Inwardness: The rise of meaningful work

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The following arguments are made in this essay:

- The rising interest in meaningful work is a consequence of changes that have occurred in affluent Western societies and workplaces in the very recent past (sometimes called ‘advanced modernity’), which have become more pronounced since the 1970s.

- Chief among these is the rise of ‘identity’: more people asking ‘who am I’ type questions which has led to a greater focus on issues of meaning and purpose – hence meaningful work.

- More educated workers doing highly skilled work (‘the knowledge economy’) does not make work more meaningful. But it does create the conditions in which an interest in meaningful work can grow.

- Employers and businesses can and should foster decent, high-quality working conditions, and lead and manage people well; these are the preconditions of meaningful work.

- But organisations cannot and should not attempt to ‘manage meaning’.

- Meaningful work is a question of balancing three motives – moral motives, craft motives and compensation motives.

‘A man who works only for a living and not for the sake of work and its meaning is not and cannot be a citizen.’

Peter Drucker, *The Concept of the Corporation*, 1946

‘Work and life have a strange reciprocal relationship: only if a man works can he live, but only if the work he does seems productive and meaningful can he bear the life that his work makes possible.’

Langdon Gilkey, *Shantung Compound*, 1966

‘Work is about a daily search for meaning as well as daily bread; for recognition as well as cash; for astonishment rather than torpor; in short for a sort of life, rather than a Monday-to-Friday sort of dying.’

Studs Terkel, *Working*, 1970

‘By offering meaning as well as money, they [‘excellent’ companies] give their employees a mission as well as a sense of feeling great.’

Tom Peters and Robert Waterman, *In Search of Excellence*, 1982

‘Meaningful work and leisure consist of activities that aren’t just instrumental, but are rewarding or pleasurable in their own right.’

Joanne B Ciulla, *The Working Life*, 2000

‘Usually, work is inherently meaningful when something other than money is gained.’

Mike Martin, *Meaningful Work*, 2000

‘Nobody wants their job to have no meaning, even if the primary or indeed only meaning is its economic support for home and family.’

Chris Baldry et al, *The Meaning of Work in the New Economy*, 2007

Like an embarrassing uncle at a family party, 'meaning' has interloped in discussions about work, organisations and management for some decades now – more frequently, it seems, as the 21st century unfolds. Its appearance provokes a few obvious questions.

First, what is meaning in the context of work? It is common enough to hear workers say they want it, or close relatives of it such as fulfilment, 'worthwhile work', or the bureaucratic version, 'to make a difference' – as if quintessentially passive, twentieth century terms like job satisfaction no longer capture the heady psychological impulses of what people want from work[1]. Yet there is a tendency to leave it unexplained or vague, as if everyone knows what it is but no one can put it into words. Moreover, it is not always recognised just how thoroughly bizarre it is in historical terms to mix meaning and work, let alone meaning and today's forceful battery of technical, managerial terms such as 'employee engagement' and 'high performance working'. To go looking for meaning in work seems to represent simultaneously a heightening of expectations about work and a lowering of intellectual and moral horizons about life as a whole, as if meaning is to be discovered not in religion, culture, the arts, or philosophy, but in the humdrum, everyday, necessary business of working.

A common reaction of people to the phrase 'meaningful work' is that it is so drastically subjective that what one person finds meaningful would not apply to anyone else. One purpose of this paper is to argue that meaningful work is a subject that is more akin to the study of 'happiness' than 'the meaning of life' in that while individual differences are to be respected many underlying principles can be generalised.

Second, whom does it belong to? The conventional answer is that it belongs to the individual worker. Work is one way in which people 'act on' the world, it is said, and the discovery or absence of meaning is experienced on a personal level. In meaningful work lies self-discovery and self-realisation, the sublime sense of being true to oneself. Let us also admit, though, that in meaningful work, there is the risk of solipsism: all the stress on 'making oneself' and 'fulfilling potential' in modern work can seem to prioritise the subjective self and its desires and block out consideration of service to other people, another seemingly basic ingredient of meaning. And then what of the humble, dignified and occasionally noble business of working simply to get by? Meaningfulness appears to demand more than a

[1] Roffey Park Management School (referenced in Chapter 2) claimed 70 per cent of workers seek 'meaning', but the sample was small. Some 60 per cent of 18-25 year olds and 50 per cent of 26-35 year olds want 'more purposeful work', says *Worthwhile Work*, a report by CHA, a UK PR consultancy (Spring 2008); the sample was again small (1538 employees). According to the European Working Conditions surveys of 1995, 2000 and 2005, between 83 and 85 per cent of workers declare themselves satisfied or very satisfied with their work, *Fourth European Working Conditions Survey*, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2007, p77.

narrow focus on an individual's immediate sensations and perceptions. However, the ownership has become complex. Many authors and companies imply meaning is something organisations 'make' or 'create' *for* people – for workers to 'consume', as it were. And there are others who maintain that meaning flows from the establishment of high quality working conditions and is thus shaped by governments and policymakers. If so, it would appear that meaning cannot be limited to individuals and their work: the search for meaning is fundamentally social as well as personal. Perhaps, seeing as the responses of others are necessary to a person's sense of being accountable and perceived as a rounded human being, the stress upon the isolated individual and their experiences as 'meaningful' was always misplaced anyway. 'A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it,'[2] notes the philosopher Charles Taylor.

Third, and related to the first, why has meaning become relevant to the debate about the changing nature of work? At first, meaning seems to be the pampered offspring of the late twentieth and early 21st century workplace, the product of an age in the advanced West that employs lots of graduates who seek to express themselves through their work choices and fewer people in immiserating jobs on bleak, monotonous production lines and down dark, dangerous mines. After all, what has been called 'the confusing workplace' where employees are expected to be friends with those to whom they sell their labour and where the realities of power are kept deliberately muddy is a notably recent phenomenon[3]. It seems impossible to imagine that in times of deep hardship, industrial strife, hunger and war, ideas so superficially fey as meaningful work might have some appeal. For much of the twentieth century, many young people sought meaning through a stance of opposition to 'the capitalist order' and by extension, the world of work. Has that period now passed? At first glance, then, meaningful work rests on the achievement of economic and physical security, on the belief that there is no realistic alternative to contemporary market capitalism, and the assumption that while risk is still very much in the air, the risks in question are of a more personal, more inward nature than in previous ages. In other words, the search for meaning at work is historically new.

Yet, if so, where does that leave ideas that may well be forerunners to today's 'meaning', such as 'vocation' or 'calling' or 'good works' or the idealised, utopian conceptions of work propounded down the centuries by thinkers such as St Thomas Moore, Tommaso Campanella, Thomas Carlyle, William Morris and John Ruskin? The archetype for the goodness of work, at least in the Judeo-Christian world, was offered by the account of God's

[2] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p35
[3] See Ciulla, op cit

six days of labour in Genesis and the repeated stressing that the ‘product’ of it ‘was good’[4]. But another foundational authority for the goodness of work with perhaps a little more sway over the secular mind was, of course, Karl Marx. His was a perspective which damned work under capitalism as alienating and destructive while at the same time exalting work itself as a ‘liberating activity’, ‘the first premise of all human co-existence’; at one point, he even wrote of ‘attractive work, the individual’s self-realisation’[5].

Neither Marx, nor the writers of Genesis, nor any of those listed above ever wrote of ‘meaningful work’ or the ‘search for meaning’ because such terms thunder the concerns of advanced modernity: they would have little purchase on a pre-modern world view prior to the rise of identity and self-hood as significant personal priorities for people. Yet the investigation of forms of work that would be compatible with the highest human (and spiritual) ideals can be traced back to ancient times. After all, it would be an absurd conceit to claim that attempting to discover psychological and moral satisfactions in the activities and thought processes known as work is an exclusive monopoly of contemporary workers: meaning, arguably, is far more elemental to human beings than that. What then is notably modern about the emphasis on meaning in the mixed literature of work and working life?

This essay attempts to shed some light on these questions.

[4] This was the view of Pope John Paul II. See *Laborem Exercens: On Human Work*, Catholic Conference, 1981, pp9-10

[5] Quotations taken from *Grundrisse* (selections), David McLellan (ed), St Albans: Paladin, 1973, p146; Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology, Part One*, 1978, p48

Work: bitter, black necessity or the central expression of one's inner life? In work, is it just money that is made or are people made too? What is the authentic attitudinal marker of 'the worker'? Indifference – genuine or affected for psychological protection? Or care – genuine or compelled through contract and the threat of punishment? Are we betraying ourselves if we don't find work that is rewarding to us in some way? Or is the very idea of rewarding work a duplicitous, elitist, class-ridden illusion?

The sheer impossibility of answering these questions says something about the peculiar cultural moment of work in the early 21st century. Work is a *means-to-an-end*. And work is where people *realise their potential*. Neither could be said to be more 'real' than the other. Obviously, people are different in their attitudes and expectations about work; different, too, in how they feel at different points in their lifecycles (even different weeks of the year). Yet what I wish to argue is that as a working culture, it is the strained equilibrium between these two little phrases – between means-to-an-end work and the work of self-realisation – that best captures the spirit of the times abroad in the world of work at present. It is this balance that gives to the contemporary culture of work its intense flavour of colossal hope and despondent resignation.

According to one UK survey of 2006, asked if they found their work to be a 'means-to-an-end', 51 per cent agreed. The same survey found 69 per cent saying their work was a 'source of personal fulfilment' and 78 per cent that it was 'stimulating and/or challenging'. Meanwhile, there was very strong resistance (86 per cent) to the notion that work was meaningless[6]. The broad pattern has been echoed in other much more substantial investigations of the meaning of work, too. A huge study of 15,000 workers from the US, UK, Japan, West Germany, Sweden and Israel found that the 'economic rationale' was predominant for just over half of the sample respondents. But the survey also uncovered deep commitment to the value of working. Fractionally under half the respondents favoured the 'expressive' rationale: 86 per cent said they would continue to work even if they had enough money to live comfortably for the rest of their life without working. Two out of three had a strong attachment to working as a life goal, with work coming second only to family when people were asked the importance of different roles in their lives[7]. Even the authors of a recent book which attempted to puncture the rhetoric about 'de-alienated knowledge work undertaken within non-hierarchical networks and information flows'[8] noted that among

[6] See *The Good Worker,* The Work Foundation, 2006
[7] See *The Meaning of Working*; MOW International Research Team, Academic Press, Harcourt Brace Jovanoich, Publishers, 1987
[8] Chris Baldry, Peter Bain, Dirk Bunzel, Gregor Gall, Kay Gilbert, Jeff Hyman, Cliff Lockyer, Abigail Marks, Dora Scholarios, Philip Taylor and Aileen Watson, *The Meaning of Work in the New Economy*, ESRC Future of Work Series, General Editor Peter Nolan, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, p40

their often resigned and pressurised interviewees, the economic meaning was overlain by many others. ‘Wherever possible people at work look for something beyond that, a sense of purpose or redemption, a source of challenge or enjoyment, or the ability of the work to confer or reinforce social identity or identities’[9]. Whatever side we incline towards – the side of self-realisation or the side of the means-to-an-end – it is hard to avoid the message that the meaning of work is paused at a point when neither could be said to be clearly in the ascendant.

What does it mean to ‘realise one’s potential’? And what – if anything – is a ‘means-to-an-end’?

When speaking of work as a means-to-an-end, it seems appropriate to accompany the phrase with a kind of shrugging sigh, as if work, the means, is just not worthy of attention, whereas the ends which it licenses are much more fun and interesting; work is ‘the blank patch between one brief evening and the next’[10], as a munitions worker once put it. In everyday conversation it is very much this sense of resigned, bored tolerance which characterises discussion about work. Yet in a more philosophical vein, it is fair to say that the phrase is also simply a fact. Work is always directed towards an end. Work that had no purpose or reward beyond itself would be very hard to conceive of as work at all; it would be like food without appetite, or sport without victory – an alien concept. Work that was an end-in-itself – *autotelic* – would not be work. Yet if work is nothing *more* than a means-to-an-end to us, we possess what sociologists like to call an ‘instrumental orientation’ towards working: the purpose is not to be found in work itself, but only externally to it, typically in its economic consequences.

