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Justice and Meaningful Work

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Political Science

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Abstract

This thesis argues the widespread promotion of meaningful work can be an important part of a liberal theory of justice that takes nonperfectionism seriously. I begin with a conceptual argument and defend what I call the ‘contributive view’ of meaningful work, which characterizes work as meaningful when it is complex enough to be person-engaging for the worker and involves them in the contributive aspects of the work process. I then turn to the normative argument and claim that undertaking meaningful work so regarded is a social basis of self-respect, for two reasons. First, because it’s connected through reciprocity to the political idea of society as a system of social cooperation, and second, because it relates to personhood and can thereby act as a shared end that brings persons together into a social union of social unions. With this done, I move to consider the institutions necessary to bring about the widespread provision of meaningful work. What is needed is the overcoming of the detailed horizontal division of labour and some parts of the vertical division of labour, and I outline several economic policies that might go towards bringing this about. Turning to political economy, I argue that while the widespread promotion of meaningful work is incompatible with welfare-state capitalism, it is compatible with markets, and could be brought about in either a property-owning democracy or market socialism.

Keywords: meaningful work, social justice, economic justice, division of labour, social contribution, self-respect

Summary for Lay Audience

Work has a central place in most persons' lives, in part because many persons in contemporary liberal democracies will spend more time working than doing anything else in their life. This makes questions about the nature of work available in society, how it might be organized, and who has to do it, all central to ethical concerns of social justice – i.e., to ethical concerns about what persons in society are entitled to as a matter of fairness. Meaningful work is one kind of work that is particularly crucial. In empirical studies, workers often report meaningfulness as the feature of work that they regard as the most important. And while the ethical importance of meaningful work is increasingly coming under the attention of political theorists and philosophers, there has to date been no systematic attempt to integrate meaningful work in wider concerns of social justice. Philosophical analysis of meaningful work is currently more necessary than ever, given work is increasingly being reshaped by technological advancement, globalization, and new forms of business organization. This project uses research tools from political theory to develop an account of what social justice requires when it comes to the provision of meaningful work in society. It does this by investigating the so far underappreciated political aspect of meaningful work's ethical importance, and how it connects to the conditions of persons' self-respect and their civic status as valued participating members of society. This project first provides new answers on what it is about work that can make it meaningful, and how meaningful work's ethical importance can best be integrated into a theory of social justice. It then offers answers on the legitimacy and feasibility of various social and economic policies that might be implemented by the state and other stakeholders to promote meaningful work in society.

“An occupation is the only thing which balances the distinctive capacity of an individual with [their] social service. To find out what one is fitted to do and to secure an opportunity to do it is the key to happiness”

–John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 360

“But even when work is meaningful for all, we cannot overcome, nor should we wish to, our dependence on others ... The division of labour is overcome not by each becoming complete in [themselves], but by willing and meaningful work within a just social union of social unions in which all can freely participate as they so incline”

–John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 529

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Neil Stephenson begins his acknowledgements for *The Baroque Cycle* like so: “[a] work like this one hangs in an immense web of dependencies that cannot be done justice by a brief acknowledgements page.” I feel the same is true with a PhD dissertation, but I’ll try my best.

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This thesis only exists thanks to all these people.

Caleb Althorpe
April 2023

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 – Work and Justice in Contemporary Theory

What justice requires when it comes to the world of work is a topic that is enjoying something of a revival in contemporary political theory and political philosophy, where current relations of work are increasingly coming under normative scrutiny. Many of these arguments conclude the sort of work presently available under capitalism ends up significantly short of what social justice requires. Just to (very briefly) mention some examples, using the neorepublican emphasis on protecting persons from domination and arbitrary interference, arguments have been made that (some) internal relations of hierarchy and power within economic firms are unacceptable (Hsieh 2005; Anderson 2017), or that workplace democracy is required (González-Ricoy 2014; Landemore and Ferreras 2016), or that democratic accountability is required not just within the enterprise but across the economy as a whole (Vrousalis 2019; O’Shea 2020). Liberal egalitarians meanwhile have argued that the nature of work under the detailed division of labour is problematic from the standpoint of justice, either because it undermines real equality of opportunity (Shiffrin 2004; Gomberg 2007) or because it violates John Rawls’ difference principle (Arnold 2012), along with arguing that state-guaranteed employment ought to be offered as a matter of right to those who are unsuccessful in the market (Arneson 1990), or that a universal basic income is required to ensure persons have the ability to make freer choices regarding their work and employment, especially in the context of reasonable pluralism about the good (Van Parijs 1991; Jenkins 2020). Additionally, a concern with the normative value of community and the common good has been taken to imply that there ought to be real limits to the kind of competition fostered by market relations (Hussain 2020), or even that the market and

private ownership of the means of production are inconsistent with the full realization of social justice (Cohen 2009; Vrousalis 2012; Arnold 2020). And perhaps the most direct criticism of contemporary work relations is made by those approaches based on Marxian accounts of freedom and nonalienation (Kandiyali 2020; Vrousalis 2021).

