidal thoughts, is very real for the subject. As Grant (2007) has emphasized, the relational architecture of work is important, and can significantly affect how well the employee is aware of the contribution one is making. In my view, the relational architecture of the job and the potential alienation caused by being separated from the contribution one’s job is making are important issues in evaluating the meaningfulness of a job—and acknowledging these requires acknowledging the employee’s subjective evaluation of the contribution one is making. Accordingly, I argue that contribution as a

component of meaningful work should involve the subject's own evaluation of the contribution one is making.

On the other hand, grand illusions about positive contribution not cashed out by reality should make us wary of purely subjectivist perspectives, where the subject's feeling of contributing is all that counts. Instead, the subject's beliefs about positive impact should be in some way warranted, one should have good reasons in believing one is having an impact. In caring about making a positive impact we are not just seeking the *feeling* of contributing but we are seeking to *make* a contribution. If Nozick (1974) would offer us an experience machine that would give us a constant sense of making a huge contribution, most would see it absurd to plug that machine to their brains, as people want their feelings of contributing being warranted by some actual contribution. The sense of contributing is “not merited, of course, unless one has actually done so” (Kauppinen, 2012, p. 358) – unless one has, in fact, contributed. Wolf (2010, p. 32) notes that “our interest in living a meaningful life is not an interest in a life *feeling* a certain way, but rather an interest that it *be* a certain way.”

Thus, I see that the most sustainable account of contribution should involve both a subjective component—the experience or evaluation of me making a positive contribution—and this evaluation being sufficiently warranted by the facts of the situation. The condition of warrantedness has been especially developed within the pragmatist view of scientific inquiry, where science progresses in a certain domain through observation, experimentation, and self-correction toward ever more warranted conclusions (Dewey, 1938; Hickman, 1998; Martela, 2015). Emphasizing the fallibilism of human beliefs, Dewey suggests replacing the word *knowledge* with its objective undertones with the phrase *warranted assertability*, to emphasize how all our beliefs are more or less warranted (Dewey, 1938, p. 7). Warranted assertions are “outcomes of inquiry that are so settled that we are ready to act upon them, yet remain always open to be changed in the future” (Martela, 2015, p. 540). Our evaluations thus always involve both the current conclusion we make and a degree of certainty that we attach to these conclusions, which is dependent on how deeply we have inquired into the premises and facts of the situation to ensure that we understand the situation correctly. Accordingly, evaluating that one has made a contribution through one's work (and by extension that one's work is meaningful) involves two conditions: the subject has to oneself evaluate that one has made a contribution, and the subject must have arrived at this evaluation through an inquiry that is sufficiently warranted to make such a conclusion justified. In general terms, I am thus in favor of a mixed view in emphasizing both the subjective sense of meaningfulness and one's subjective

believes about meaningfulness being warranted by the reality of the situation.

This warranted subjectivism about contribution has the added benefit of not being tied up with a certain theory of what is good for humans. Having defined contribution as being about benefitting other people, one natural question to emerge is what actually benefits other people? If a workplace canteen starts serving healthier but less tasty food for the employees, is this a positive contribution toward them? In other words, what in the end is beneficial and of value to others? To answer such a question, we need a theory of what is of ultimate value to people. This is a question asked at least since Aristotle (2012), in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, aimed to identify the nature of eudaimonia, with some philosophers defending hedonism or desire satisfactionism, while others provide lists of various objective goods (see Griffin, 1988; Haybron, 2008), such as Ross's (1930) list of four intrinsic goods or Nussbaum's (2001) list of capabilities. Given the long tradition providing a rich literature with several competing theories, settling the question of what is objectively good for humans goes beyond the scope of the present article.

