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**Developing an understanding of meaningful work in economics: the case for a
heterodox economics of work**

David A. Spencer

University of Leeds

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Abstract

The idea that work has meaning and is meaningful beyond its contribution to consumption has been largely absent from mainstream economics. This paper gives reasons for why mainstream economics has neglected the idea of meaningful work. It identifies the idea of the disutility of work, the assumption of free choice on the part of workers, and the use of a formal and individualistic method, as key constraints on the ability of mainstream economics to incorporate the idea of meaningful work. It also addresses the contribution of happiness economics and shows how it is unable to encompass the idea of meaningful work. Ideas on work from heterodox economics are then discussed. These ideas provide essential insight and inspiration for the incorporation of the idea of meaningful work into the economics of work. In all respects, the paper seeks to contribute towards the development and promotion of a heterodox economics of work that has the goal of meaningful work at its centre.

JEL codes: A13, J32, J83

Key words: work, meaningful work, disutility of work, happiness economics, heterodox economics, job quality

1. Introduction

The idea that work has meaning and is meaningful beyond its contribution to personal consumption has been largely absent from mainstream economics. Theories of work in mainstream economics have generally depicted work as an activity that people do in order to satisfy their consumption wants and have ignored its broader qualitative aspects. It has been left to different heterodox economics schools – e.g. Marxian, institutional, and feminist – to consider the deeper meanings and roles of work, both paid and unpaid, as shapers of human character and well-being.

In this paper, we attempt to develop a broader understanding of work in economics by considering what role the idea of ‘meaningful work’ could and should play in the economics of work. By meaningful work, we mean work that offers people the opportunity for self-development and personal fulfilment and the external recognition that accompanies it (see Schwartz, 1982; Murphy, 1993; Sayer, 2009). Meaningful work is work that not only meets our consumption wants but also meets our needs for freedom and creativity – it is work that enables us to develop and realise our potential. We trace in the paper the barriers, conceptual as well as methodological, to the incorporation of the idea of meaningful work into mainstream economics. These include the idea that work is a ‘disutility’, the assumption that workers are ‘free to choose’ the work they desire, and the broader formal and individualistic method of mainstream economics. We also consider how recent developments in mainstream economics linked to happiness economics fail to offer an adequate basis for the consideration of meaningful work.

Going beyond mainstream economics, we draw insight and inspiration from heterodox economics to craft an economics of work that includes the idea of meaningful work.

Attention is given to the definition of meaningful work and suggestions are made for how the idea of meaningful work can be incorporated into the economics of work. In all respects, the paper seeks to contribute towards the development and promotion of a heterodox economics of work that has the goal of meaningful work at its centre.

2. The idea of work in mainstream economics

The idea that work is a disutility has been a key feature of the analysis of work in mainstream economics. According to this idea, people suffer some personal loss through the act of work that leads them to demand some compensation for the time they give to work. The idea of work as a disutility has at least three separate meanings in mainstream economics. In what follows, we highlight these three meanings and then subject them to critical scrutiny.

2.1. The disutility of work: three definitions

The first definition of the disutility of work is that work itself is painful. This view is particularly associated with classical economics. Adam Smith (1976, p. 47), for example, referred to work in general as ‘toil and trouble’ and contrasted it with the happiness gained from activities outside of work. Although Smith (1976, vol.2, p. 782) highlighted and lamented the degradation of work caused by the division of labour, he thought that

workers would suffer work as a disutility even without the division of labour – pain was an immutable part of the human experience of work. Jeremy Bentham (1983, p. 104) took a similar approach defining work as a pain that must be overcome in the act of realising the pleasure of consumption. In this approach, the blame for the human aversion to work is linked to the inherent painfulness of work itself and there is an inbuilt fatalism with regard to work's burden. Humans are seen to be happiest where they work the least for the maximum possible amount of consumption. 'Luxurious indolence' (Sayers, 2005, p. 608), on this view, represents the ideal form of human existence.