Of course, many theorists have also offered arguments that there is far less of a gap between the work opportunities offered today and the kind of work that social justice requires. For example, libertarian accounts argue that any kind of substantial government intervention in the market would be unjust, given that it is only a minimally regulated market that can respect the private property rights of individuals (Tomasi 2012), while other accounts argue that the best way to protect persons from domination and the arbitrary power of others is to ensure that there are free and competitive markets which give persons real exit voice (Pettit 2006; Taylor 2017). Indeed, one can even find arguments that it is pure capitalist relations of production that are going to best promote mutual cooperation and the value of community (Brennan 2014).

These concerns with the nature of work and the work process of course naturally then lead into wider concerns of political economy. A useful distinction here is between those accounts that think social justice requires a system of private ownership in the means of production, encapsulating anything and everything from anarcho-capitalism (Rockwell Jr. 2014), the many varieties of welfare state capitalism (Tomasi 2012; Zwolinski 2012; Vallier 2015; von Platz 2020a), to a property-owning democracy (Rawls 2001; O'Neill 2009; Thomas 2017), and those that think social justice requires public or social ownership in (at least some of) the means of production, be it as a form of market socialism (Miller 1989; Roemer 1994; Schweickart

2011; Malleson 2014a), or a decentralized but democratically planned socialism (Albert 2003). Obviously, there are a whole plethora of reasons why one kind of economic system might be preferred over another, but the kind of work opportunities and relations that different systems make available and encourage will surely be one of them.

It is against this background about what social justice requires when it comes to the world of work that this thesis' argument about meaningful work takes place. Indeed, a subset of this literature places attention on meaningful work in particular, and there have been several defences offered as to why its promotion can be a legitimate aim of justice (there now even exists an *Oxford Handbook of Meaningful Work*, see Yeoman et al. 2019). Now, there is no universally agreed account of the necessary conditions of 'meaningful work,' let alone what might ground those conditions (the concept of meaningful work itself is the focus of Chapter 2). But for our purposes here it suffices to note that almost all theorists see meaningful work as work that has a sufficient level of complexity that it can be interesting and engaging for the person carrying it out – the antithesis of meaningful work is monotonous drudgery. Some theorists then also take as a necessary condition that the work gives the worker some democratic say over their work process. For this more demanding account the antithesis of meaningful work is not just monotonous drudgery, but monotonous drudgery where one is unaccountably ordered about.

Another important distinction here, and one that will be crucial throughout this thesis, is between defenses of forms of work and work relations (including defenses of meaningful work) that are perfectionist (i.e., internal to a particular conception of the good and reliant on the values and ideals therein) and those that are nonperfectionist (i.e., internal only to a public account of

justice and reliant on values and ideals that are not subject to reasonable disagreement). Accounts of the latter are consistent with what has come to be known as political liberalism, which is an approach whose aim is to provide principles or institutions that are based on values and ideals that are acceptable to persons no matter what particular conception of the good they hold (for some influential examples, see Gaus 1996; Larmore 1996; Rawls 2005; Quong 2011).

Most defences of meaningful work are in terms of perfectionist values. For example, it has been argued that meaningful work is normatively significant out of its connection to the value of autonomous activity (Esheté 1974; Schwartz 1982; Roessler 2012; Yeoman 2014; Osawa 2022), to the positive conception of freedom as self-realization (DesJardins 2012; Breen 2019), to a Hegelian social conception of freedom (Hasan 2015), to eudaimonian flourishing (Walsh 1994; Gomberg 2007; Veltman 2016), and to the Marxian concepts of unalienated labour and human essence (Attfield 1984; Elster 1986; Schweickart 1993, pp. 224-241; Smith 2012, pp. 196-200), along with a whole range of other philosophical and religious traditions (for examples, see Veltman 2016, pp. 65-67). These approaches are all perfectionist in that meaningful work's normative importance is downstream from the weight attached to values and ideals within a particular conception of the good (e.g., Millian liberalism giving priority to autonomy, accounts of human flourishing giving priority to self-realization, and so on).

However, while much rarer meaningful work has also come under the attention of political philosophers working within the remit of political liberalism. One example here are those writers who, following a broadly Rawlsian account of political liberalism, take meaningful work as normatively significant through the way it supports or is necessary for the attainment of

primary goods – those things persons would want no matter what else they want, or which are necessary for the development of those capacities (the two moral powers) relevant to persons’ status as citizens.¹ Meaningful work for instance has been taken as relevant to social justice out of its affiliation with the internal resources of ‘intelligence and virtuosity’ (Arnold 2012), as well as the social bases of self-respect (Moriarty 2009). Such a connection, the argument goes, means that meaningful work is important not because it is linked to or can promote some account of the good, but because its connection to primary goods makes it necessary for persons to be able to carry out whatever particular conception of the good or plan of life they have in the first place.