However, given the subjectivist starting point of the present view, we do not need to commit to one theory. Instead, employees with different views about the objective goods can each advance the good that they see as valuable to the world. Thus a follower of Nussbaum (2001) might derive meaningfulness from being able to defend the bodily integrity and practical reason of a vulnerable group, while a follower of Fletcher (2013) would derive meaningfulness from being able to develop one's clients self-respect, virtue, and achievement. What is good for others would thus depend on the subject's own theory of goodness. However, also this theory of what is good for others needs to be warranted and open to be improved in the future (Martela, 2017b). Subjecting the other under authoritarian rule ‘for their own good’ would probably not be viewed as good by the other or by any idealized rational version of the other and thus any attempt to warrant such a theory of goodness would face severe problems. In aiming to benefit others we thus need to be guided by our present theory of what is good for others (because what else could we be guided by), while remaining sensitive to feedback and actively trying to ensure that what we view as good for the other is actually good for them. An attitude that acknowledges the limitedness of our current perspective, while remaining open to listen to and learn from other points of views is thus essential to be able to increase the warrantedness of one's outlook over time (see Martela, 2019). The present mixed view thus involves the subject evaluating what is good for others and whether one has been able to advance that good—but at the same time requires that both the type of goodness provided and

the fact that it is provided need to be sufficiently warranted through inquiry. Thus the subjective evaluation is constrained by a degree of warrantedness that is gained through inquiry (Dewey, 1938).

Contribution and Morality as Two Separate Axiological Values

The relation between contribution and morality merits some clarification. Certain acts, such as helping a person in need, might involve both contributing and doing something morally good. We should, however, not confuse morality and contribution with each other. Instead, both are independent axiological values, providing their own, separate ways of evaluating whether life or work is good from their point of view. Morality and moral praiseworthiness is typically taken as an axiological value clearly separate from happiness, providing thus an independent standard from which to evaluate the goodness and choice-worthiness of a life (Haybron, 2008). Furthermore, meaningfulness as “a category of value that is not reducible to happiness or morality” (Wolf, 2010, p. 13) has been widely recognized as a third axiological value separate from both happiness and morality (e.g., May, 2015; Metz, 2013; Wolf, 2016; Yeoman, 2014). Few examples may help us to see how contribution as a dimension of meaningfulness is distinct from morality. A rock star may touch the hearts of millions of people through his music, giving hope, inspiration, and comfort to many who struggle in their lives. At the same time, let’s imagine he is totally narcissistic to the degree that “those around him do not show up on his moral radar” (May, 2015, p. 119). I have a few real-life examples in mind but even without naming names you might recognize the type. As regards morality, our judgment of his life might not be benign, but as regards contribution there’s no doubt that through his music he had a clear positive impact in the lives of millions of people. As a second example, consider the choice Nelson Mandela had to make when released from prison: Should he finally devote some time to his family and children, who had hardly seen him as he had been imprisoned for most of their lives? Or should he assume the role of a political leader, with very little time to spend with his family, to guide South Africa out of apartheid? From the moral point of view, both choices seem equally justified. We could hardly blame him morally for choosing to attend to his family. But from the point of view of contribution, the fact that he made the latter choice, guiding the nation to democracy while evading a civil war, has made his life and his career as one of the prototypical examples of meaningful lives (e.g., Metz, 2012). What these examples demonstrate is that evaluating life or work from the point of view of morality and from the point

of view of contribution are two independent judgments, sometimes in harmony, other times less so.

Separating morality and contribution as axiological values does not mean that contribution could not be a moral concern. Happiness as an axiological value is typically seen as morally valuable, leading to discussions about what duties employers and governments have as regards ensuring the happiness of the employees or protecting them from suffering. Similarly, contribution as an axiological value should be recognized as morally valuable, leading to discussions about the duties related to ensuring employees have a chance to contribute. Happiness, contribution, and morality are all independent axiological values. But when examining work *from the point of view of morality*, few of the relevant factors to consider include the happiness of the employees and whether the employees have a chance to contribute.

Conclusion

While most normative accounts of meaningful work have focused on the inherent harmfulness of alienation caused by powerlessness and the moral value of autonomy and self-development (Bowie, 1998; Roessler, 2012; Schwartz, 1982; Yeoman, 2014), in this article I have attempted to build the case for contribution as another key dimension of meaningful work. The key task of the present article has been, accordingly, to carve out the space for contribution as an axiological value of work, to argue for its separateness as a type of axiological value and a “basic variety of goodness” (Matheson, 2020, p. 313). Being able to have a positive impact through one’s work is one of the key values that work can serve and, when realized, an important part of what makes work meaningful and intrinsically worthy. In contrast, when a person has to engage in pointless labor where one has lost touch with anything positive the work would contribute to, this should be recognized as a type of alienation seriously harmful for the employee. In some occupations, such as nurses, firefighters, teachers, or social workers, the positive contribution might be especially tangible. However, I see that on average, most occupations involve at least some degree of contribution: someone is paying for the goods or services provided, which implies that they feel that they benefit from them in some sense. Accordingly, while evaluating the total contribution of a certain work is complicated, I see that most jobs involve elements of contribution, the strengthening of which would strengthen the meaningfulness of that job.