So what are these fabulous ends? The question itself highlights the sense that work and ‘ends’ make uneasy bedfellows: the rationality of means seldom specifies ends. The end we might first think of is the end of making a living. But that is surely another means: we do not make a living in order to make a living, we make a living because of some other end – the maintenance of family life, perhaps, the freedom to buy choice, to gain status, to palliate the consumption ethic, or to pursue the relentless quest for novelty?

Yet these don’t sound like proper ends either – more like means again. Actually, if we follow the lines of our idle speculations, we will soon find that the end which we are striving for

[9] Ibid, p 235
[10] Keith Grint, *The Sociology of Work*, Polity Press, 1998, first published 1991. p1

is not really our own at all, selected from a vast menu of diverse possibilities, but rather something 'ultimate' about which it is absolutely impossible to give convincing reasons as to why we should want it – something like 'happiness' for ourselves and our families, perhaps, a basic, indisputable, universal good. The philosopher David Hume believed reason alone could not get very far in explaining why human beings do what they do as very quickly the explanations run out of steam. So, too, it might be said, does the attempt to explain work solely as a means-to-an-end. 'What end?' is the question that defies easy answer.

'It appears evident that the ultimate ends of human actions can never… be accounted for by reason,' wrote Hume. 'Ask a man why he uses exercise; he will answer, because he desires to keep his health. If you then enquire why he desires health, he will readily reply, because sickness is painful. If you push your enquiries farther, and desire a reason why he hates pain, it is impossible he can ever give any. This is an ultimate end… It is impossible there can be a progress in infinitum; and that one thing can always be a reason why another is desired. Something must be desirable on its own account'[11].

The ultimate end of happiness – like all ultimate ends – seems rather closely tied up with how one lives. And this might return us back to the question of work again. It would seem to be difficult to be happy if the bulk of our time was given to something that made us unhappy, or was devoid of all meaning for us. So perhaps the end requires of us to find a means that is most conducive to our happiness. In other words, the end demands some unity of means and ends. Life is a texture of means and ends.

Anyone who has ever had such thoughts and fantasised about how nice it would be if work was not just a means-to-an end may have contemplated the possibilities inherent in the second commonplace about work – at least common in corporate literature: that work is where people go to 'realise their potential'. We have potential for many things, of course (insincerity, pick-pocketing?), but what is meant here, I think, is the faintly bohemian-sounding goal of self-realisation. What is it to realise oneself? Self-realisation, we could decide, is a matter of *action* – life becomes rewarding in the process of striving for certain goals and acquiring skills and talents, and, as we acquire them, we feel the need to use them and extend them further; self-realisation is about *identity*, of expressing ourselves in our own way and of being recognised by others for that identity; self-realisation is finding a way of life that makes sense as a whole, with work and relationships and all our activities somehow

[11] David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and the Principles of Morals*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge and revised by P.H. Nidditch, Clarendon Press, 1975 edition, p293

blending into a coherent unity. Yes, we might readily concur, work in its abstract form at least, has an obvious bearing on the realising of potential.

But then is it possible to realise that potential within the confines of a specific work setting and organisation? That may not be so obvious. In fact, serendipitous thoughts of realising one's potential may be apt to greatly increase dissatisfaction with work as it is in daily life, with its pervasive atmosphere of grubby compromise. The premise of the aspiration of self-realisation at work is that there has been a profound change in the nature of working life. This is not the work of grinding factories and tick-tock jobs, of bawling foremen and rigid status hierarchies. This is not the work of Max Weber's bureaucratic 'iron cage', of disenchantment and alienation, the human spirit confined inside cramped, immutable roles and processes. No, this is work as part of the project of the self, and the organisation as a blank canvas onto which worthwhile lives can be drawn in co-operation with sympathetically-minded managers and colleagues – the interests of employees and employers reconciled at last.

Has a fresh page in the nature of work really been turned? Have fundamental antagonisms been dressed up in emollient, perhaps manipulative language? The goal of self-realisation seems to lend itself all too easily to being padded out with company logic; there are some organisations that even try to 'manage meaning' for their employees (see next section). Such anxieties may prompt caution. If work becomes the dominant idea in our lives, if we identify ourselves to others solely in terms of what we do for a living, and if we rhapsodise work as a source of self-fulfilment, maybe it is time to say a good word for working simply in order to live again. Perhaps it is a good thing that the meeting of immediate needs prevents too much introspective dwelling on the true purpose of work.

And so the dilemmas of modern work are constructed. To work is to feel the magnetic pull of the two attitudes which these phrases describe. Work is an arena for self-realisation. And work is a means-to-an-end. What is noteworthy is not so much that one meaning is in the ascendant and the other in decline, but that neither could be said to dominate the other in the discussion of what work really means to the workers who do it. There is no cultural consensus about work any longer. It is up for grabs. The notion of meaningful work flows from this moment of poise or equilibrium in the meaning of work because it creates the pressure for new and urgent questions to arise for individuals as they attempt to make their mark on the world. The question shifts from 'what does work mean to me' to the more up-tempo one of 'does my work have meaning'.

If a company offers 'meaning' to its staff, 55 per cent would be more motivated, 42 per cent said they would have greater loyalty, and 32 per cent more pride. 'That's a considerable return on investment by any standard,' wrote David Fairhurst, McDonald's UK's director of people in a human resources magazine in 2005[12]. 'If an employee doesn't care about their organisation, and feels they aren't cared for in return, then their time at work is soulless… The workplace is the most natural environment for us to learn more about ourselves and interact with the world and people around us.'

This must rank as a contentious remark – more natural than the home, the park or the shops? – but its contentiousness is enhanced by its source. There are few companies that have exercised both popular imagination and sociological scorn in quite the same way as McDonald's. The term 'McJob' was popularised by the author Douglas Coupland to refer to 'a low paying, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job in the service sector'[13]; the word is now in the Oxford English Dictionary.

Yet Fairhurst's column attracted little attention. Talk of 'meaning' among big companies is, after all, only another emanation of so much other HR-related discourse about engagement, belonging, culture and commitment, ethics and corporate responsibility – inward but increasingly pronounced ideas in working life. The traditional 'unitarist' view of employment relations places emphasis on the shared interests of employers and employees, but is translated crudely as 'it pays to be nice'. Meaning appears to have been easily absorbed into this context. 'If anything has value to people, it has meaning,' said Fairhurst. Meaning can be created by 'giving them (workers) a sense of shared purpose'. Clearly, ostensibly personal, psychological qualities are now part of the emotional equipment of running a competitive service business, at least at the level of rhetoric. For some time now businesses and business writers have sought to escape the limited discourse of financial ends and instead have come to couch corporate interests in language that is unfamiliar to a strict 'economic gain' point of view.

It is worth investigating what exactly is being talked about through the word meaning here. Most obviously, meaning is a strategy that attempts to maximise employee commitment. It is concerned with the non-financial rewards of work and the fair treatment of workers. It celebrates a psychological contract in which achievements are recognised, ambitions encouraged and talent is nourished. Meaning is in the gift of employers; it is something they do (or don't do) *for* workers, not something workers experience for themselves. In fact, the

[12] People Management, 23rd December, 2005
[13] Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, St Martin's Press, 1991, p5

tastes and hopes of individual workers appear to be almost marginal to the provision of meaning; values have to be aggregated according to the interpretation of the organisation. Fairhurst's article on meaning – like so much of contemporary HR – was written in the vein of 'the business case' which seeks to build economic or organisational rationales from 'goods' (equality and diversity are the classic examples) more traditionally conceived in terms of their inherent worth. Moreover, the business benefits of 'meaning' appear in somewhat mechanical input-outcome terms: more meaning equals more motivation. Meaning is a means to an end. The fundamental difference between 'meaning' and 'a perk' is difficult to perceive.

The concentration on McDonalds is not aimed at highlighting novelty, but in demonstrating what is typical in many contemporary corporate approaches towards meaning. As individuals, managers are likely to have the same kinds of feelings towards work as any other group of workers. Yet constructing a case as to why *organisations* should dally with meaning involves pointing towards instrumental motivations; meaning becomes morally neutral, but consequentially useful – just another bargaining chip to factor into the rational-economic calculus. Tom Terez, a motivational speaker and writer, argues the 'benefit to the organisation as a whole' from offering meaning lies in improved recruitment, retention, performance, quality, customer loyalty, market share and revenue[14]. 'Come and be part of a community doing meaningful work,' gushes Google, the search engine as it markets its 'employer brand'[15].

When Roffey Park Management College examined meaning at work, it too ran into the gulf separating the perspectives of individual and organisation. Asked individually, some 70 per cent (all middling level managers) said they were looking for meaning at work[16]; the figure rose to 80 per cent among workers under 30. Researchers were able to group the qualities of meaningful work around the answers they received: work becomes meaningful when it is 'inherently worthwhile' – personally compelling jobs which allow people to lose themselves in tasks (in 'flow' as the psychologist Mihaly Csikczentmihalyi calls it); it relates to a feeling of interconnectedness and trust shared with other people at work; to autonomy and respect – the freedom to make choices and be fairly treated; to balance, too – the management of personal commitments outside work; it is about an idea of doing something for the common good and benefiting others; and, finally, the alignment between personal values and the values that pertain in a place of work. We shall return to some of these issues later.

[14] Tom Terez. *22 Keys to Creating a Meaningful Workplace*, Adams Media Corporation, 2000, pp3-4
[15] See Stephen Overell, T*he Search for Corporate Meaning*, Financial Times, September 12, 2002
[16] *In Search of Meaning at Work*, Linda Holbeche and Nigel Springett, Roffey Park Institute, 2004

However, Roffey Park is a management school and must think through the shared intellectual and emotional space between employees and employers rather than note the psychological affiliations and aspirations of a group of managers on their own. To build meaning into the life of organisations means identifying corporate rationales. And to do so means drawing on the language of commitment and motivation, of engagement and excellence, of discretionary effort and going the extra mile, of leadership and culture – in other words, all the familiar levers of people management, the judicious pulling of which is reckoned to lead to organisational effectiveness. Leaders, says Roffey Park, in their style, their integrity and the messages they send, create the 'social architecture' of an organisation which 'provides context (or meaning) and commitment to its members and stakeholders'[17]. From this perspective, meaning has become a subsidiary activity of bureaucracies, and the normal subjects of meaning – individual workers – are reduced to an unrecognisable picture of passive submission. The concern of organisations to make a 'we' issue out of meaning sows the seeds of its own failure: it can appear less as a concern for mutuality between employers and employees and more like a straightforward corporate take-over of psychological space.

This treatment of meaning within corporate literature is, of course, familiar from earlier generations of managerial thought. According to Tom Peters and Robert Waterman's 1980s blockbuster, *In Search of Excellence*, the provision of meaning on the part of organisations can have a transformative effect on commercial success. 'Every man becomes a pioneer, an experimenter, a leader. The institution provides guiding belief and creates a sense of excitement, a sense of being a part of the best, a sense of producing something of quality that is generally valued'[18]. The price of this idealised business corporation appears to be the eradication of individuality, difference and active engagement with the world. Those at the top are presented as omnipotent and omnipresent; those below, impotent and ignorant.