Given the nature of meaningful work, any argument (be it perfectionist or nonperfectionist) that its promotion or availability is relevant to a theory of justice will, so long as the argument goes through, have a whole host of implications for the design and organization of work processes, and the structure of economic institutions more broadly. Given all accounts of meaningful work see it as antithetical to monotonous drudgery, and some also see it as antithetical to unaccountable workplace hierarchy, then arguments in favour of its promotion are arguments in favour of overcoming, or at least blurring, the detailed horizontal division of labour and, possibly, the vertical division of labour. Such arguments then are going to have quite the critical edge when applied to contemporary society given the nature of work under contemporary forms of capitalism. If justice requires the promotion of meaningful work, then justice requires radical change to the design of economic institutions.

¹ The two interpretations of primary goods here reflect how Rawls changed their characterization between *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*. See respectively: 1971, pp. 62, 92; 2005, pp. 106, 178, 187, 307-308.

1.2 – Meaningful Work and Political Liberalism

The argument of this thesis is that the promotion of meaningful work can be made consistent with the justificatory constraints imposed by political liberalism. Consequently, meaningful work can form a core part of a nonperfectionist theory of justice, or what is sometimes called a theory of justice that is neutral in regard to different views about the good. The reason for this, or so I will argue, is that individuals having the opportunity to undertake meaningful work is a social basis of their self-respect, and that thus, the opportunity to undertake meaningful work is in the interests of persons generally, regardless of whatever particular conceptions of the good they actually hold. But while the argument I will use to defend this claim is in some sense ‘Rawlsian,’ and I will be referring to Rawls’ work throughout this thesis more than any other liberal theorist, my aim is not to explore how the promotion of meaningful work might be ranked against the two principles of justice. My aim is just to show that meaningful work’s inextricable connection to self-respect makes its availability something liberals should care about, not to fully integrate meaningful work into one specific liberal conception of justice. This thesis then can be seen as part of a more general attempt within recent liberal theory to bring questions about work, production, economic justice, and political economy back onto the table (e.g., see Hsieh 2008; O’Neill 2009; Arnold 2012; Stanczyk 2012; Anderson 2017; Edmundson 2017).

Two clarifications about meaning. First, unless otherwise stated in this thesis when I refer to a ‘liberal’ theory of justice or a ‘liberal’ defence of meaningful work, I will be referring to this political liberal variant of liberalism. Second, I will often throughout this thesis refer to the opportunity persons have to undertake meaningful work, or the promotion of the opportunity for meaningful work, rather than simply persons undertaking meaningful work, or the promotion of

meaningful work. But it is important to note that this use of ‘opportunity’ is not just referring to a situation where meaningful work is openly available to persons through free and fair competition, in the same way ‘opportunity’ is used in discussion about fair equality of opportunity (see discussion in §5.2). Rather, my talk of the opportunity for meaningful work is referring to the fact that because meaningful work requires subjective feelings of meaningfulness on the part of the worker (I explain why in Chapter 2) then it is technically not possible for the state by itself to promote meaningful work, as it can’t control persons’ subjective feelings (in the same way the state can only ever promote the social bases of self-respect and not the actual attitude of self-respect itself). All the state can do is promote work with the objective features that make it a possible instance of ‘meaningful work.’

Now, a natural thought here might be that meaningful work and nonperfectionism are rather strange bedfellows. Won’t the fact that the sort of activity at issue here is *meaningful* work inevitably mean that the discussion is going to fall back on questions about purpose and meaning in life more generally? And aren’t these questions inextricably linked to debates between comprehensive conceptions about the nature of the good, the priority of certain ethical values, and so on? While a nonperfectionist account of justice might have a place for the normative importance of other kinds of work (say, freely chosen work or nondominating work), surely, the thought goes, political liberalism has no place for something as substantive as meaningful work. I hope to show that this is not the case. And this will not just be the result of arbitrarily choosing to focus on a ‘political’ account of meaningful work, but will result from an argument that the most convincing account of meaningful work as a concept actually necessarily avoids relying on any claims that are internal to comprehensive conceptions.

The principal claim in this thesis is that meaningful work can have an important place in a nonperfectionist account of justice, and I will not be defending to any great extent political liberalism as a methodology, or the merits of nonperfectionism as a whole. Those who reject political liberalism then will unlikely find anything in this thesis to convince them otherwise (unless I suppose one's grounds for rejecting political liberalism is that it offers little guidance when it comes to questions of economic justice). It is however worthwhile to briefly outline the basic appeal of political liberalism's commitment to nonperfectionism. Such a commitment naturally results if two features are accepted. The first of these is the *fact of reasonable pluralism*, that it is a permanent feature of modern democracies that they are, and will continue to be, composed of citizens who disagree fundamentally about religious, moral, and philosophical matters (for Rawls' articulation see 2005, pp. 36, 54-58). The second is the *principle of political justification*, which says that for a society's political principles and decisions to be legitimate they must be supported by considerations that are acceptable to all its members – principles of justice need to be based on public reasons (Waldron 1993, pp. 50ff.; Gaus 1996, p. 3; Larmore 1996, p. 137; van Wietmarschen 2021, p. 354). In combination, the fact of reasonable pluralism and the principle of political justification mean that principles of justice must be independent from any particular conception of the good (at least for most political liberals).²

² I say for most political liberals because there are several accounts which, while accepting the basic principle of political justification, offer a standard of justification different to the requirement that political principles must be 'freestanding' and independent from comprehensive conceptions. Prominent examples are those highlighting the epistemic nature of the disagreement (e.g., Buchanan 2004; Talisse 2008), those which think political justification only requires principles to be acceptable from within a conception of the good (e.g., Gaus and Vallier 2009), and those that think perfectionist principles can actually meet a standard of publicity (e.g., Billingham 2017; Tahzib 2019). But in this thesis I am taking the orthodox view of publicly justified principles as those which are based on values and ideals independent from any comprehensive conception of the good, such that they can be reasonably shared.