The second definition of the disutility of work focuses on the allure of leisure time. This definition finds particular support in neoclassical economics and forms the basis of the standard income-leisure model of labour supply that is found in all economics textbooks (see Author, 2009). The basic idea is that workers avoid work because of the marginal utility they derive from hours of leisure. The cost of work, in this case, is not defined by the pain cost of work itself (as in the case of Smith and Bentham), but instead by the assumed opportunity cost of work time (here acting as a proxy for the marginal utility of leisure time). Work is resisted, in short, not because it is irksome per se, but rather because it takes time away from leisure. The assumption that leisure time is a 'good thing' is used to explain why work time is a 'bad thing'.

The third definition of the disutility of work takes into account the assumed propensity of workers to avoid work or 'shirk'. The assumption of pervasive shirking by workers is made in principal-agent theory (Milgrom and Roberts, 1992) as well as transaction cost

economics (Williamson, 1985). It also features in the efficiency wage model of Shapiro and Stiglitz (1984) – in the latter case, it is used to explain the existence and persistence of involuntary unemployment. The above assumption neglects the direct cost of work itself and instead places emphasis upon the supposed predisposition of workers to indulge in ‘on-the-job-leisure’.

2.2. Limitations of concept

All three of the above definitions of the disutility of work have their faults. Starting with the idea of work as inherently painful, it misses the possibility for work to be pursued and valued for its own ends. There is a lack of consideration of the moral and social dimensions of work – the fact that people value work for its own sake and choose to perform for non-economic reasons is ignored (on the ‘moral economy of work’, see Murphy, 1993; Fevre, 2003; Sayer, 2005). The focus on the internal value of work is one key feature of heterodox perspectives on work, as we shall see below. Secondly, there is a systematic failure to consider how the form and organisation of work influences the costs of work. Instead, the impression is given that the disutility of work is universally given, rather than socially determined. Thirdly, there is an absence of hope for changing the nature and quality of work. Work reforms designed to improve the quality of work are viewed as futile, owing to the inherent disutility of work. People are ultimately asked to accept the disutility of work as a necessary price for their own material improvement.

The second definition of the disutility of work is flawed in the sense that it draws a veil over the quality of workers' lives at work. Individual workers in neoclassical economics are assumed to choose a set number of work hours in return for a wage that exactly compensates them for the loss of leisure hours. In this approach, the work decision is viewed from the perspective of the voluntary choices that workers make between income and leisure time. There is a lack of understanding of how the qualitative content of work impacts, both positively and negatively, on the lives and well-being of workers.

Paradoxically, the orthodox neoclassical labour supply model theorises the work decision without consideration of work itself. As a 'work-less' model, it leaves unexplored the qualitative experience of work and fails to recognise the opportunity and need for improvement in the quality of work as a way to promote the well-being of workers (Author, 2009).

The third definition of the disutility of work is not just theoretically suspect but also potentially prone to ideological bias. The idea that workers are predisposed to shirk misses the social and institutional origins of conflict in and over work (Edwards, 1990; Author, 2011). If workers do avoid work, then this is more a product of their environment than their genes. Instrumental motives for work are not preordained by human nature, but rather are constituted by the kind of environment in which workers live and work.

Further, the picture of workers as incorrigible 'shirkers' has an ideological cast that fits with the interests of employers. It offers a ready-made excuse to blame workers for work resistance and avoids confrontation with the malpractice and exploitative behaviour of employers. It also condones and supports traditional, top-down governance systems that

seek to curtail the discretionary power and freedom of workers (Ferraro et al., 2005; Pfeffer, 2007). In the case of the efficiency wage model of Shapiro and Stiglitz (1984), the shirking axiom becomes a means to justify the existence and persistence of involuntary unemployment.

In sum, while mainstream economics has evolved different definitions of the disutility of work, none offers a fully satisfactory account of the qualitative experience of work. All take for granted the idea that work's main function is to provide opportunities for consumption and thereby miss the importance of work as a potentially valuable and meaningful activity in its own right.

3. The fallacy of free choice and the problems of a formal and individualistic method

Two further barriers to the incorporation of the idea of meaningful work into mainstream economics can be identified. The first is the assumption that workers have 'free choice' over their participation in the labour market. The second is the use of a formal and individualistic method in mainstream economics. We consider both barriers in turn below.