Again, a line can be drawn between the excellence cult and the psychologist Abraham Maslow's remarks about what an ideal organisation would be like in 'Eupsychia' – his term coined in the 1960s for an island on which 1,000 'self-actualising' people lived (Maslow favoured the phrase 'self-actualising' above 'self-realising', but the two appear to mean very similar things – see Section 4). Self-actualising people assimilated work into their identity, Maslow declared. People became their work. Better management of them held the key to improving the world. The more management took a 'Eupsychian' direction the more 'the

[17] Ibid, p53
[18] Tom Peters and Robert Waterman, *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies*, Harper and Row, 1982, p323

industrial situation may serve as the new laboratory for the study of the psychodynamics of high human development, of the ideal ecology for the human being'[19]. When work had become 'introjected' into the fabric of selfhood, esteem needs and belonging needs were met through work and were reciprocated by a developed sense of responsibility towards work on the part of the worker. Employment took on the characteristics of a 'love relationship'[20].

Perhaps the sentiment is a little too clumsy to merit the outrage the social critic Georg Lukacs felt against what he saw as the drive by corporations to invade the last bastion of personality, an individual's own thoughts and feelings. Watching with distaste the growing interest in the internal workings of workers' minds on the part of large bureaucracies – as well as Maslow, the 1960s witnessed the optimistic motivation theories of Herzberg and McGregor – Lukacs inveighed against the 'rational mechanisation (which) reaches into the 'soul' of the worker: even his psychological qualities are cut off from his personality, objectified against it, in order to make them fit into rational special systems and to the respective calculationable concept'[21]. Nevertheless, we can see what he meant. The overriding interest of this literature about meaning is the fit between individual and organisation; the emphasis on how organisations can meet 'needs' and bring 'satisfactions' is redolent of the language of product marketing. It has yet to cast off the shadow of social engineering and take on a broader concern with people and their work. Or perhaps the word is simply being misused.

Why is it that organisations and their spokespeople among management writers struggle to deal with meaning? One reason is that it is unfamiliar territory. Business corporations exist to make a profit. Everything must be subordinated to this goal, hence the stress upon what meaning leads to rather than meaning 'in itself', something of intrinsic worth. Approaching meaning in this commoditising, instrumentalising way bears with it the inevitable risk that it will jar; the attempt creates a false note not just because the language is gauche, but because the win-win line of reasoning is an inherently specious stance towards the concept of meaning. This is not to deny that businesses are social entities and must adapt to the expectations of culture and society. Nor is it to suggest that organisations have no role in enabling meaningful work – for example, by providing high quality jobs and good working environments, and by leading and managing people competently. The point is that there is a fundamental tension between the economic motivations which underlie business activity, the social reality of business organisations, and the ethical concerns of individual employees.

[19] *Abraham H Maslow: Eupsychian Management*, Richard O Irwin, Inc and The Dorsey Press, 1965, p2
[20] Ibid, p11
[21] Georg Lukacs: *Die Verdinglichung und das BewuBtsen*, 1968, p262, quoted in Sievers, see next reference

This clash has arguably in our less ideological times, come to replace the old tension between worker and boss, or between left and right. Market principles and ethical concern do not always sit comfortably.

A more innovative explanation, though I think a partially misguided one, was offered by the organisation theorist Burkhard Sievers. According to Sievers, ‘motivation only became an issue for management and organisation theories … when meaning disappeared or was lost from work… motivation theories have become the surrogates for the search for meaning’[22]. The legacy of the industrial revolution, Sievers argued, was a world of work in which work has been split into smaller and smaller jobs and where people are hypnotised by the monotony of ceaseless repetition. Work, the noble activity in which man sought to regulate his environment and his relationships with other people, became labour in which he sold his time to someone else for economic gain. At this moment, it became inherently difficult for men and women to discover meaning in their work. Alienation is the product of meaninglessness. Work has stopped being a central aspect of life and become the property of the employing institution. The fragmentation displayed in modern work is at odds with work as an activity which embodies the kinship of humanity. ‘Our ability to work is based on the fact that we are surrounded by the finger-prints of previous workers,’ he wrote[23] in an echo of the famous words of Karl Marx.

There is much here to endorse. The reservation relates to the direction of the argument. The fact that most people understand work as employment in advanced, capitalist societies, and that employment is frequently unpleasant and dehumanising, ought not in itself to curtail the search for meaning. The only fruitful agenda is in how the concept of meaning can be successfully reconciled with work as it is today. Yet the implication of Sievers’ view is that meaning is the proper business of management theory, once correctly conceived. It is hard to see how to avoid commoditising meaning in the manner outlined above were this to be the case: meaning would become game theory, part of the endless calculation of rational interests. Surely, a preferable argument is the traditional one: meaning is primarily a matter for individuals and civil society, not something in an organisation’s gift. Indeed, the point can be made in stark terms. Any attempt to grapple with meaning from the perspective of organisational advantage risks making meaning meaningless.

[22] *Burkhard Sievers: Work,Death and Life Itself: Essays on Man and Organization*, Walter de Gruyter, 1994, p9
[23] Ibid, p34

What is meaningful work? Does the question even make sense? It is not every noun that can take the adjective 'meaningful' and still comply with the strictures of linguistic acceptability – no one talks of meaningful weekends, meaningful leisure or 'play' and still less about meaningful grass, sky or trees. So why is meaningful work no travesty of language? Perhaps we should talk of 'meaningful leisure' rather more. Given that work is often assumed to be of principally economic significance, and therefore lacking in meaning, why does the idea of meaningful leisure seem so odd? After all, leisure is just as much an expressive domain of life as work, filled, as it is, with chores which don't look like leisure at all, activities undertaken with a view to self-improvement and health (we don't just play tennis, we perfect backhands), and relationships with people and groups which can sometimes be fun, but which are just as often referred to as 'hard work'.

The answer is surely that leisure's very status as non-work results in us never having to think about whether the time spent outside work is meaningful or not, it is just assumed to be so. It does not matter how frequently or forcefully people are berated for squandering their leisure, leisure's status as something inherently valuable and desirable is never seriously in question. There is a kind of harsh scrutiny that comes with the word 'meaningful'. Certain aspects of life – be they leisure or sky – will never face that scrutiny because they are uncontroversial, consensually approved of, and do not demand any thought about whether they are a good thing. The same could never be said of work. It is work's deep ambiguity that licenses the construction 'meaningful work'. It appears to be a universal feature of those aspects of life blessed with the ability to be described as meaningful that they are, in themselves, inherently ambiguous and apt to provoke a very wide range of interpretation. We can give someone a meaningful look, read meaningful literature, and have a meaningful experience, but just as easily gawp, browse magazines, and pursue the same flat routine. Significance and meaning are by no means written in to the part of life being described; rather, we might say the word indicates a generalised absence. Here, then, is an apparent paradox: work can be described as meaningful because work has no intrinsic meaning.

At first, such a remark can sound simply baffling. Yet what lies behind it is really that the word 'meaning' can be used in two distinct senses. To write of the 'meaning of work' is to refer to the significance of work to the individuals who do it, or to some aggregate of individuals – groups, societies, nations, the kinship of humanity. What work *means*, in this sense, is concerned with the purpose of work: 'what does work mean to you?' The question seeks an interpretation. And the answer to the question of what work means is that its meanings

are as diverse as the people who have ever done it. As the sociologist C Wright Mills put it: ‘Work may be a mere source of livelihood, or the most significant part of one’s inner life; it may be experienced as expiation, or as exuberant expression of self; as bounden duty or as the development of man’s universal nature. Neither love nor hatred of work is inherent in man, or inherent in any given line of work. For work has no intrinsic meaning’[24].

The ‘meaning of work’ is a long-standing, eminently respectable field of study in social science, history, and ethics. In it, anthropologists, social psychologists, sociologists, ethicists, management specialists, historians and the occasional economist offer analyses of work as a social, cultural and psychological activity.

Yet to speak of experiencing ‘meaning’ in work, or that work gives ‘meaning’ to the rest of life, is to use the word in a subtly different way. Meaning, here, relates to whether purpose and significance is *felt* (either at the time or as a post-hoc rationalisation): ‘do you consider your work to have meaning for you?’ The question seeks more than an interpretation of work, but rather asks whether work has substance, significance, value and importance as lived experience. It leads by its nature into the realms of ethical and spiritual inquiry; the ‘search for meaning’ is that yearning for a feeling of wholeness and harmoniousness with the world, between day-to-day activities and some overall, animating purpose that gives direction to life as a whole. Meaningful work is work of substance, significance and importance; it is expressive. One way to think of meaningful work is through the relationship of content and context: meaningfulness comes about when a particular aspect of life finds itself in a harmonious relationship to an overall context. ‘The world is full of meaning when activity, intercourse or understanding fits happily into our sense of life as a whole,’ writes the philosopher David Schrum[25]. By extension, meaninglessness is an absence of harmonious relation.

The two modes of meaning – the ‘interpretation’ version and the ‘philosophical-experiential’ version – tend to call for the services of different groups of experts. Social scientists who study the ‘meaning of work’ can experience a sudden desire to stow their clipboards at the moment when the concept of ‘meaningful work’ raises its head because work of substance, seriousness and importance would seem to call for normative value judgements anathema to many self-respecting social scientists. The notion of ‘meaningful work’ is a much less well-established field of study, and is perhaps a little less respectable, too. The issues that

[24] C Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Class*, Oxford University Press, 50th Anniversary Edition, 2002, first published 1951, p215
[25] David Schrum, *To reconsider One’s Life: An Exploration in Meaning, in The Search for Meaning: The New Spirit in Science and Philosophy*, edited by Paavo Pylkkanen, Crucible Books, 1989, p271

might be covered include the analysis of soul-friendly, as opposed to the more familiar, soul-destroying, work; what constitutes purposeful human activity; the reconciliation of human happiness with profitability; the basis of ethical engagement between workers and the world of work; work as self-expression, and work as creative and aesthetic pursuit.

While it may be theoretically possible to divide tribes of work-experts thanks to the polysemy of the word meaning, the borderline is inherently unstable. Consider, for example, 'the meaning of life'. This would seem at once to be asking for an interpretation ('what is the purpose of life') and a philosophy (a plan for how to live a worthwhile life) at the same time. The idea of meaningful work is similar in that it prowls the borderline between the interpretation of work and the discovery of a philosophy of work. Finding work 'meaningful' is to attach a meaning to work; meanwhile, figuring out the meaning of work implies a spectrum of different interpretations, one of which might be that of meaningfulness. The two ideas are separate, but inter-related.

The distinction is admittedly subtle. It's usefulness, however, is that it dramatically narrows the field of study. There is a rich and wonderful literature which deals with the meaning of work down the ages – from Adriano Tilgher's oft-quoted grand tour of what work has meant throughout the evolution of culture, published in the 1930s, through state-backed social research studies such as The Meaning of Working Programme in the 1980s, referred to previously, and on to very recent authoritative academic surveys[26]. The chapter headings of Gilbert Meilander's eclectic collection of readings about work and its meaning provide a useful terrain map, here: 'work as co-creation', 'work as necessary for leisure', 'work as dignified but irksome', 'work as vocation', 'the rhythms of life', 'play', 'personal bonds', 'historical transformations', 'rest'[27]. In many places, the readings appear both elegiac and euphoric on the subject of work. Yet what I want to stress is that however enamoured of work, the collection deals, in essence, with *interpretation*. With phrases such as 'meaningful work' there is the definite implication of something more than interpretation. With them rises the strong flavour of personal quest and self-definition and ethical adventure. Work is not something contemplated from afar as an abstraction, but something up close and personal, experienced in a direct way; not an intellectual, historical exercise, but a more immediate, inward, personal one.