The way these two features come together within political liberalism is nicely expressed in this passage from Rawls:

“given the conflicting comprehensive conceptions of the good, how is it possible to reach such a political understanding of what are to count as appropriate claims? The difficulty is that the government can no more act to maximize the fulfillment of citizens’ rational preferences, or wants (as in utilitarianism), or to advance human excellence, or the values of perfection (as in perfectionism), than it can act to advance Catholicism or Protestantism, or any other religion. None of these views of the meaning, value, and purpose of human life, as specified by the corresponding comprehensive religious or philosophical doctrines, is affirmed by citizens generally, and so the pursuit of any one of them through basic institutions gives political society a sectarian character. To find a shared idea of citizens’ good appropriate for political purposes, political liberalism looks for an idea of rational advantage within a political conception that is independent of any particular comprehensive doctrine and hence may be the focus of an overlapping consensus” (2005, pp. 179-180)

What the political liberalism approach insists is that to use as the basis of a conception of justice values and ideals that are subject to reasonable disagreement would be, as Rawls points out, sectarian. This then is why the ‘metric’ of distributive justice must be something like primary goods, which are those resources which are in the interests of persons generally. The argument goes that basic rights and liberties, opportunities, income and wealth, and the social bases of self-respect (just to take Rawls’ primary goods), are all resources that are in persons’ interests no matter what particular conception of the good they actually hold. It is in a person’s interest (or to their advantage, or rational for them...) to have freedom of association, say, regardless of their religious, moral, or philosophical outlook.

This thesis’ claim that meaningful work can have a place in a theory of justice will take the same kind of argumentative form, except I will not characterize the opportunity for

meaningful work as itself a primary good, but instead as inextricably linked to the primary good of self-respect. It is because the opportunity for meaningful work is a social basis of self-respect, and therefore in the interests of persons generally, that efforts to promote and protect such an opportunity will not be sectarian but will instead be acceptable to society's members.

Initially at least, the plausibility of such a strategy may be doubted. The doubt goes like this: while liberal principles of justice will still apply as “essential constraints” to the internal life of work associations (just like they do all associations),³ any more substantive commitments, such as a commitment to the promotion and protection of meaningful work, will be ruled out by the commitment to nonperfectionism. This is because, given the reasonable pluralism on conceptions of the good and the priorities accorded to values, ends, and pursuits – a pluralism which extends to questions over what (if anything) is valuable about work – to privilege certain work processes over others would be to valorize particular ideas about the good and thereby unfairly privilege some persons over others. Because the work environment is merely one of the many associations that taken together make up civil society, the place of work in society, its structure, and the prevalence of different work environments, ought to reflect the decisions people freely make about how they want to order their lives, what values they want to give priority to, and the ends they want to focus on. Consequently, the promotion of something substantive like meaningful work is illegitimate.

³ ‘Essential constraints’ is of course Rawls’ term (2005, p. 468). It is worth mentioning that relying on external constraints by themselves can still ground a wide-ranging normative critique of the nature of work in contemporary capitalism. Reading first-hand accounts of low-wage work in America and the UK at least, one is struck by the sheer level of indignity and condescension faced by those at the bottom of the current wage-labour system. Pervasive wage theft, the prevalence and exploitation of zero-hour contracts, being pressured to support particular political candidates, being prevented from using the bathroom, union busting, verbal and physical abuse, are just some examples. See Ehrenreich 2001; Anderson 2017, pp. 134-137; Bloodworth 2018. Such realities can be taken as unjust not because the work activity is some ‘special’ sphere of activity, but simply because it is a requirement of justice to ensure that the rights and privileges we think persons have as citizens generally are still upheld and protected in the workplace association.

This will obviously be true if the grounds of meaningful work's promotion are perfectionist values (like conceptions of freedom as self-realization, or eudaimonian flourishing, or unalienated production, and so on), but the objection might still apply to those defences of meaningful work based on its link to primary goods – such as mine. While these defences are clearly on the right kind of track by focusing on those goods that can be said to be in the interests of persons generally, given it seems plausible to think that the goods attainable in and through work are, at least in principle, attainable in other spheres of life outside of work, to promote meaningful work would be to unjustifiably prioritize merely one of the means to attain primary goods (e.g., see Arneson 1987; 1990). I call this line of thinking the 'nonperfectionist objection,' and the argument of my thesis has a burden of proof to adequately respond to it.