The assumption of 'free choice' features in both classical and neoclassical economics. In the latter, it is a core aspect of the standard labour supply model. It is assumed that workers can obtain the work they want at the highest possible wages through their voluntary participation in the labour market. In applications that incorporate the theory of

compensating differentials (Borjas, 2002, ch.6), there is the idea that workers can obtain monetary compensation for the disutility of dangerous, remote or unpleasant forms of work. Conversely, workers are assumed to pay for the utility of safe, local or pleasant forms of work with lower wages.

Three critical comments can be made in relation to the above assumption. The first relates to the fact that workers are not, in fact, 'free to choose' the work they desire. In capitalist society, paid work is an obligation rather than a voluntary choice. If workers do not secure paid work, they are very likely to face economic as well social hardship. This fact means that workers often confront having to take forms of paid work that fail to meet their preferences. That is, they face the prospect and reality of taking jobs that can inflict real harm on them. The assumption of 'free choice' that features in mainstream economics is, in short, a fallacy – it is a convenient fiction that obscures the real constraints faced by workers in the labour market.

Secondly, the idea that workers can allocate themselves to jobs they wish to do conveys the impression that collective action to alter the qualitative content of work is unnecessary and even counterproductive. Such action is potentially and actually counterproductive because it interferes with the supposedly free and optimal choices of workers in the labour market. Yet, as argued above, it cannot be argued that workers in all cases are in jobs that satisfy their preferences – in fact, to the extent that free choice is denied in the real world, there is much room to improve the quality of workers' lives at work by collective interventions.

Thirdly, there is the assumption that workers ‘choose’ from a set of jobs that are designed in the most efficient way possible. If, for example, forms of work exist that are dangerous or unpleasant, these are seen to represent the most efficient ways of organising work under current technological conditions. Workers who choose these forms of work, as suggested above, are assumed to gain compensation in the form of higher wages. The cost to employers of paying higher wages is seen to be less than the cost of their taking steps to make work less dangerous or more pleasant (a similar line of argument is used by Nozick (1974, pp. 246-50) to reject the idea of a ‘right’ to meaningful work).

Two objections to this line of reasoning can be made here. The first is that it reinforces the idea that a free or unregulated labour market ‘works’ to the advantage of both workers and employers. By implication, it assumes that there is positive harm from collective interventions to alter the quality of work available in the labour market. Here we miss how workers (due to their lack of power) can be forced to accept lower pay for inferior forms of work – how, in other words, the labour market can work in ways that favour the interests of employers over those of workers.

Secondly, there is a misunderstanding about the motives of employers. The idea that employers will always organise and design work in the most efficient way possible misses the specific political influences on their behaviour. In practice, pressure to make profit and the associated need to exert control over production can lead employers to forgo efficiency improvements in production. Inefficiencies in production, as famously

documented by Marglin (1976), may be tolerated by employers in order to increase their power over workers and thereby their share of the surplus created in production. The idea that there are no efficiency improvements to be achieved in production via the reorganisation of work including the improvement in the quality of work is another fallacy perpetuated by mainstream economics.

The second barrier to the inclusion of the idea of meaningful work in mainstream economics concerns issues of method. Specifically, the formal and individualistic method of mainstream economics prevents the proper study of the qualitative dimension, including the qualitative content of work (see also Fleetwood, 2011; and more generally, Lawson, 2003). On the one hand, the formalism of mainstream economics only allows for the treatment of work in units of time and money, since these units are directly measurable and can be inserted into a formal model. If qualitative factors linked to work are considered at all, they have to be treated as reflected in relative wages. There is not the place within the confines of the formal modelling approach of mainstream economics to consider directly and in detail the qualitative side of work. On the other hand, the individualistic approach of mainstream economics tends to preclude insight into the social and moral aspects of work. We are reduced to seeing work from the perspective of the individual and are unable to see the social relations and broader moral economy of work. There is the general sense in which the method of mainstream economics pushes us to see work in functional terms and to miss its role as a human activity with deep links to well-being. Notwithstanding this broader criticism, we proceed to examine one important contribution to the understanding of work in modern mainstream economics – this

contribution is linked to happiness economics. As we shall see below, it purports to take the nature and meaning of work seriously.