[26] Adriano Tilgher, *Work: What It Has Meant to Men Through the Ages*, George Harrap and Co, 1931; The Meaning of Working, op cit; Baldry et al, op cit

[27] *Working: Its Meaning and Its Limits*, edited by Gilbert C Meilaender, University of Notre Dame Press, 2000, pp x-xiii

I wish to stress this distinction because it helps reinforce the sense of cultural newness involved in meaningful work – a central contention of this essay. To go looking for meaningful work is to situate oneself squarely within the cultural boundaries and concerns of late modern society. By contrast, wondering at the place of work in human affairs is as old as work itself. To my best knowledge, the earliest reference to 'meaningful work' in the title of a book or scholarly article dates only from 1982[28]; since then more have begun to appear. We should be cautious not to read too much into this. Nevertheless, I believe its significance is that it suggests that in examining meaningful work we are engaged in an exercise that is relatively new and which has little place in other historical periods.

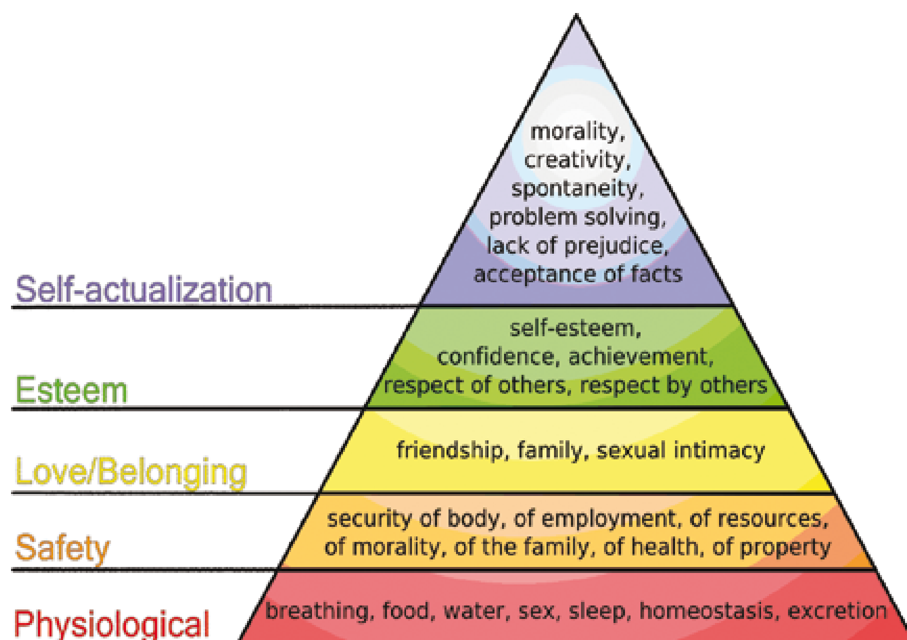
To develop this point further, we turn next to look at how social values change, how the world of work has changed in response, and how those changes have paved the way for the idea of meaning.

[28] Adina Schwartz, *Meaningful Work, in Social Justice in a Diverse Society*, edited by Rita C Manning and Rene Trujillo, Mayfield Publishing Company, 1996, pp261-268; first published 1982

In 1943, the psychologist Abraham Maslow published an article in *Psychological Review* that would define the principal themes of the rest of his career, and in retrospect appears to be a kind of manifesto for the school of humanistic psychology he helped establish. Rebelling against the emphasis on Freudian neurosis and breakdown that dominated the field – the study of 'crippled people and desperate rats'[29] as he saw it – Maslow was interested in 'the best of humanity'. To this end, he argued that human beings were motivated by a set of instincts which he called the 'hierarchy of needs'. At the top of the hierarchy lay self-actualisation. Motivation was dynamic, he contended: the act of satisfying a need created new ones, the meeting of basic needs led to 'higher needs', and there was no need that did not itself rest on the prior state of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of other needs. Human beings were 'perpetually wanting creatures'[30], he observed. Of self-actualisation, he wrote:

> 'A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualisation… It refers to man's desire for self-fulfilment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualised in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming'[31].

In 1954, he presented his theory as a pyramid which has gone on to great fame.



[29] Edward Hoffman, *The Right to be Human: A Biography of Abraham Maslow*, Tarcher, 1988, p191
[30] Abraham Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, Psychological Review, Vol. 50, pp370-396, ps, 387 and 395
[31] Ibid, p382

For the rest of his life, Maslow wrestled with the notion of self-actualisation. In 1970, the year of his fatal heart attack, he added two new levels to his pyramid just below self-actualisation[32]. These were 'cognitive needs' (first the need to acquire knowledge, then the need to understand that knowledge); and 'aesthetic needs' (the need to create and/or experience beauty, balance, structure, etc). Yet one of the issues that bothered him most about his theory was that it appeared to prioritise a hedonistic self-seeking, an anticipation of the excesses of the *kulturkampf* of the 1960s. The hippie ethic was a distortion of his theory, he argued. Self-actualisers were by nature much more able to realistically picture the 'real world' beyond themselves. In becoming more of themselves they transcended themselves, becoming concerned with the self-actualisation of humanity at large.

Maslow is relevant to the subject of meaningful work not because his hierarchy of needs was especially profound; indeed, his theory has been criticised for missing what is most notable about human beings (great acts of sacrifice and love are seldom borne of self-fulfilment)[33]. However, what he did was develop an idea that makes a great deal of intuitive sense: human needs and concerns are dynamic and change but remain linked as they evolve. This line of argument, I would contend, has become pervasive in daily life as much as in social scientific research and speaks to some of our most basic intuitions of progress; in the move from scarcity to affluence what people want out of life becomes diverse, complex, somehow 'more psychological'. Yet if Maslow is one of the greatest spokesmen for the rise of self-actualising (or realising) identity-seekers, what remained was for the template of the pyramid to be taken out of the realm of individual psychology and given a sociological twist through being applied to the realm of culture, economy, society and history. The evidence that has begun to accrue since the 1970s that is broadly compatible with the Maslovian template, offers, I believe, the empirical background for the study of meaningful work.

Among the most important steps towards substantiating the idea that peoples' needs have changed in the course of the late twentieth century has been the work of the sociologist Ronald Inglehart with his World Values Survey – now claiming to cover some 70 per cent of the world's population in 43 countries and measured annually in surveys since 1970[34]. The central finding of his research has been that values in advanced societies differ markedly from those that pertain in less advanced ones; economic growth, security, and faith in the

[32] See *Motivation and Personality*, Harper Collins, 2nd Edition, 1970
[33] For an incisive critique of Maslow, see Lg Bridwell and MA Wahba, *Maslow reconsidered: A review of research on the need hierarchy theory, Organisational Behavior and Human Performance*, 1976, pp210-40
[34] Inglehart has been making similar arguments in books and articles since *The Silent Revolution* of 1977. I have drawn most heavily for this essay on Modernization and Postmodernisation: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies, Princeton University Press, 1997

power of science and technology, that are the most important priorities for countries in the process of industrialising are not the priorities are of those that have reached a stage of advanced, or as he put it, 'post-industialisation'. Among these, 'post-materialist priorities' such as self-expression and the quality of life become progressively more pronounced within the culture as a whole. Behold the Maslovian template, duly socialised.

During the process of industrialisation, Inglehart argued, a whole syndrome of related changes is likely to occur – urbanisation, mass education, occupational specialisation, bureaucratisation, though never in a straightforward, linear way, with different countries moving at different speeds. During this period, the primary motivating goal of the majority of people and therefore of the society as a whole, is the maximisation of economic value; people feel a clear orientation towards achievement, social mobility and advancement. By contrast, the term 'post-modernisation' relates to a society moving away from standard functionalism and uncritical enthusiasm for science, rationality, authority and technology and giving more weight to aesthetic and human considerations, such as imagination and tolerance, and an acceptance of human diversity. This change had occurred broadly since 1970 in countries such as the US and Western Europe. The culture – which is to say society's internalised beliefs, knowledge and skills and expressed in social institutions – had undergone a palpable shift. In 1970-71 materialists outnumbered post-materialists by 4 to 1 in the West. By 1990 the balance had shifted to 4-3 and by 2000 Inglehart predicted the two groups would be equal[35].

To be sure, post-material did not mean non-material: material possessions still mattered deeply. Rather, they lose their dominant motivating force across the population and are balanced by other priorities – for example, alongside the simple desire for wealth emerges a concern with 'lifestyle'[36]. 'The disciplined, self-denying and achievement oriented norms of industrial society are giving way to an increasingly broad latitude for individual choice of lifestyles and individual self-expression,'[37] he wrote. To an extent, this change had occurred because the values appropriate to industrial society were inherently less effective in high tech, highly specialised workforces, and amongst highly educated, sophisticated consumers. In the period of modernisation, societies were prepared to accept uninteresting, dehumanising and meaningless work[38], and people were more willing to subordinate themselves to authority. But in affluent societies people were much less willing. The key

[35] Ibid, p35,
[36] Ibid, p55
[37] Ibid, p28
[38] Ibid, p29

instruments of industrial society were the assembly line and the mass production bureaucracy. To the post-modern, post-material mind, however, bureaucracy was seen as stifling, and denoted a stripping away of spontaneity. Instead, personal likes and dislikes mattered more: work was becoming concerned at least partly with self-expression and creativity. Symptomatic of this change was the sense that the limits of bureaucracy and traditional collectivities were being reached: the political party, the labour union, and the bureaucratic state were all finding their relevance tested in the time of post-industrialisation.

> 'There is also a gradual shift in what motivates people to work: the emphasis shifts from maximising one's income and job security towards a growing insistence on interesting and meaningful work. Along with this comes a twofold shift in the relationship between owners and managers. On the one hand, we find a growing emphasis on more collegial and participatory styles of management. But at the same time, there is a reversal of the tendency to look to government for solutions to social problems and a growing acceptance of capitalism and market principles'[39].

Of course, under post modernisation economic growth continues – even accelerates for some nations. But accompanying the change is an emphasis less on tangible things that contribute to survival and more and more on intangibles 'whose value is subjective'[40]. Tourism, software, microchips, entertainment, psychotherapy – these are the intangible 'goods' of post-modernity. 'Ideas and innovation are the crucial component – and their value is whatever people feel it is worth'[41].

Inglehart's work is important to the subject matter of this paper because it offers some empirically-grounded confirmation of the Maslovian vision. From Inglehart stems an authoritative endorsement that at least some of the changes in social values that are widely perceived and felt in everyday working life – that more people appear to be ascending the Maslovian pyramid as they become richer and better educated, for example – are, at least in part, also evidentially based[42]. Take social class. Class retains its relevance but alongside it has arisen a stress upon the individual and their choices that is palpably *different* from the situation in, say, the 1920s and 30s. Instead, we are bombarded with the message that biographies are of our own making rather than allotted to us by institution, social structure

[39] Ibid, p44
[40] Ibid, p76
[41] Ibid
[42] Needless to say, Inglehart's work has created an industry of controversy. See, for example, Robert A Giacalone and Carole I Jurkiewicz, *The interaction of materialist and postmaterialist values in predicting dimensions of personal and social identity,* Human Relations, Vol 57 (11), pp1379-1405

or habit. We are the agents of our own identity. Today, at least in the West, people not only 'gain the freedom to choose their own biography, values and lifestyle, they are forced to make their own decisions because there are no universal certainties or collectively agreed conventions as in traditional or early modern societies'[43]. Of course, no one is free in the sense of having no constraints upon them, whether voluntary or imposed. Yet the emphasis on individuals, each with their special potentialities and their unique characteristics was much more muted prior to the advent of late modernity (or post-modernity in Inglehart's language) – hence the very modern phenomenon of the writing of autobiographies and more recently the maintenance of blogs. Indeed, the philosopher Charles Taylor argues that 'talk about identity in the modern sense would have been incomprehensible to our forebears of a couple of centuries ago'[44]. 'Moderns' he argues, are engaged in a constant 'act of becoming' – an on-going project of self-hood: 'To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary'[45]. This project of the self is a new phenomenon.