The preceding discussion should make clear that I am not understanding 'liberalism' or a 'liberal' theory of justice in terms of, or necessarily requiring, the set of political and economic institutions traditionally identified with liberalism as a political movement, or as they have culminated in the form of current liberal democracies (protection of civil and private property rights, opening up of free economic exchange, some kind of social safety net, and so on). If this were the case then any compatibility between meaningful work and liberalism will seem very unlikely, given concerns around meaningful work (and work conditions more broadly) are more closely associated with the socialist and radical political tradition. Rather, I am understanding 'liberalism' as a philosophical framework committed to certain *principles*. One of these is something I have already mentioned, that principles of justice can only be legitimate if their grounds are neutral between competing conceptions of the good. But liberalism also includes

other principles, such as the characterization of persons as free and equal, and that society is a system of cooperation. It is in relation to these liberal principles that I am claiming meaningful work can form a part of a ‘liberal’ theory of justice. And so while a commitment to liberal principles will of course result in an endorsement of many of the political institutions traditionally affiliated with liberalism, we can follow Will Kymlicka (2002, pp. 95-96) in recognizing that it need not result in any apologia for the traditional liberal welfare-state, and that it might well be the case that liberal principles will have radical institutional implications. To endorse reforms and institutions not traditionally affiliated with liberal politics is not necessarily an abandonment of liberalism, but can instead be an outcome of taking its principles seriously. I hope to convince the reader that a commitment to liberalism’s core principles entails a commitment to policies and institutions that promote meaningful work.

Consequently then, this thesis’ argument is responding to the longstanding charge that liberalism, especially with its emphasis on distributive justice, pays insufficient attention to justice in production (e.g., Wolff 1977, pp. 199-208; Clark and Gintis 1978; Doppelt 1981; Young 1981, pp. 279-287; Buchanan 1982). One famous example such critics point to is the way Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* characterizes the two principles of justice as exploiting a difference in social primary goods, with the first principle covering civil rights and political liberties and then the second principle covering economic and social benefits (1971, p. 63). This obviously leaves little room for considering from the standpoint of justice how social benefits are produced in the first place (but cf. Rawls 1971, pp. 88-89; 2001, p. 48; 2005, p. 229). It is true that liberal theorists over the last fifty years or so have said relatively little about questions of work and

production.⁴ But this does not necessarily reflect a flaw in liberalism's principles. It may well instead merely reflect a flaw in how liberal theorists have understood and interpreted those principles.

1.3 – The Political Value of Social Interdependencies

A key claim of this thesis is that it is possible to assign political (in the sense of public or civic) value to the social interdependencies and mutual reciprocities that obtain between persons. And furthermore, that to do so is not merely consistent with liberal theory but necessarily results from the liberal characterization of society as a system of cooperation. It is on this claim that the argument about the normative importance of meaningful work is built. I defend meaningful work's importance to a theory of justice not by connecting it in some way to a comprehensive conception of the good, but by connecting it to the political value of social interdependencies and mutual reciprocity. This is what connects meaningful work to the primary good of self-respect. I do this by arguing that a crucial aspect of meaningful work relates to work's unique role in providing persons the opportunity to undertake social contribution that enables others, who might have disparate conceptions of the good, to carry out their own aims and plans of life. It is this connection between meaningful work and the political value of certain social relations, which is why meaningful work is something that political liberals should care about.

⁴ Various explanations for this inattention include: the victory of 'neoliberal' ideology (Renault 2012), the chasm between realities of work and the normative ideals of work being so large that any theoretical examination of normative issues seems futile (Honneth 2010), and that because the normative tools and concepts used to assess the workplace are carryovers from before the industrial revolution they thus regard (albeit falsely) all market activity today as free and based on independence (Anderson 2017). I have no idea how one could (dis)prove any of these theories.

To make this argument I will throughout this thesis be heavily engaging with the work of Rawls (this is especially so in Chapter 4). Despite Rawls' two principles of justice saying nothing about meaningful work, in his overarching theory there are, or so I will be arguing, the basic building blocks to develop this argument grounding meaningful work's normative weight in the political value of social interdependencies and mutual reciprocity.

I have chosen to focus on Rawls' work for two reasons. The first (more esoteric) reason is that, despite the mountains of Rawlsian scholarship written over the years, there currently exists no convincing account of how meaningful work can be incorporated into Rawls' theory of justice in a way consistent with its commitment to nonperfectionism (for attempts see Moriarty 2009; Arnold 2012; Hasan 2015). 'Why does this matter?' you might ask. Well, exploring the normative value of meaningful work within the framework of Rawls' theory is no arbitrary endeavour, given there are several passages throughout his work suggesting that he thought meaningful work was important, and that a theory of justice ought to say something about it. In the introduction to the expanded edition of *Political Liberalism* Rawls states that "[l]acking ... the opportunity for meaningful work and occupation is not only destructive of citizens' self-respect but of their sense that they are members of society and not simply caught in it," and that this justifies having "[s]ociety as an employer of last resort" as one of the "essential prerequisites for a basic structure" (2005, p. lvii). Indeed, in *The Law of Peoples* Rawls repeats this claim but goes so far to say that this is a requirement that must be satisfied by the principles of *all* liberal conceptions, and not just his own account of justice as fairness (2001, p. 50). Additionally, in *A Theory of Justice* Rawls says that "what men want is meaningful work in free association with others" (1971, p. 290) and, as seen in the epigraph, that in a well-ordered society "the division of

labour is overcome not by each becoming complete in himself, but by willing and meaningful work within a just social union of social unions in which all can freely participate as they so incline” (1971, p. 529).