4. The utility of work: the contribution of happiness economics

The emergence and proliferation of the economics of happiness since the 1990s has given new impetus to the study of work in mainstream economics (for an overview of happiness economics, see Frey and Stutzer, 2002; Layard, 2005; Helliwell et al., 2012). Happiness economics, specifically, has challenged the view that work is just a disutility – instead, it has given attention to the possible and actual utility of work. In highlighting the costs of unemployment, for example, happiness economists have stressed the loss of opportunity to gain intrinsic reward from work (Layard, 2005, p. 67). Further, it has been seen as possible to gauge the effects of work itself on the subjective well-being of workers using survey data that asks workers how satisfied they are with their jobs. In the past, mainstream labour economists were sceptical about the use of job satisfaction data as a direct measure of the utility and disutility of work. This scepticism reflected a deeper unease with the use of data on preferences – hence it was argued that peoples’ preferences must be interpreted by their actions, not by their reported feelings. With the rise of happiness economics, however, there has been a move to embrace job satisfaction data in the measurement of the subjective well-being of workers (see Clark, 2001; Benz and Frey, 2008; Clark, 2011).

The advantage of happiness economics as it is applied in mainstream economics research on work is that it seeks to capture the qualitative experience of work. Unlike other versions of mainstream economics, it sees work as an activity that people can derive both enjoyment and displeasure from. There is no prior assumption that work is against human nature but instead there is the idea that ‘happiness at work’ is possible and indeed realisable. The assessment of workers’ satisfaction with work becomes in essence an empirical matter involving the use and estimation of data on job satisfaction. Importantly, there is faith in the reliability of such data as a proxy for the quality of work that is experienced by workers in jobs.

But there are drawbacks to the approach of happiness economics to the study of work. Firstly, its attempt to reduce work to the level of a subjective feeling can be questioned. The argument made in happiness economics is that work, like all other activities, matters in terms of how it makes people feel – a good job is seen as one that makes people ‘feel good’, whereas a bad job is viewed as one that makes people ‘feel bad’ (Helliwell et al., 2012, p. 92). The problem with this line of argument is that work has importance beyond its impact on peoples’ subjective feelings. Work matters to the status of people – work is how people measure their contribution to society and conditions their social position (Sayer, 2009). It also matters to their ability to develop valued skills and competences – work is or can be a means for people to affirm and realise their creative potential. The utility-centred view of work in happiness economics takes us down the track of seeing work as just a conduit to positive or negative subjective feeling – we may as well be talking about a drug as talking about work. Work’s importance in the realisation of

human creative needs and its potential role as a source of positive status and ultimately self-realisation get lost in the focus on the subjective feelings experienced by people through work. Work becomes a source of happy or sad feelings, rather than a way to achieve (or not) a life of creative action and personal fulfilment.

A second problem comes in the use of data on reported job satisfaction as a proxy for the quality of work life. Two issues can be raised here. Firstly, reported job satisfaction offers more than a measure of peoples' subjective feelings gained from work, as is implied in happiness economics. Rather it provides a judgment by people of the extent to which their jobs meet their needs. It offers their judgment of how well or how badly their lives at work are going. But peoples' judgments about the quality of their work lives are subject to biases, in part caused by their norms and expectations. This brings us to the second issue, namely that job satisfaction data can provide unreliable information on the quality of peoples' lives at work. A person may say he or she is satisfied with work simply because he or she has low expectations about work or because he or she holds instrumental norms about work that make him or her discount whatever hardships he or she may face at work. Work may be 'good enough' for workers based on their norms and expectations and may be sufficiently good to make them report high job satisfaction; however, this need not indicate that their lives at work are going well – indeed, it may hide the fact that their lives at work are going badly and it may also conceal the fact that they yearn for something better.