If anyone should wonder why it is common for people to fret about the meaningfulness of their lives, whether their life is substantial or empty, whether it amounts to something or is running away to nothing, should direct their question towards the ghost of Abraham Maslow that haunts contemporary work. The answer may be that an insistence on identity and meaningful work flow from the evolution of social values as societies become more advanced.

We turn next to how accounts of change at work have paved the way for consideration of meaning.

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[43] Catherine Hakim, *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century: Preference Theory*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p12.
[44] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, this edition 2004, p28
[45] ibid

How does change at work relate to the search for meaning? I propose dealing with three aspects here: rising levels of skill and education used in work (sometimes referred to through the phrase 'the knowledge economy'); the role of technology, in particular information and communications technology (ICT); and the changing make-up of occupations in advanced economies.

Let us start with the knowledge economy. Knowledge has always been fundamental to work and employment. However, the term 'knowledge economy' describes the rising intensity with which high-level knowledge – and by extension greater education – is needed by organisations. In Peter Drucker's early formulation of a knowledge economy (1968 – though he was not the first[46]), the central cause of the rise of industries based on knowledge and ideas (Drucker reckoned that by 1965 a third of American GNP came from industries that 'produced and distributed knowledge', such as healthcare, teaching, computing and so on) was not the upgrading of jobs, but the upgrading of the educational level of workers. The longer people were at school the more education jobs required, the longer working lives were extended, and the more demanding people became in terms of their expectations of work. Formal schooling, theoretical, codifiable knowledge, as opposed to apprenticeships and on-the-job learning, were what the future was most concerned with; it was work that relied heavily on 'manuals, charts and texts'[47] and the knack of 'learning to learn'. It is interesting that much discussion of the knowledge economy today tends to stress tacit, intuitive, informal knowledge more than the formal education Drucker gave weight to.

The greatest single impact of knowledge, Drucker argued, was that it changed society from being based around predetermined occupations to being based around choice: people could make good livings plying almost any kind of knowledge, a development which was 'something new under the sun'[48]. Yet the work was not changing as fast as the worker. The knowledge worker had high hopes – of careers, of accomplishment, of more than a mere livelihood, of being immersed in their work, of work that was itself self-motivating. Yet such hopes were not easily realisable. 'This hidden conflict between the knowledge worker's view of himself as a 'professional' and the social reality in which he is the upgraded and well-paid successor to the skilled worker of yesterday underlies the disenchantment of so many highly educated people with the jobs available to them'[49]. Access to opportunity still depended on organisations. And organisations did not all cherish accomplishment and excellence in the

[46] See Fritz Machlup, *The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States*, Princeton Universty Press, 1962. Machlup used the term 'knowledge industry'
[47] Peter Drucker, *The Age of Discontinuity*, 1968, p251
[48] Ibid p256
[49] Ibid, p259

way that some individual knowledge workers did. Mere competence and a willingness to submit to authority were often sufficient.

Here, then, in an early description of the knowledge economy concept we find several themes with a bearing on the notion of meaning. Knowledge-based societies, driven by the expansion of education, increased choice and introduced the prospect of work sought more because it complied with the strictures of identity than because it offered a livelihood. The argument was not so much that knowledge-based work was inherently more meaningful, but rather it was meaningful in terms of its consequences, most notably greater choice. Yet along with greater choice came the prospect of disenchantment as aspirations were thwarted in the encounter with real life – as noted above, meaning is frequently recognised through its absence.

Many of the themes touched on by Drucker found their echo in visions of the knowledge economy which followed. The sociologist Daniel Bell in his future-gazing blockbuster of the early 1970s, *The Coming of Post Industrial Society*[50], also built on the syndrome of social changes identified by Drucker: the upgrading of occupations, the vast expansion of higher education, the increase in productivity, the 'new salariat' of technicians, engineers and managers (the 'labour of superintendence'), the incorporation of research and science into the structure of the economy, the reach of technology, and the switch towards economies based around services. Yet along with greater depth came a darker note, too. Society could be divided into three levels, he noted: social structure (economy, technology, occupations); polity (distribution of power and the clash of interests); and culture (the realm of expressive symbolism and meaning). These three levels operated along different 'axial principles'. For the social structure the axial principle was the maximisation of profit and efficiency; the axial principle of the realm of polity was participation; and the axial principle of culture was fulfilment and the enhancement of self. Bell contended these three realms of human affairs were pulling apart from one another, the root cause of the great social tensions of the age. Roles on offer within the social structure were 'limited modes of behaviour' in themselves unappealing to educated labour. 'A revolutionary outlook emerges because of the alienated desire of educated persons for a full life as producers as against the fragmentation and specialisation which is their lot in the workaday world'[51]. The meanings on offer in the realm of culture did not necessarily translate into the more parcelled up, narrow realm of production.

[50] Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*, Basic Books, New York, 1973; first p 212; second, p289
[51] Ibid, p152

Although Bell's favoured term was post-industrial, his coming society was 'organised around knowledge'[52]. The process of knowledge spilling into all aspects of human behaviour was driving the primacy of experts, technical specialists, professionals and scientists who now held the real power. If the industrial society was a world of organisation, of hierarchy and bureaucracy, in which men were treated as things and people were roles rather than individuals, a post-industrial, service-oriented society was a 'game between persons'[53]. The nature of this work was by its nature much less easy to picture than the work of producing or maintaining physical, tangible things. It could be seen only through the lens of relationships. 'If there are no primary images of work, what is central to the new relationship is encounter or communication… But the fact that individuals now talk to other individuals, rather than interact with a machine, is the fundamental fact about work in the post-industrial society'[54]. In passing, we can see that 21st century speculation that 'talk is the new work' is, in part, homage to Bell.

Bell's was at times a bleak write-up of the 'game between persons' that characterised the new knowledge work. Each potentially hopeful change for him hinted at disappointment – from the rise of individual knowledge and expertise taking over from ownership of property as the basis of power, to the more people-centred, personality-driven, less economic outlook of businesses organisations: the path of social change was strewn with barriers in the way of human fulfilment. What is striking, though, is the way that a concern with meaning seems, in retrospect, to flicker behind his post-industrial pen. His educated, newly affluent 'producers' are destined to be denied 'a full life' in their work, but he does not even question that this is what they aspire to. Relationships are the new basis of productive work, but relationships are concerned with attachment, interconnectedness, loyalty and kinship: suddenly, the world of work appears to have grown in philosophical scope. In words that prefigure the corporate social responsibility movement by some twenty years, he noted that organisations were becoming more 'social' and less blatantly economic: 'Unless one assumes that loyalty and identification are simply monetary transactions or that employment is simply a limited relation of service-for-payment, the corporation is a social world, with social obligations to its members as well as an economising instrument competitively providing goods at least cost to an economic world of consumers'[55].

In more recent times, the most sophisticated expansion on these themes has been that of Manuel Castells in his millennial trilogy, *The Rise of the Network Society* of the late 1990s.

[52] Ibid, p20
[53] Ibid, p127
[54] Ibid, p126
[55] Ibid, p289

By now, Castells was able to refer to the 'classical theory of post-industrialisation' whose elements were becoming familiar: productivity growth lay in the generation of knowledge extended to all realms of economic activity; the shift to services; and the increased importance of occupations with a high knowledge content in their activity. His innovation, however, was to note the role of ICT. The central impact the spread and constant upgrading of ICT had on work was not to cast people out of work on a mass scale – the traditional fear of the machine – it was to increase dramatically the importance of human brain input into the work process, he argued. 'The broader and deeper the diffusion of advanced information technology in factories and offices, the greater the need for autonomous, educated workers able and willing to programme and decide entire sequences of work'[56]. While it was true that ICT meant the end of sequential, programmable work, and would certainly displace workers out of some sectors into others, ICT itself enhanced work that required analysis and decision-making. 'What is specific to the informational mode is the action of knowledge upon knowledge itself as the main source of productivity,'[57] he wrote. In other words, knowledge was a reflexive process constantly building and subdividing what had taken place before, and applying new knowledge to create new value in both processes and products. That required human beings.

As had long been apparent in these discussions, informational or knowledge based work was obviously advantageous to a growing professional and managerial elite, but what impact did it have on others? Was it necessarily more unequal than previous production systems? No, suggested Castells. While informational societies were unequal, technology did not itself cause work arrangements. If polarisation had occurred, it was the outcome of policy choices, industrial relations, cultural and institutional environments, and, of course, exclusion and discrimination within the labour force, rather than ICT per se[58]. Technology merely interacted with these processes. Furthermore, the polarisation thesis was essentially incorrect. While lower level service occupations had certainly expanded in advanced economies, the share of the top of the occupational structure had increased its share faster. For example, the managers and professional and technicians categories were (in 1996) just under 30 per cent of the entire labour force and rising[59]. Along with a notably more individualistic culture of work came a challenge to the prevailing model of organisation. The form based around full-time employment, clear-cut occupational assignments and a career pattern over the lifecycle was

[56] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Volume 1*, Blackwell, 1996, p 241
[57] Ibid p
[58] Ibid, p240
[59] Ibid, p219

being eroded by a new, more flexible form. The unit of operation was no longer the organisation so much as the network, and the network model divided labour into the core labour force and the disposable labour force for greater flexibility and adaptation with work done increasingly in projects. 'Never was labour more central to the process of value-making. But never were the workers (regardless of their skills) more vulnerable to the organisation since they had become lean individuals, farmed out in a flexible network whose whereabouts were unknown to the network itself'[60].

New forms augured new conflicts. The great conflict identified by Castells echoed that of Bell – the labour-capital split made way for a more cultural kind of conflict between, if you like, the economising and the socialising modes. The 'struggle of today is not so much between labour and capital any more' but rather 'has been subsumed into a more fundamental opposition between the logic of capital and cultural value of human experience'[61].

This focus on the impact of ICT might at first appear to have taken us away from meaning and meaningfulness. Actually, what computers do is critical to understanding it. Computers have redefined the boundary of useful and productive human work, displacing people from certain occupations into others as is the time-honoured wont of technology. Yet the particular way in which computers have helped reshape work has the capacity to fit well with the unfolding story of meaning we have been outlining. According to the economists Frank Levy and Richard Murnane, if there are five broad types of work – their labels are expert thinking, complex communication, routine cognitive, routine manual and non-routine manual – the advantage humans have over machines is increasingly in the first two: expert thinking and complex communication. The effect of computers is to greatly increase the need for highly skilled and highly trained people – managers, technicians, professionals and so on. Computers 'raise the cognitive bar' in that while they follow rule-based logic they cannot deal with the problems not anticipated by the writer of the rules. By their nature, they cannot deal with tacit or intuitive knowledge – the things we know but cannot tell. We store immense reserves of facts and relationships and from them we seek to order our experiences. 'A task that can be fully described by rules is a strong candidate for computer substitution. … Jobs that require complex pattern recognition remain a largely human domain'[62]. To this end, there has been a pronounced shift in occupations: between 1969 and 1999 the number of managers, administrators, professional workers and technicians taken together in the US

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[60] Ibid, p278-9
[61] Ibid, p476
[62] Frank Levy and Richard Murnane: *The New Division of Labour: how Computers Are Creating The Next Job Market*, Princeton University Press, 2004, p30

– the highest paid and most highly skilled categories – grew from 23 per cent to 33 per cent of all workers[63]. Computers 'substitute for workers in performing routine tasks that can be readily described with programmed rules, while complementing workers in executing non-routine tasks demanding flexibility, creativity, generalised problem-solving and complex communication'[64]. ICT, in short, points to a new celebration of humanly unique characteristics. In the UK, for example, very striking numbers (42 per cent of workers) are now counted officially as either professionals, managers, or associate professionals – the elite occupational categories which occasionally travel under the shorthand 'knowledge workers'; just under a third now have a degree[65].