Combining meaningful work with Rawls’ theory then is not an instance of that kind of scholarship where originality is determined by combining a new topic with a thinker or framework just for the sake of it and because this has not yet been done. Rather, there was clearly something about meaningful work that made Rawls think, all throughout his career, that it was relevant to a political conception of justice. It seems a worthwhile endeavour to try to make sense of that connection and to reconstruct an argument to support it. I think we can reject the interpretation of Rawls’ comments on meaningful work being just “Rawls the man” and his own “personal comprehensive conception of the good” coming through (as thought by Edmundson, 2017, p. 165). This might be a plausible inference if meaningful work only featured in a passage or two buried in Part III of *A Theory of Justice* (given Rawls came to regard much of Part III’s argument as inconsistent with nonperfectionism). But as we have just seen, meaningful work appears in every single one of Rawls’ major works, and it survives his ‘political turn’ post-*Theory*. Rawls’ comments on meaningful work then have not just slipped through the cracks (while one can make many criticisms of Rawls’ writing one can’t call it sloppy or loose), they must be the result of clear intention. However, and this is what is peculiar, Rawls never properly outlines his full reasoning for thinking why meaningful work ought to be included in his conception of justice, or how it might be made consistent with other aspects of his theory. While he suggests meaningful work is connected to persons’ self-respect, why this is the case is left frustratingly unclear. In providing an answer to these questions about meaningful work, I hope

my thesis can contribute to Rawlsian scholarship by highlighting an as yet underappreciated aspect of his work.

The second reason for focusing on Rawls extends beyond exegesis. Due to the stature and influence of Rawls' work in contemporary liberal political philosophy and political theory, the hope is that constructing a 'Rawlsian' argument that meaningful work is important to justice will have implications for thinking about meaningful work's place in liberal conceptions of justice more generally. I am using the tools Rawls' framework provides to develop a particular liberal argument – that because meaningful work is supportive of persons' self-respect through the way it enables persons to be participating members in society, that therefore it is important to a political conception of justice. But this argument does not inherently rely on or need Rawls at some fundamental level, and ought to be relevant to more than dyed in the wool Rawlsians.

As I said at the start of this section the key is recognizing, on the one hand, that liberal theory can give normative importance to relations of reciprocity and the social interdependencies between persons, while on the other, that the most convincing account of meaningful work makes it uniquely placed to provide persons with the opportunity to engage in activity best expressive of those reciprocal relations. While liberal theory undeniably gives a priority to the individual and their interests, this does not mean a concern with social interconnectedness (or the "sociability of human beings" as Rawls calls it, see 1971, p. 522) is lacking or somehow foreign to the theory.⁵ As Seana Shiffrin nicely puts it: "what is implicit behind the liberal starting point of social cooperation is the assumption that social cooperation is the necessary context in which

⁵ See Kymlicka 2002, pp. 221ff., for both the communitarians who make this kind of claim, as well as what I take to be a convincing defence of liberalism against it. See also Kymlicka 1989, pp. 206-210.

the capacity for individual autonomous development and in which the two moral powers of the individual may be developed and fully realized” (2004, p. 1663). It is through meaningful work expressing those reciprocal relations constitutive of the liberal ideal of social cooperation, that it becomes an irreplaceable part of a convincing account of social justice.

And while this thesis is no piece in the history of political thought, it is worth highlighting here how this argument about meaningful work being linked through reciprocity to persons’ political status is picking up on something that was emphasized quite a lot by the new or social liberals in the early twentieth century. For these liberals, it was the way work could enable and mediate reciprocal relations between citizens which heavily informed the way they placed concerns about work quality and political economy as central to their political commitments.⁶ Just to give some examples, L. T. Hobhouse thought that because work was the fundamental way to return benefits received from the efforts of others, then as a “civic service,” “it is the right ... of every person capable of performing some useful function that he should have the opportunity of so doing” (1927, pp. 209-10. See also pp. 158-159, 179-180). Work was not just an obligation for Hobhouse, it was a right. Somewhat similarly, J. M. Robertson thought that “it is primarily the rendering of service that gives a true moral title to support and that reciprocity of service is the ideal social condition” (1912, p. 152), which led him to claim that for the state “to refuse to make this effort [of guaranteeing a job] is ... a repudiation of the law of reciprocity, and a negation of the real membership of the unemployed in the community” (1912, p. 54). Just like Hobhouse then, the importance of reciprocity for Robertson grounded a moral right to work. In the thought of J. A. Hobson meanwhile, the same idea of work relations needing