The problem with happiness economics as applied to the study of the quality of work is that it interprets people as ‘happy at work’ when they report high job satisfaction when the latter result may be consistent with people having a bad time at work – it may simply reflect adaptation to adverse circumstances and the existence of satisficing behaviour. Compared with an even worse job or no job at all, a bad job can appear as appealing (for a complementary critique of happiness research in general, see O’Neill, 2008). Job satisfaction data may still convey some useful information about how people are doing at work (see Author, 2013). But these data cannot ever tell us definitively whether people are achieving a fulfilling and meaningful life at work. As a potential guide to the conceptualisation of meaningful work, in this case, happiness economics remains distinctly suspect.

The broader point is that even with modern innovations such as happiness economics mainstream economics remains unable to grasp the full meaning and meaningfulness of work. Happiness economics, in essence, retains the same formal and individualistic approach as other mainstream approaches to work. Because of this, it lacks the ability to capture the essential qualitative dimensions of work. As argued in the next section, in order to incorporate the idea of meaningful work into economics, we need to go beyond mainstream economics. That is, we need to craft a heterodox economics of work.

5. Crafting a heterodox economics of work

This section seeks to do two things. Firstly, it outlines some key ideas on work found in heterodox economics. Secondly, taking inspiration from heterodox economics, it elaborates on the idea of meaningful work. An economics of work that incorporates the idea of meaningful work is seen as necessarily heterodox in nature and scope. The wider goal of the section is to develop and promote a heterodox economics of work.

5.1. Ideas on work in heterodox economics

The study of work has been a feature of several different heterodox economic schools. Here we consider in general terms the contribution of three main heterodox economics schools, namely Marxian, institutional and feminist. We also consider the ‘capabilities approach’ of Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (1999). Though not always classed as a ‘heterodox’ approach, the work of Sen and Nussbaum offers important criticisms of mainstream economics theorising on work. It is also helpful in the understanding of what is meaningful work.

Firstly, Marxian political economy stresses the importance of work from the perspective of realising the creative potential of human beings (Marx, 1975). Work is seen as a part of humanity’s ‘species being’ and is viewed as an activity through which people can express their creativity and achieve self-realisation (Sayers, 2005). There is a stress on how the form of production under capitalism turns work into an ‘alienating’ experience

for workers. Importantly, the imposition of alienated work on workers is seen as specific to capitalism – there is a denial of the idea that work in general is a ‘bad thing’. The possibility and necessity of achieving a form of non-alienating work is stressed in Marxian political economy and is used to make the case for socialism.

Secondly, institutional economics puts emphasis upon the intrinsic value of work. Notably, Veblen (1898) identified the ‘instinct of workmanship’ possessed by all of mankind. Veblen thought that people had a natural urge to work efficiently and to avoid wasted effort and time. He criticised the disutility of work idea found in mainstream economics on the basis that it missed the potential positive attributes of work and the place of work in the development of human character and well-being. While it was true that work was eschewed in society, this reflected on the dominance of a ‘pecuniary culture’ that honoured money-making over workmanship (see Author, 2009). The focus upon the essential human quality of work and the potential and actual role of work in meeting (or not) vital human needs has been a recurring theme in institutional economics (Kaufman, 2010). In the case of institutional economics, unlike in Marxian political economy, there is support for reforms under capitalism to turn work into an activity fit for humans.

Thirdly, perspectives in feminist economics give attention to unpaid work and more broadly, ‘women’s work’ including female paid labour (Barker, 2005). A key criticism made by feminist economics is that mainstream economics renders as invisible and valueless caring or reproductive work. Feminist economics seeks to correct this problem by

showing how reproductive work has importance both in contributing to the formal economy and in providing a basis for social reproduction (Beneria, 1993). There is also a stress on the problems faced by women in escaping domestic labour and in securing paid employment on equal terms as men. Unequal power relations and patriarchy are seen to present acute obstacles to women accessing forms of paid work that meet with their needs (Kabeer, 1994).

Fourthly, there are contributions that emphasise the real meanings of work for workers in terms of their capacity to be and to do things in their lives. In contrast to conventional utility or preference-based approaches, the ‘capabilities approach’ linked to the work of Sen and Nussbaum aims to establish the conditions that enable people to live lives of meaning and fulfilment (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 1999). In relation to the work domain, there is recognition that work activities can be a source of well-being beyond the contribution they make to human consumption (for an application of Sen’s framework to the study of job quality, see Green, 2006). Nussbaum (1999, p. 54) includes in her list of ten core capabilities the ability ‘to work as a human, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers’. She sees the lack of real freedom available to workers as a key barrier to their ability to achieve well-being. The idea of empowering workers – of giving them the ability to ‘work as human beings’ – is pushed centre-stage and is used to inform policy debates (e.g. on the promotion of employment rights for women and for workers in general). In this sense, there is recognition of, and an attempt to promote, the idea and goal of meaningful work.