Of course, there is nothing inherently more meaningful in knowledge-based work than non-knowledge work. But this is to misunderstand the argument. The point this chapter and the last chapter have sought to argue is that an interest in meaningful work has arisen because of two broad, interlinked sorts of changes that are still ongoing today: first, the shift in social values towards more 'expressive' orientations and the rise of individual identity; second, related transformations in the macro-economic environment that shape working life. Taken together, these tell a story of the notion of meaningful work that mixes a number of disparate ingredients: better educated, more affluent workers making extensive demands of working life; the emergence of post-material priorities among workers alongside financial ones; greater proportions of jobs which demand brainpower and more sophisticated social skills; the expanding psychological horizons of organisations. These are the cultural and social conditions for an interest in meaningful work to emerge.

[63] Ibid, p44
[64] *The Skill Content of Recent Technological Change: An Empirical Exploration*, David H Autor, Frank Levy, Richard J Murnane, Quarterly Journal of Economics, November 2003, pp 1270-1333, quote from p1322
[65] In the UK most new jobs created in the last decade have been in the top three occupational categories. See Ian Brinkley, *The Knowledge Economy: How Knowledge is Reshaping the Economic Life of Nations*, The Work Foundation, 2008, p35

A widespread view argues that an interest in meaningful work is much the same as the battle to improve the quality of working life. Faced with the thought experiment of how we might go about increasing the experience of meaning in working life, it would be difficult to imagine our improvements wouldn't attempt to do at least some of the following things: raise the autonomy of workers, so their work wasn't chopped up into tiny, specialised parts and gave them a semblance of completing whole tasks; allow them greater variety; provide for decent terms and conditions and a reasonable association between effort expended and reward received; enable mechanisms for dialogue between employers and employees, both on an individual and collective level via unions or staff representation bodies; encourage management styles and skills that give a strong direction to organisations, but which aim at participation, involvement and interest from the workforce; a legal framework that balances the goals of efficient performance with minimum standards to prevent exploitation and discrimination… the list could go on. Suddenly, we might note, the thought experiment points to a clear role for organisations, politicians and policymakers in fostering a culture of meaningful work. And here, too, is a possible contribution for social scientific research. Both jobs themselves, and the aspects of work that surround jobs (such as employment relations, management practice and terms and conditions) are capable, at least theoretically, of being modified by research findings. Suddenly, meaningful work could be made fundamentally social as well as individual; it could be turned into a cause.

This is the view forcefully expressed by the philosopher Adina Schwartz in her essay *Meaningful Work*. Because very large numbers of people are in jobs that deny them the opportunity to decide the aims, methods and pace of their work, she argues, they forfeit their status as 'autonomous agents' the moment they cross the threshold of their employer's door. 'We need to recognise… that the view that a society should foster all its members' autonomous development is incompatible with an unconditional commitment to economic growth,' she writes, somewhat gloomily[66]. Does meaning therefore reside in the well-established movement that seeks to improve work?

It would be foolish in the extreme to contend that the quality of working life and the struggle for meaningful work are not very closely connected. Meaningful work cannot possibly be conceived without reference to issues of what high quality work looks like within broadly well-functioning social democracies; meanwhile, commonsense suggests that organisations are immensely capable of rendering work meaningless by turning employees into grudging jobsworths through how they manage work. Yet I dissent from the view that 'high quality' work and 'meaningful work' are synonymous.

[66] Adina Schwartz, *Meaningful Work*, op cit, p165

Instead, in this section, I would like to pursue a Maslovian argument that places quality of working life issues at levels below the apex of an imaginary pyramid – supporting the apex, certainly, arguably even gesturing towards the apex – but not at its summit where work enters the realm of meaning. What the International Labour Office calls 'decent work'[67] and is elsewhere called 'good work' or 'high quality work' are the necessary preconditions for meaningful work. Yet the most voluptuous terms and conditions in the world are, alas, no straightforward path to work's meaningfulness. Well-treated, well-managed, autonomous, but empty and unfulfilled is no longer an especially uncommon feeling about work – an affluent variant of alienation, perhaps. I would accept the challenge that this might be a preoccupation of the relatively fortunate, distant from the kinds of issues trade unions campaign about. However, I hope I have demonstrated that both changing social values and the changing world of work explain a little of why meaning seems to be 'in the air', no longer of marginal relevance.

To enter the realm of meaning at the apex is to venture beyond the nature of the employment relationship and pursue questions of a fundamentally different order: What is the purpose of work? How does it square with identity? What am I doing with my time and my life? Why should my instinct to do a good job be used within this particular employment situation? The joy of losing oneself utterly in a task, of doing something well for no other reason than a sense of craftsmanship, of the intense pleasure of work at its best – these are areas of human life dealt with much more comfortably under the rubric of 'meaningful work' than 'high quality work'. And they are areas where the established institutions of the workplace – governments, employers, unions – by their nature cannot go. The job of employers is to offer decent work; the job of governments is to establish policy frameworks that encourage, incentivise and, if necessary, regulate employers into providing decent work; the job of unions is to defend and extend the interests of workers in decent work. From there, meaning is a solitary expedition for individual workers.

So, while accepting the two are intimately linked, what is the distinction between 'job quality' (or 'good work') and what I mean by 'meaningful work'?

One of the appealing facets of the notion of job quality is that it is susceptible to measurement (although this can be methodically tricky) and can lend itself to campaigning.

[67] 'Decent work means productive work in which rights are protected, which generates and adequate income, with adequate social protection. It also means sufficient work, in the sense that all should have full access to income earning opportunities. It marks the high road to economic and social development, a road in which employment, income and social protection can be achieved without compromising workers' rights and social standards.', ILO 2003

Among the early attempts to use good work as a policy concept came from the Swedish Metal Workers Federation in the mid 1980s. Its definition of 'good work' went beyond working conditions and employment relations and comprised the social infrastructure for health, welfare and gender equality. Its list had nine dimensions: job security; equal and fair share of production results; worker co-determination; collaborative work organisation; skills and competence development at all levels; recurrent education/lifelong learning; flexible and employee-friendly working hours; workplace equality and social inclusion; a healthy and risk-reducing work environment[68]. The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions has narrowed the list down to four key dimensions for the promotion of good work. They are: ensuring career and employment security; maintaining and promoting the health and well-being of workers; developing skills and competencies; and reconciling working and non-working life[69].

The approach has been further developed by The Work Foundation. According to David Coats, conceptual clarity around good work is advanced by thinking through what we mean by 'bad jobs' – not just in the sense of physically hazardous, poorly paying, low status jobs, but also work that suffers from being organised in a sub-optimal way. The features of bad jobs are: an absence of control over the pace of work and key decisions that affect the workplace; limited task discretion and monotonous or repetitive work; inadequate levels of skill to cope with periods of intense pressure; an imbalance between effort and reward; and limited 'social capital', by which is meant friendship networks or formal associations such as trade unions. Armed with this list, what then might be the mirror-categories that would go to form 'good work'? Coats' answer is that good work is: secure and interesting jobs that employees find fulfilling; a style and ethos of management that is based on high levels of trust and recognises that managing people fairly and effectively is crucial to skilled work and high performance; choice, flexibility and control over working hours; autonomy and control over the pace of work and the working environment; and voice for workers in the critical employer decisions that affect their futures.

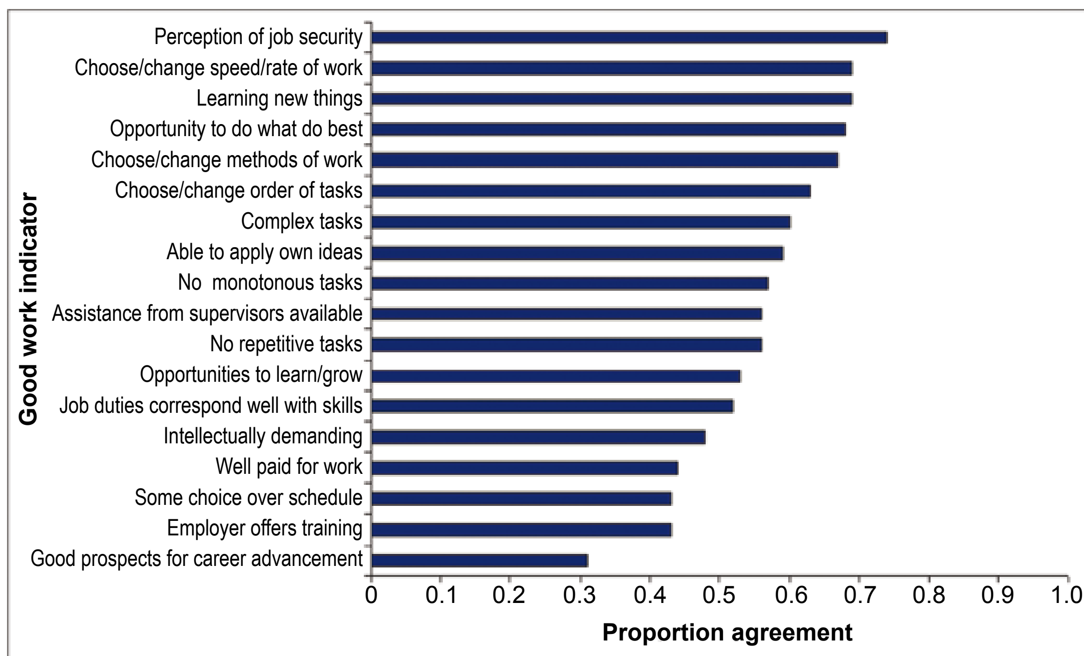
There are further lists that could be adduced, too[70]. Yet the precise features of any 'good work' list are less relevant to my purposes than the broad perspective. Attempts to grapple with job quality tend to approach the subject from an industrial relations and human rights perspective rooted both in the workplace and in an implicit model of progressive social democracy. It is, to borrow an economist's word, *endogenous*, that is, its conception of an

[68] *Good Work Literature Review*, The Work Foundation, unpublished paper, 2008
[69] Eurofound, 2001, p 8 of Good work paper
[70] See, for example, the Good Work campaign of Amicus/Unite, the British trade union

ideal form of work comes from *within the workplace*. Whether it is talking about task variety, worker participation in decision-making or management style, the *weltungshauung* of 'good work' is work-based and draws on traditional trade union and socially progressive discourse about ameliorating the lot of working people; this paper would, of course, wholeheartedly endorse its aims. In one of the most thoughtful examples of the genre, the industrial relations academic John Budd argues that for work to assume a 'human face' what is needed is for efficiency – the employer's imperative – to be tempered by equity and 'voice'[71].

Before we move on to consider the related, but I would submit different, perspective of meaningful work it is worth noting that since the 1990s, there has been considerable development in measuring job quality. Using 'good work' factors, one study, for example, attempted to measure the quality of jobs across the European Union – revealing either how far there is to go, or grounds for encouragement depending on one's point of view. The chart below suggests 14 of the 18 'good work' indicators were present in at least half of respondents' jobs[72].

Figure 1: Proportion of EU 27 workers agreeing the job quality factors were present for them.



Source: The Work Foundation using the European Working Conditions Survey, 2005

[71] See John Budd, *Employment With a Human Face: Balancing Efficiency, Equity and Voice*, Cornell University Press, 2004

[72] Rebecca Fauth and Alana McVerry, *Can 'good work' keep employees healthy? Evidence from across the EU*, The Work Foundation, unpublished paper, p21

How does meaningful work differ? Perhaps the most straightforward answer is that the perspective of meaningful work is *exogenous*, which is to say that it comes from outside the workplace: it bolts 'whole life' issues onto the world of work. Its perspective flows not from industrial relations or human rights, but rather from the search for identity and a broad, inquisitive social-philosophical interest in issues of fulfilment and how they might map onto working life. Where aspects of the campaign to improve working conditions stray into notions such as 'fulfilment' – as Coats does in his list – I would argue that the limits of the concept of high quality work have been reached. To move from 'job security' to 'fulfilment' is not a natural evolution of the campaign to improve working life, it is to introduce an entire new category of thinking about work – or to reach for a new level on the Maslovian pyramid. The job quality movement finds it difficult to deal with fulfilment and meaning because of its endogenous perspective; however good an employer, however active the government, such words cannot be turned into operational principles for an ideal workplace in the way that equal opportunities and work-life balance can. Once we escape from purely workplace-based discourse, the contours of meaningful work become clearer: self-realisation, self-esteem, expression, personal formation, psychological growth – bigger, broader, and more psychological types of issue that have not traditionally been considered in the context of work.