⁶ As Michael Freeden describes the focus of the new liberals, “reciprocity ... is a convenient description of the new liberal attitude to social relations,” and this formed the basis of their commitment to certain economic policies, including the right to work (1978, quote occurs at pp. 223-224, but see generally pp. 201ff.). See also Gaus 1983.

to correlate with and support reciprocal social interdependencies between individuals occurs, as persons are “a social being and this social nature demands recognition and expression in economic processes” (1914, p. 160). The way these new liberals connect economic reciprocity to persons’ political status is, I believe, an insight that has not been sufficiently appreciated in contemporary debates about the place of work in a theory of justice, and liberal theorists might benefit by doing a better job of making sense of it.⁷

1.4 – Outline of Thesis

This thesis has three major areas of focus: the concept of meaningful work itself (Chapter 2), the normative weight of meaningful work from the standpoint of a political conception of justice (Chapters 3 and 4), and how the opportunity for meaningful work might be best promoted and supported in economic policies and structures (Chapter 5).

The starting point of Chapter 2 is the recognition that despite the increasing attention being placed on meaningful work by political theorists and political philosophers, there is little agreement on what the concept actually means, and why certain features are taken as necessary for work to be taken as an instance of ‘meaningful work.’ Chapter 2 provides and defends a novel account of meaningful work, what I call the *contributive view*. The contributive view of meaningful work is an account of what makes work, as a work activity meaningful (in both its market-facing and non-market-facing varieties), and it is not concerned with ‘fundamental

⁷ To be sure, one can find instances of contemporary liberal theorists recognizing (or at least hinting at) the political value of social interdependencies through work. For example, Martin O’Neill (2008, p. 46) touches upon something close to what I will argue can ground the normative importance of meaningful work: “we might think that there is something special about our productive economic activity, insofar as it is in our capacity as economic producers that many of us most fully exercise our powers as cooperating members of a system of social cooperation over time. In other words, our self-conception as citizens participating in a cooperative political enterprise with others can be intimately tied to the self-conception that we form through engaging in cooperative, productive economic activity.”

meaning' or meaning in life. I defend the contributive view in contradistinction to two major alternatives, the *subjective view* (meaningful work is work that the worker simply believes to be meaningful) and the *autonomy view* (meaningful work is work that is complex enough to be person-engaging for the worker such that they can see it as 'their own'). I argue that while each of these accounts captures part of what it means for a work process to be 'meaningful work,' taken either alone or together they are insufficient. In contrast, the contributive view argues work can only be meaningful when two features are present: one, it enables persons to undertake social contribution that depends on their own developed skills and talents, and two, it involves persons in the contributive aspect of the work process. The importance of social contribution is generally underappreciated in discussions of what makes work meaningful, and this is something the account of the contributive view aims to rectify. Chapter 2 then concludes by outlining how the features of the contributive view of meaningful work can be understood in isolation from any account of 'fundamental meaning' internal to a comprehensive conception of the good, and how they are antithetical to work defined by the detailed horizontal division of labour, and (certain forms of) the vertical division of labour.

Chapters 3 and 4 then use the political value of social interdependencies to argue that the contributive view of meaningful work from Chapter 2 can be successfully integrated into a theory of justice that takes nonperfectionism seriously. Before the positive argument however, in Chapter 3 I first offer a negative argument against the use of one strategy to make concerns with work and its organization consistent with nonperfectionism that has become ubiquitous in the literature on economic justice. This strategy relies on empirical evidence about the formative effects of different kinds of work on other aspects of individuals' lives, in order to then justify

giving the work process special treatment from the standpoint of justice. I argue that despite the initial appeal of using this kind of argument in a defence of meaningful work's normative importance, doing so limits its scope of applicability to nonideal conditions and does not defend meaningful work's consistency with nonperfectionism in conditions of full justice. Chapter 3 then provides an alternative defence of meaningful work's compatibility with a nonperfectionist theory of justice, based on meaningful work's connection to reciprocal relations. I first argue that implicit in the idea of society as a system of cooperation (an idea taken as axiomatic in much of liberal theory), is the existence of reciprocal interdependencies between the skills and talents of persons, and that persons' self-respect is tied to their opportunity to undertake social contributions expressive of this reciprocity. I then argue that because it is meaningful work alone (understood as more than paid employment) which can provide persons the opportunity to undertake activity best expressive of this reciprocity, that the opportunity to undertake meaningful work is a social basis of self-respect. This makes meaningful work, even in ideal conditions of full justice, inextricably linked to a primary good, and thereby relevant to political liberalism.