5.2. The idea of meaningful work as a component of a heterodox economics of work

The ideas on work addressed in the previous section offer an essential foundation for the presentation of the idea of meaningful work. Although the heterodox perspectives considered above have different theoretical and methodological as well as ideological implications, all point to the idea that work can be and ought to be meaningful in its own right – they highlight the possibility and necessity for meaningful work, though in doing so they point to the acute barriers, economic and institutional as well as political, that prevent its achievement. Here we consider the definition of meaningful work and its potential place in a heterodox economics of work. Our primary focus is on paid work – we do not consider directly forms of unpaid work.

In referring to meaningful work, we are concerned not just with work itself but also with the context of work, that is, its organisation in particular workplaces. Work itself varies in its capacity to meet our needs. Some kinds of work (e.g. cleaning tasks) lack much meaning and are seen as mere means to an end. Few, if any, people would categorise cleaning tasks as meaningful work. Other forms of work, by contrast, can be a source of meaning and fulfilment in their own right. The work of an artist is by its nature meaningful – it has meaning in itself and is pursued and valued for non-instrumental reasons. This explains why some people choose to do this kind of work during their free time. However, the meaningfulness of work is also dependent on the context of work. Cleaning tasks can be made even less meaningful in the presence of inferior working

conditions. And the meaningfulness of the work of an artist can be heightened by favourable working conditions.

For the present purposes, we can define meaningful work in relation to the characteristics of jobs that exist in the economy. That is, we can establish the characteristics of jobs that would enable workers to achieve meaningful work, where the latter is understood in terms of the meeting of workers' needs, material and creative. The focus on the characteristics of jobs is important because it helps us to identify the barriers to, and opportunities for, meaningful work in particular workplaces. It is recognised that the meaningfulness of work depends on certain other factors, notably the state of the labour market (e.g. the unemployment rate) and the nature and extent of prevailing employment and welfare policies (e.g. minimum wage laws, and employment protection policies). However, in the below discussion, we take the perspective of jobs themselves, abstracting from external factors such as those just highlighted.

It is convenient to distinguish between the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards from work as they exist in jobs. Firstly, the extrinsic rewards from work include the pay attached to jobs. The higher the pay workers receive from paid work the greater their ability to meet their needs and wants through consumption. Other important extrinsic factors include the prospects for career progression and the availability and generosity of work-related benefits such as pensions. There are also the hours of work and the security of employment. These also influence the extent to which workers can find meaning in the work they do – for example, long work hours can leave workers so exhausted that they

lack the capacity to take advantage of any creative opportunities in work. There are interdependencies between the above extrinsic factors. High paid jobs, for example, may appear as less meaningful and less conducive to well-being where they are endured by workers under conditions of job insecurity.

Secondly, the intrinsic rewards from work encompass multiple aspects. The most basic aspects would be the physical and social environment of work. On the one hand, there is the aspect of whether working conditions put at risk the physical health of workers. On the other hand, there are the social relations cultivated at work – these may make work more meaningful by offering social support, but they can also undermine the meaningfulness of work if they feature forms of abuse or discrimination (e.g. by age, gender, class, etc.). There is also the skill content of work. Whether workers can use and develop skills has direct affects on the meaningfulness of work. The autonomy exercised by workers over work is another critical intrinsic factor. Workers may have the ability to use skills in work, but the meaningfulness of their work will be enhanced still further if they also possess the ability to choose when and how to use those skills. The variety and complexity of work are other key factors that determine the intrinsic rewards from work. The above intrinsic factors can offset or accentuate the extrinsic rewards from work. Work that is high paid, for example, may not be experienced by workers as meaningful where it is performed under oppressive physical conditions or without autonomy. Low paid and low skilled work, by contrast, may have the redeeming quality of positive social relations that add vital meaning to work.