Besides arguing that contribution is a key axiological value work can serve, I provide a warranted subjectivism account of contribution that argues that contribution involves both a subjective and objective element. In order to make the

subject's life more meaningful, the subject must be aware of and recognize the positive contribution they are making. However, the subject's belief in that they are making a positive contribution can't be a mere illusion, but must be warranted by the facts of the situation—the subject must actually make a positive contribution. It is worth emphasizing that arguing that contribution is an axiological value and arguing for a warranted subjectivism account of contribution are two separate arguments, and the former is not dependent on the latter. After we have recognized contribution as a separate type of value, we can take a subjectivist, an objectivist, or a mixed stance as regards the point of view from which it should be evaluated. All these stances have their merits and defenders (e.g., Ciulla, 2019; Michaelson, 2021; Yeoman, 2014), but the main point of the present article is to demonstrate that subjectivists, objectivists, and proponents of mixed views can all, from their own particular theoretical background, still appreciate and adopt contribution as an important axiological value and part of what is traditionally called meaningfulness. That said, I also aim to advance the discourse around subjectivism and objectivism about meaningful work by offering a novel type of mixed account that embraces subjectivism but involves the condition of warrantedness that introduces an element of objectiveness to ensure that the subjective evaluations sufficiently adhere to the facts of the situation.

Recognizing contribution as an axiological value and lack of contribution as a type of alienation has implications for the individual, organizational, and societal duties to provide meaningful work, which can be of the form of negative duties safeguarding employees from alienating work or more positive duties of ensuring that the work in question is meaningful (Michaelson, 2021; Yeoman, 2014). As regards this question of “whose responsibility is meaningful work” (Michaelson, 2011), we could argue that the ability to contribute is not a mere desire but an unavoidable interest and a fundamental human need, in a similar way that Yeoman (2014) has argued that freedom, autonomy, and dignity are such unavoidable interests. This would entail that there are societal duties to protect the employees from work that is pointless and lacks contribution as well as organizational duties to provide work that is not devoid of contribution. However, examining more specifically the normative duties arising from the recognition of contribution as an axiological value of work would require a normative framework such as Rawlsian distributive justice (Walsh, 1994), liberal political theory (Yeoman, 2014), or Kantian ethics (Bowie, 1998) within which such duties can then be examined. Accordingly, while I call for researchers working within these normative frameworks to recognize contribution as an axiological value, the more specific implications as regards normative duties must be left as a task for future research.

In making the case for contribution as a key dimension of meaningful work, I am not arguing against autonomy and the capability for self-development as important for meaningful work. Instead, following researchers seeing that meaningful work is best viewed as a multidimensional construct (Martela & Pessi, 2018; Steger et al., 2012), I see that contribution is one of the key dimensions of meaningful work, with autonomy and self-development representing other independent key dimensions. While autonomy and self-development focus on the individual in question, and the individual's rights for self-determination, contribution focuses on the impact of the work beyond the individual. Autonomy and self-development are thus related to “the intrinsic value of work for the person in question,” while contribution is related to the “intrinsic value of work beyond the person in question,” as Martela and Pessi (2018, p. 1) express this difference. Similar distinction is drawn by Audi (2005, p. 343) as regards meaning in life, when he suggests that “a life is meaningful on the basis of the good that is realized *in* it or the good created *by* it.” Work thus becomes meaningful when it is able to produce something meaningful to the life in question (autonomy and self-development) *and* beyond the life in question (contribution). Both are independently valuable aspects of work; both answer the question of what makes work worth doing, and neither might alone be enough to make work meaningful. This highlights the importance of examining meaningfulness of work utilizing a multidimensional approach that acknowledges that work can serve several separate axiological values. Susan Wolf (2010, p. 26) famously stated that meaningfulness arises when “subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness.” In somewhat similar spirit, I see that meaningfulness of work arises when an opportunity for autonomy and self-development meets an opportunity to make a contribution.

Funding Open Access funding provided by Aalto University. No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author has no conflict of interest to declare that is relevant to the content of this article.

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