To find an example of the Maslovian escalator, we need look no further than a government document from the US. *The Work in America* report of 1973, the report of a task force set up by the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare[73], was prompted by widespread concern with alienation and a feeling that despair surrounding work was squandering both human and economic potential. In language that seems most untypical for an official report, it argued compellingly not only for reform of work in the form of job redesign, empowerment and worker participation programmes, but also in favour of 'fulfilment'. 'Work plays a crucial and perhaps unparalleled psychological role in the formation of self-esteem, identity and a sense of order… When it is said that work should be 'meaningful' what is meant is that it should contribute to self-esteem, to a sense of fulfilment through the mastering of one's environment and to a sense that one is valued by society'[74]. The report even speculates about the capacity to exercise 'powers to useful ends'[75] – in other words, about a concern with the purpose of one's work. To be sure, much of the report deals with subjects that would be familiar to anyone who campaigns to improve the quality of working life (not to mention

[73] *Work In America: report of a special task force to the secretary of health, education and welfare*; WE Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, MIT Press, 1973
[74] Ibid, P4
[75] See Sean Sayers, The Need to Work: A Perspective From Philosophy, in Ray Pahl (ed), *On Work: Historical, Comparative and Theoretical Approaches*, Basil Blackwell, 1988, p726

human resource practitioners and paternalist employers). For example: ‘The redesign of work… can lower such business costs as absenteeism, tardiness, turnover, labour disputes, sabotage and poor quality… the evidence suggests that meeting the higher needs of workers can, perhaps, increase productivity from 5 per cent to 40 per cent, the latter figure including the ‘latent’ productivity of workers that is currently untapped’[76]. Yet through giveaway phrases such as ‘higher needs’, it strays beyond the heartland of the quality of working life movement and into the territory I am calling meaningful work.

The report may be one of a kind – hence the frequency which it is quoted in the literature about work (though it led to few concrete policy changes) – but its content was not wholly esoteric. The impulse to transcend a purely work-based level of thinking, as if straining for domains of thought that lie beyond the employment relationship and working conditions has long been evident in some strands of labour movement discourse. According to the ILO’s Declaration of Philadelphia of 1944: ‘All human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex have the right to pursue both their material wellbeing and their *spiritual development* in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity’[77] (my italics). In such sentences, the material and the avowedly non-material, decent work and meaningful work, rub shoulders: the Maslovian escalator in action.

We turn next to consider meaningful work more directly.

[76] *Work In America*, P27
[77] Quoted in John Budd, op cit, p42

Meaningful work is not a subject that can be launched into head-on. It has to be built up to – hence what may seem to be the leisurely pre-amble before confronting it in this section. I hope by now the reader has a fairly clear understanding of the broad territory of meaningful work, why it is a relatively novel idea in the literature about work, why understanding it is becoming more urgent, how it relates to the modern stress upon identity, and why it differs from traditional campaigns to improve the quality of working life. It is now time to try to isolate its universal, underlying elements.

It is beyond my and arguably anyone's capacity to arrive at a statement of meaningful work that would apply to everyone in all circumstances; such an exercise may be inherently absurd. However, I think it sensible to argue as the applied philosopher Mike Martin does in his book, *Meaningful Work* (a book mostly about professional ethics, though I think it represents one of the best statements about meaning and work) that meaningfulness in work, in as far as it can be described, necessitates a trinity of inter-related motives to be present.

First, there are *craft* motives; individuals seek after and embrace professional ideals that evoke their talents and interests. Second, there are *compensation* motives; these might include pay, but go much wider, into areas such as power, authority, leadership and recognition – self-interested concerns, but not necessarily egotistical ones. Third, there are *moral* motives; these involve trust, caring and vocation[78]. Each of these sets of motive is a wellspring of intrinsic satisfaction in work – each can give rise to the feeling of 'flow', mentioned earlier. We shall consider each of the three in a little more detail. They are the closest we can get to a statement of meaningful work.

The list might surprise a little because it suggests that some of the animating motives of meaningful work are indeed self-interested. Martin's response has a pragmatic flavour: in real life, among real complex people, motives are invariably mixed, the self-interested and the other-directed interweaving constantly in patterns of work. There may be an element of 'in it for themselves' in meaningful work – even as people strive for the betterment of others; the example of the arrogant, driven, but dedicated hospital surgeon springs to mind. In this paper I have laid emphasis on identity and self-definition as being fundamental to the rise of the search for meaningful work to the extent that without a notion of self-identity, meaning and meaningfulness would make no sense. Identity has within it the same tension of mixed motives as Martin highlights. Identity can be a profoundly moral force, a standard which

[78] Mike Martin, *Meaningful Work: Rethinking Professional Ethics*, Oxford University Press, 2000,

affirms and rejects patterns of behaviour and thought as if, like conscience, it arises from a light within. However, identity can also imply self-consciousness to the point of self-seeking – an inability to look further than the end of one's nose. There seems no way to resolve this tension without recourse to an ideal balance of motives: where compensation motives are not modified by moral and craft motives, they break with meaningfulness and lead to cynicism; at the same time, we might say that we are entitled to be suspicious of a model of meaningful work that denies a proper place for selfhood and identity. Feeling respected, being given opportunities to use talents and to show flair, and working for a well-directed organisation are not simply trivial, egotistical issues that have no role in meaning. Indeed, any model of meaningful work that denied a place for concern for oneself would be too unreasonable, too unworldly, to be taken seriously[79]. It is from a balance of motives that meaning grows. We can say that meaning flows from our understanding of our own identity, but the exercise of defining a self, if is to be more than merely cynical, involves reference to goods that extend beyond ourselves.

The mention of moral motives in work raises some of the most difficult and sensitive issues in meaningful work. Moral motives in work seek ethical standards for two things – the activity of work and the ends which work serves. The first test sets a hurdle that does not seem too extravagant: many forms of work, whether humble or grand, are, at worst, ethically neutral, morally trouble-free, and at best, much more positive than that – they provide useful, enjoyable, life-enhancing goods and services for people. But the issue of the ends of work is more complex and more troubling. Asking what ends work serves, and whether those ends meet ethical standards, implies delicate value judgements that without sensitive handling can descend into a downright judgemental, intolerant stance that would be at odds with the goal of advancing interest in meaningful work. For example, for some people a decision to pursue a career in, say, teaching, in preference to one in, say, investment banking is driven by the view that the ends of one are morally superior to the ends of the other (though it would be a feeble-minded teacher who was unaware that universal education and mass literacy have been well-served by productivity growth, which market capitalism, and indeed investment banking, have proved effective at delivering); advancing one's position about ethical ends ought not to lead to a condemnation of others for feeling differently. The end worshipped by market capitalism is that of maximising shareholder value (at least according to the consensus). The case has been made that this is itself a worthwhile end[80], but as a life-goal it can seem thin, unconvincing and just as ideologically dogmatic as the view that

[79] Ibid, p21
[80] See Milton Friedman, *The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits*, The New York Times Magazine, Sept 13, 1970

capitalism is inherently evil. For the maverick economist EF Schumacher, meanwhile, the test for whether work was good or bad could only be resolved by asking what was the purpose of life (his answer was a Christian one of service to God)[81]. Only once this was clear could one arrive at a threefold answer to the question of what made work meaningful: to provide necessary and useful goods and services; to enable everyone to use and perfect their gifts; and to do so in serve to and in co-operation with others, 'so as to liberate ourselves from our inborn egocentricity'[82].

It would be tempting to say that the judgement to be made about which activities and relationships are worthwhile is purely subjective. But that would not be completely accurate as there is a social perspective about occupations that are 'inherently worthwhile', too[83]. Our notions of meaningfulness in work tend to descend from an assumption of shared values about public goods and that it is the service of public goods which contribute to meaningful lives; once more, the examples of occupations within the healthcare, education, voluntary and public sectors seem to come to mind, but there are doubtless many others. Ideas of shared assumptions and public goods do not mean we as individuals should unquestioningly subscribe to them; community standards can be oppressive as well as positive. Yet meaning struggles to be meaning if it is a matter of personal pleasure and preference alone.

The word around which these debates about ends circle is vocation, sometimes given a slightly more religious flavour through the rendering of 'calling'. At its most meaningful, it is said, work becomes a vocation – a concept that somehow connotes with sacrifice over a long period of time, an unshakable ethic of public service, a lack of concern for self as one's work subsumes one's life, and a spirit of putting-up-with and getting-on-with we associate with the austere, kindly matriarchs of Victorian and Edwardian novels. Vocation 'must be wooed with industrious thought and patient renunciation of small desires', as George Eliot reminds us in *Middlemarch*.

According to Robert Bellah and his contributors who wrote *Habits of the Heart*, a contemporary classic on how religion and society interact: 'In the strongest sense of a 'calling', work constitutes a practical ideal of activity and character that makes a person's work morally inseparable from his or her life. It subsumes the self into a community of disciplined practices and sound judgement whose activity has a meaning and value in itself, not just in the output or profit that results from it. But the calling not only links a person to

[81] EF Schumacher, *Good Work*, Johathan Cape, 1979, p114
[82] Ibid, p3
[83] Mike Martin, p28-29

his or her fellow workers. A calling links a person to the larger community, a whole in which the calling of each is a contribution to the good of all'[84]. This forthright statement fits well into discussions of professional ethics. Yet arguably one of the problems about professional ethics is that it is hard to take words such as 'calling' outside the elite domain of the traditional professions; it feels like stretching the boundaries of the word to name one's work as a plasterer or marketing manager a calling. Unwittingly, callings tend to create exclusive, sheep-and-goats divisions between occupations around value judgements of the social worth of different jobs.

Is meaningful work the same as having a sense of vocation? After all, the quotation from *Habits of the Heart* may well constitute many people's idea of meaningful work. The concept of vocation certainly explores very similar territory to meaningful work – but for a vocation to become meaningful work requires an essential, modernising twist. Modernity struggles with vocation. This is not just because our time frames have become more temporary, our loyalties more revocable, and our work so tightly managed and intensely pressurised. The central reason is that vocation seems to find it difficult to allow a place for identity. Try as we might, the contemporary world of work cannot be un-self-conscious: there is a 'me' making a difference that is aware of itself even as it dedicates itself to others' benefit. Experience has to be personalised to have meaning; our work is a clue to the workings of our inner selves. The contrast between vocation and meaningful work is at its sharpest if we think of vocation as a calling to the service of others and meaningful work as the personal experience of that service. Vocation plus self-realisation becomes meaningful work.

A formulation like this is likely to attract the riposte that meaning thus construed is self-interested, even vainglorious – perhaps justifiably; the dark side of meaningful work is a concentration upon the inward manifestation of ethical commitment. The sociologist Richard Sennett had a similar point in mind when he worried about the old-time stress on 'character' coming to be replaced by a much newer stress on 'personality'. 'Today', he wrote, 'impersonal experience seems meaningless and social complexity an unmanageable threat. By contrast, experience which seems to tell about the self, to help define it, develop it or change it, has become an overwhelming concern. In an intimate society, all social phenomena, no matter how impersonal in structure, are converted into matters of personality in order to have a meaning'[85].