Two points can be made here. Firstly, meaningful work, as defined above, extends beyond the intrinsic rewards from work and includes the extrinsic rewards from work. The decision to include extrinsic factors is based on the argument that work cannot be designated as meaningful if it thwarts the ability of workers to meet their material needs. Being able to fulfil one's potential in capitalist society entails being able to earn enough to live. In this sense, pay and other pecuniary aspects of work must be included in the conception of meaningful work. Secondly, meaningful work encompasses an array of non-pecuniary aspects of work. It does not just refer to one key non-pecuniary aspect of work say autonomy but rather includes a range of such factors that are seen to meet workers' needs. We face the task of deciding on which factors matter most in particular jobs. But this is, in practice, an empirical exercise (see Green and Mostafa (2012) and Smith et al. (2013) for an application of an objective or needs-based approach to the measurement of job quality). For our purposes, it is enough to say that meaningful work is the joint product of the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards from work as they exist in jobs.

It is important to note the advantages to workers of being able to perform meaningful work. On the one side, there is the sense of achievement and pride in work that comes from doing work that is freighted with skill and autonomy. On the other side, meaningful work can bring the intrinsic benefits of solidarity, community, purpose, stimulation and satisfaction. Beyond these aspects, it can also give to workers external recognition – doing meaningful work becomes a way to gain esteem and reward that in turn helps to support a positive identity (Sayer, 2011). These advantages add to the more basic advantage of being able to meet one's material needs through work – again meaningful

work encompasses the provisioning of material needs alongside the fulfilment of other needs such as the needs for creativity and freedom.

The disadvantages to workers of not doing meaningful work are serious and long-lasting. Where work is mundane and repetitive, workers will suffer boredom and fatigue. They will also face the prospect of not being recognised and esteemed for their work. In cases where work lacks intelligent action and autonomy, workers can find that their capacity to think and act creatively is reduced. Evidence suggests that prolonged exposure to low intelligent and non-creative forms of work reduces the intelligence of workers (Kohn and Schooler, 1983). This reduced intelligence has negative impacts on the qualitative content of leisure activities – mindless work can pave the way for mindless leisure (Murphy, 1993, p. 4; Sayer, 2011, p. 14). The outcomes for workers are obviously bad, but there are also costs for society in the form of lower labour productivity and potentially lower levels of civic participation. There are also potential higher health care costs. Exposure to work that lacks intelligence as well as scope for initiative can lead to stress and other mental health problems. It can also lead to physical health problems such as an increased probability of heart attacks (Marmot, 2004). Viewed from a societal perspective, the social and economic costs of non-meaningful work may be very high indeed. Such costs, as argued below, underline the need for policies to promote and extend opportunities for meaningful work.

The point to be made here is that meaningful work is an encompassing concept – it includes the extrinsic and intrinsic aspects of work and is directly related to the

characteristics of jobs that workers do. It entails seeing work in terms of the needs of workers and asks us to consider whether work matches up to those needs. Meaningful work, in essence, means work that enables workers to realise their potential or, in the apt phrase of Nussbaum (1999, p. 54), 'to work as humans'. The inclusion of the idea of meaningful work in heterodox economics can be seen as vital from the perspective of the latter being able to capture the real meanings of work, both actual and potential, in the lives of people.

The stress on human needs is important because it suggests that meaningful work may be important to pursue even where many workers express a preference for other objectives in life such as increased income or increased leisure. Meaningful work may also be worth pursuing even where workers say they are satisfied with jobs that are lacking in meaning and fulfilment. The argument here is that, by performing work that is not meaningful, workers do damage to themselves both via the loss of their intelligence and freedom to act creatively, and by the impairment of their health and well-being. Given that these costs are also borne by society via, for example, higher healthcare costs and lower labour productivity (in this latter case, due to the waste of human creative potential), there is a case for promoting meaningful work via collective intervention, even if many workers have different or competing preferences about what they want to get out of work or even if many workers report high levels of job satisfaction in what are ostensibly low quality jobs.

The question of how to achieve meaningful work raises broader issues of policy and politics that cannot be covered directly here. Instead, three broad points relating to the politics of meaningful work can be made. Firstly, it is clear that the idea of meaningful work as set out above not only supports the case for policy intervention to achieve meaningful work but also offers some specific criteria for formulating policy interventions. The focus on certain objective factors that make work meaningful can help us to evaluate the actual state of job quality and to identify areas where policy action can be taken. An effective and instructive illustration of how an objective approach to job quality can be used in empirical and policy evaluation is provided by Green and Mostafa (2012) and by Smith et al. (2013). It can be argued that regulation is necessary in the achievement and spread of meaningful work. The alternative of leaving things to the market and individual choice, as is suggested in mainstream economics, will not increase the supply of meaningful work opportunities. To the contrary, it is likely to entrench and even widen inequalities in the quality of work in society.

Secondly, worries over the potential economic effects of promoting meaningful work can be considered. There is the idea that meaningful work even if feasible and in line with individual preferences will lead to huge and unacceptable losses in output, thereby reducing consumption and also leisure time (Schwartz, 1982, pp. 643-44; Sayer, 2009, p. 8). Some non-meaningful work is necessary, according to this argument, in order to satisfy peoples' wants for consumption and leisure time. Adam Smith, as we saw above, defended the division of labour using a similar argument. Although he recognised the degradation of work due to the division of labour, he thought that this cost would be more

than outweighed by its economic benefits in the form of higher labour productivity and higher economic growth (Murphy, 1993, p. 11). Efficiency, for Smith, necessitated the impoverishment of workers' lives at work (Perelman, 2010).

A counter to the above argument is that an unequal division of the quality of work is inefficient. As mentioned above, employers may benefit in economic and political terms from not adopting efficiency-improving reforms in the workplace (Sayer, 2011, p. 16). That is, employers may prevent reforms that could improve the efficiency of work for narrow sectional reasons. Another counter is that there is scope to raise efficiency by promoting meaningful work. Moves to promote meaningful work can help to increase the morale and motivation of workers. They can also help to harness the ingenuity and creativity of workers. Here there can be seen to be an economic case for interventions that provide workers with meaningful work.

But, even if efficiency is higher where workers are denied meaningful work and no other feasible alternatives exist, it may be better from a welfare perspective to sacrifice some efficiency gains for the sake of a more meaningful work life (Murphy 1993, p. 45; Sayer, 2009, p. 12). The promotion of meaningful work, in short, may be given a higher priority than the maximisation of efficiency. Work is not solely about creating additional output for consumption but also entails pursuit of other objectives such as the meeting of workers' needs for creative activity. In this sense, efficiency needs to be reappraised in a way that recognises more explicitly the meaning and meaningfulness of work. Regulating

work is about balancing the requirements for consumption and leisure time with the need to provide meaningful work.

Thirdly, the notion of meaningful work endorsed here is premised on a deeper understanding of human needs. Its realisation in practice is not about meeting some personal preference as in the discourse of standard neoclassical welfare economics, nor is it about making workers ‘feel happy’ as in the language of modern happiness economics. Rather providing meaningful work is about meeting fundamental human needs (Murphy, 1993; Sayer, 2011). The promotion of meaningful work as a policy and political goal in this case has deep significance, and from the perspective of the arguments advanced in this paper, should be a key focus of the reform agenda promoted by a heterodox economics of work.

6. Conclusion

This paper has contributed to the critique of mainstream economics by showing the inadequacies and failings of its underlying depiction and theorisation of work. Its failure to incorporate the idea of meaningful work has been exposed in particular. This failure has been shown to persist despite innovations in the conception of work linked to happiness economics. There is the sense in which mainstream economics due to its conceptual and methodological framework is incompatible with the treatment of meaningful work.

The paper has argued for a heterodox economics of work that incorporates the idea of meaningful work. Heterodox economics has the theoretical and methodological openness to allow for the consideration of this idea and suggestions have been made for how it might incorporate it. The arguments advanced in the paper demonstrate the importance of promoting and achieving the goal of meaningful work. This goal is one that a heterodox economics of work can and should support.

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