[84] Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Berkeley University Press, 1985, p66
[85] Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, Penguin Books, p219

Meaningful work is just the kind of 'matter of personality' he had in his sights. To this we might reply with a tentative double-negative: proper concern for one's happiness and wellbeing in work is not incompatible with a moral point of view about the work that one does. The blend of self and other that occurs in meaningful work is well made by the authors of a book that attempted to find the keys to how 'ethics' and 'excellence' marry to make work meaningful. 'It is difficult to look in the mirror and like what we see unless we can combine – in our lives, in our work – the full development of individual potentials with commitment to a greater whole'[86]. Work struggles to be meaningful if there is no sense of being recognised and rewarded within it, the 'compensation motives' Martin refers to.

Another faintly antediluvian sounding word that occurs in our list of the ingredients of meaningful work is that of 'craft'. The word craft summons an image of the workshop, the feel of physical objects as they are transformed in skilled hands, years of practice and experience; craftsmanship died first in the age of industrial mass production, second in the information age when fewer and fewer people produce tangible objects in the course of their work. Yet here the word is used in a broader sense that is absolutely central to the concept of meaningful work. Craft stands for the pleasures of work for its own sake. Craft is the worker's desire to do a job as well as he or she can. Craft, menaced by bureaucracy on the one hand, market forces on the other, names one of the profoundest, but quietest of human thrills: the acquisition of competence and the development of skill.

In his recent book *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett gives craftsmanship an elegiac quality as he writes of the bodily experience of tools and physical objects as 'steadily adding value' to a person's life[87] and the work of the craftsman as an 'active, creative' phenomenon distant from the passive work of alienated labour. He quotes approvingly from John Ruskin, patron saint of troubled craftsmen, who offered a helpful list of the influences that shape the craft ideal. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*[88], his 'lamps' or guides for the craftsman comprised: the lamp of sacrifice, by which he meant the willingness to do something well for its own sake; the lamp of truth, the embrace of difficulty, resistance and ambiguity; the lamp of power, tempered power, guided by standards other than blind will; the lamp of beauty, found in the detail of things and people; the lamp of life, life equating with struggle, energy, and death; the lamp of memory, the guidance provided by the time before machinery ruled; and finally, the lamp of obedience – obedience to the example set by a master's practice.

[86] Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and William Damon, *Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet*, Basic Books, 2001, p244
[87] Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, Allen Lane, 2008, p265
[88] From *John Ruskin, the Seven Lamps of Architecture*, George Routledge and Sons, 1901, in Richard Sennett, ibid, p114

Meaningful work, then, comes about when work is animated by the spirit of craftsmanship – the 'proclivity for taking pains' that stands as one of the instinctive traits of the craftsman[89].

Admittedly, 'craftsmanship' is not a word that transfers easily to occupations that have no physical objects to shape or work with – such as the massed ranks of managers, for example, who account for rising proportions of most advanced nations' labour forces. If the word rankles, much the same idea is intended by excellence. What craft means is doing work of the highest possible standards – if not for the feeling of 'flow', then because it is a dignified, stoical, helpful reaction to the world and to one's fellow human beings. As with vocation, the times are not necessarily moving in a direction conducive to great craftsmanship.

[89] See Thorstein Veblen, *The Instinct of Workmanship*, MacMillan 1914, p33

There were three great narratives about work in the twentieth century: the opposition between labour and capital; the battle against unemployment; and the dehumanisation of work that accompanied industrialisation and the rampant turnover of technology. To an extent the narratives continue to be played out in the 21st century, with unemployment a serious social problem in many advanced countries (such as France), them-and-us assuming ever-changing forms (such as electronic surveillance), and the quality of working life remaining a contentious, and arguably health-threatening issue[90]. And yet none of the three narratives has the hold on the culture of work in the 21st century that it did previously. Somehow, albeit patchily and uncomfortably, work has moved on. So what is the new 'story' about work?

The story has fragmented, burst into dozens of micro-issues, that attract little cells of interest – talent management, welfare-to-work, ageism, to name just three – but none of which has the mass, popular, serious, life-shattering significance of the previous examples. My answer is that one of the more interesting new trends in the world of work is that the story has to some extent gone inward: there is a new culture of inwardness in work that is progressively becoming more mainstream. The search for meaningful work is one startling manifestation of this culture.

In contemporary work, we witness an historically extraordinary prioritisation of the subjective feelings, attitudes and affiliations of individual workers. As employers wrestle with 'employee engagement' and styles of management believed to nurture 'discretionary effort' and 'commitment' and which are held to be appealing to the 'talent' they aim to woo, they take the search for effectiveness far beyond issues of pay, jobs and working conditions into the workings of individual personalities. The offer is that alongside a livelihood there is an opportunity to *make oneself*, to fulfil potential and to achieve personal life-goals. Organisational success is 'about people' in a way quite different from the one explored in so many constipated management textbooks. Meanwhile, for workers, work remains instrumental and material. Yet the most important cultural cues concerning work in the 21st century are in its non-material aspects. Fair treatment and adequate pay set out a clear policy agenda for a socially just conception of work. But the real growth area as far as the dominant culture of work is concerned – influenced disproportionately, like so much of what we mean by culture, by a tone-setting elite of the workforce – is about work that tells of experience, feeling, fulfilment, personality, value and identity. In one interesting reflection on the rise of interiority, in 2001, a document issued by the British government was entitled *Full and Fulfilling Employment: Creating the Labour Market of the 21st Century* (it was longer on

[90] Intensity and tighter management are given most often in explanation of why the quality of work may be in decline. See Francis Green, *Demanding Work*, Princeton University Press, 2005

the full than the fulfilling). Inwardness, though, carries penalties alongside rewards. It is no accident that the most prevalent and expensive disorders of the contemporary world of work in advanced economies are all unverifiable, non-physical, interiorly located and substantially subjective – stress, anxiety, depression, mental disharmonies of various shades, descriptions and severities.

Inwardness could be a stultifying, pacifying, introspective trend. What stops it being so is that, at its best, we look in to look out and vice versa: the desire to find meaningful work takes an inward phenomenon – meaning – and relates it to an outward one, that of behaviour. And, in turn, it takes outward experience and runs it against the inner index of meaningfulness. This movement back and forth happens without thinking about it. When meaning is present in our work we are probably happily unaware of it most of the time. When it is absent, it can gnaw incessantly.

I hope in this essay to have illuminated the idea of meaningful work a little. To conclude, I should like to answer the three questions with which I started, and draw on some of the arguments made above in doing so.

The first question was: what is meaning in the context of work? Following Mike Martin, I have argued that meaningful work comes about when three sets of interweaving motives are in balance in work. They are craft motives, moral motives and compensation motives. Respectively they recognise the ends of work, the work itself, and the person doing it. When work has these elements within it, when it is at its ultimate and most enjoyable – from the pleasures of friendship and connection, to the joy of conceiving and completing tasks, to a feeling that work and life fit together to form a sense of a whole, and up to doing 'worthwhile work' – it is encompassed by this trinity of inter-related motives. Yet another element of the answer to this question is that meaning, used in the sense of 'meaningful work', carries a sense of personal quest, of psychological, ethical adventure. This, I submit, is something new and different from the traditional sociological game of interpreting peoples' experience of work along a continuum ranged between 'making money' at one pole and 'expressing one's personality' at the other.

The second question was who 'owns' meaningful work? The answer to the first question implies strongly that as meaning is experienced on an individual level it is workers who are the subjects of meaning. In one sense this is quite true. But an exclusive focus on individuals

remains an inadequate account of the concept of meaningfulness. What we are talking about in the phrase meaningful work is about a culture that normalises a search for meaning as much as the aspirations and disappointments of individual working people. The issue of meaning arises because of the modern stress upon identity, authenticity and individuality: only by addressing 'who am I' and who might be 'my people' can one begin to grasp meaning as it is concerned with how individuals locate themselves in the world and seek to order and accord significance to their lives. The search for meaningful work draws deeply on the powerful modern ideal of doing one's own thing, finding one's own path to fulfilment, and life 'being what we make it'. As Charles Taylor puts it: 'Being true to myself means being true to my own originality and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realising a potentiality that is properly my own'[91]. Pushed to extremes, identity and authenticity reveal their dark side, becoming narcissistic, egotistical and subjectivist – and as they do so they make life poorer in meaning because they narrow and flatten moral horizons by making everything a matter of self. These are aspects of modern culture at large that affect the culture of work. They echo Abraham Maslow's worry about the 'self-actualising individual' to whom he gave voice descending into a solipsistic monomaniac; they echo, too, the tensions of motive we discussed in the previous section: the compensation motives of meaningful work – power, authority and recognition, for example, can – if left untempered by moral motives and craft motives – easily turn from proper respect for oneself towards cynical self-seeking. The culture that 'owns' meaningful work is indeed hopeful, liberating even. Yet it is possible to see that it carries within it the potential seeds of an evisceration of meaning.

The mention of culture suggests forces greater than individuals. However, this should not be taken to imply meaning is automatically social and organisational as well. In Section 5, I argued the proper role of organisations and policymakers is in ensuring high quality working conditions which are an essential precondition of meaning; it is hard to fret about meaning if more pressing matters such as excessive working time are at the forefront of one's mind. But meaning is not in an organisation's gift. Only individual workers can know what is meaningful for them. One of the ironies of the subject is that organisations can foster meaninglessness through exploitative, thoughtless and directionless treatment of people. They cannot, however, create meaning or ensure fulfilment.

The third question was why talk of meaning seems to be occurring more in the period since, say, the late 1960s. The answer again relates partly to the supremely modern forces of

[91] Charles Taylor: *The Malaise of Modernity*, House of Anansi Press, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1991, p29

identity. Meaningful work is closely bound up with the sense that the individual feelings and proclivities of individual employees matter profoundly; all the talk of 'talent' is one reflection of this. Yet it is also fostered by changing social values. Issues of meaning arise in life generally and in work specifically because the values of significant proportions of the population in advanced nations have shifted in the move from scarcity to affluence, and from industrial to post-industrial production paradigms, broadly since the post-war years. Drawing substantially on the work of Ronald Inglehart, I argued an orientation towards achievement, income maximisation and security has given way gradually over time to other priorities, such as self-expression, self-realisation, lifestyle, aesthetic considerations and fulfilment. The power of the material still holds, but is balanced by other 'post-material' concerns. This more individualistic, identity-driven outlook has influenced the current doldrums in which many traditional collective organisations find themselves – whether trade unions, social clubs or bureaucracies. They were well suited to defend clear collective interests and communities in the industrial golden age, but now seem stultified and unsure of themselves in comparison with looser, more flexible, networked organisational forms which enable individuals to form and disperse around issues, identities, and leisure interests. Complementing the change in values are a related set of changes in the macro-economic environment in which organisations and workers exist. The phenomenon of the knowledge economy, driven by technology and globalisation, does not make work more meaningful, but it does help create the conditions in which issues of meaning flourish: better educated workers using their brains in their work, more work revolving around relationships and social skills, and organisations taking on a much more 'socialised' as opposed to solely 'economic' perspective – to whit the vague and rather content-free commitments to corporate social responsibility.

Throughout the history of work, people have sought to reconcile spiritual and moral ideals with work. What makes meaningful work different from this tradition of writing – and different too from ideas such as vocation, which, as we have seen, have a profound bearing on meaning – is that meaningful work springs from identity, and feeds off very recent socio-economic change. It is, in other words, a new development. Even had he wanted to include meaningful work in his Utopia, St Thomas More could not have done so because the phenomenon would have made no sense to the pre-modern mind. It is culturally specific to advanced modern societies.

Whether this new notion of meaningful work is practically realisable or whether the world of work is turning against the pursuit of meaning is a subject for another paper.

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