Chapter 4 argues for the same conclusion – that the opportunity for meaningful work is important to a liberal theory of justice because it is a social basis of self-respect – by way of a different argument. The emphasis of Chapter 4 is on how meaningful work can be tied to persons' political status and their self-respect by bringing individuals together into a social union of social unions. I do this by reconstructing the account of self-respect found in Part III of Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, and it is in Chapter 4 that this thesis engages most heavily in Rawlsian exegesis. The chapter begins by outlining the distinction between three kinds of self-

regarding attitudes: entitlement self-respect, standards self-respect, and self-esteem. I argue that while Rawls' account in Part III seems to preclude any connection to meaningful work, his account of 'self-respect,' which is based on persons' activities being recognized by their like-minded associates in social unions, really only makes it an account of self-esteem. I then, by showing how having oneself and others undertake meaningful work can be in the interests of persons generally, argue that meaningful work can form the basis of a shared end that brings society's members together into a social union of social unions, in a way analogous to how Rawls takes the activity of maintaining just institutions to do the same thing. And as recognition for activities related to the end of a social union of social unions is related to persons' *standards* self-respect (and not just their self-esteem), then this means the opportunity for meaningful work is supportive of persons' standards self-respect. Chapter 4 concludes by responding to several arguments that having meaningful work as a shared end between society's members would violate the justificatory constraints imposed by political liberalism.

Taken together, the arguments of Chapters 3 and 4 not only offer a justification for the kinds of claims Rawls makes about meaningful work in various passages throughout his work, but also offer a defence of meaningful work's normative weight that makes those claims consistent. Rawls' comments on meaningful work in *A Theory of Justice* are not (like some other parts of Part III) just reflective of a particular conception of the good and so inappropriate from the standpoint of political liberalism. But his comments on meaningful work post-*Theory* need also not be completely disconnected with how in *A Theory of Justice* self-respect is tied to recognition from within social unions. The arguments I make in Chapters 3 and 4 show that there is a connection between meaningful work and self-respect which is applicable across the

different periods of Rawls' work. The fundamental starting point, and this is what is important for liberal theorists more generally and not just Rawlsians, is that meaningful work is uniquely situated to enable persons to undertake activity expressive of the kind of social interdependencies that have normative weight.

In Chapter 5 I then consider the institutional implications of the preceding argument by considering the sorts of economic policies that would be effective, and the larger structures that would be compatible, with the widespread provision of meaningful work. I begin by first arguing that increasing the scope of a principle of fair equality of opportunity – such that it now becomes fair equality of opportunity for the meaningful work opportunities in society – fails to suffice as an institutional means to promote the widespread provision of meaningful work. This is because ensuring fair competition for meaningful work opportunities does nothing, at least by itself, about the extent meaningful work opportunities actually exist, and thus unfairly limits meaningful work to the winners of market competition. What is needed, and so what Chapter 5 turns to consider next, are economic policies that increase the amount of meaningful work available. I first consider several ways the state could exploit its levers to reduce the extent work is defined by the detailed horizontal division of labour and (some parts of) the vertical division of labour, and then consider ways to increase opportunities for meaningful work outside the market. Some examples include job quality clauses in public procurement contracts, the sharing of socially necessary drudgery, legislation mandating worker co-determination, a state job program or job guarantee, and a basic income. Chapter 5 then moves to some larger questions of political economy. I first consider the appropriateness of promoting, at least partly, the opportunity for meaningful work within a system of markets. I outline two reasons it might be thought market

relations will occlude the widespread provision of meaningful work: because the commodification on which market exchange is based results in workers being disconnected from the wider social effects of their work, or because the self-interested attitudes and motivations fostered by market activity are inimical to the way meaningful work requires persons to care about meeting the needs of others for its own sake. I offer responses to these arguments and claim that while the widespread promotion of meaningful work is incompatible with markets as they are, it is not incompatible with markets as they could be. Chapter 5 concludes by considering the implication of meaningful work's importance for debates about the control and ownership of society's productive assets. I argue that while a concern with the promotion of meaningful work could never cohere with the aims of welfare-state capitalism, sustainable provision of meaningful work is possible in either a property-owning democracy or market socialism. However, there are two reasons market socialism might be preferred as the means through which meaningful work opportunities are made available: its institutional guarantee of workplace democracy, and its system of social ownership corresponding better to the reciprocal relations and economic interdependencies relevant to meaningful work.

I will close this introduction by referring to a point made by G. A. Cohen about the place of liberal theory in relation to debates about work and justice within political philosophy. Cohen argues that one reason liberal theorists give less attention to work is that they lack any foundational commitments inherently tied to the world of work – a liberal “does not conceive oneself as the intellectual representative of a particular class or movement” (1995, p. 160). In one regard Cohen sees this aspect of liberalism as a strength, because it gives liberal theorists a certain “immunity” and “security” against certain kind of objections (1995, pp. 160-161). One

example which I think expresses Cohen's point is how egalitarian liberals, given they lack any deep commitments about the importance of self-ownership in the economic sphere, were for the most part able to be rather dismissive and unconcerned with libertarian defences of laissez-faire economics, such as those from Robert Nozick and his followers. Marxists meanwhile, in contrast to liberals were left "vulnerable," and so while being situated further to Nozick's left than liberal egalitarians were forced to confront and respond to the libertarian position.

Given Cohen spent a significant portion of his academic life devoted to responding to the libertarian position, let's take him on his word that in this regard liberalism's lack of deep economic commitments is a strength. But we might think that this is also a source of weakness, given it seems to have come at the cost of liberalism having far fewer substantive prescriptions when it comes to economic justice. While Marxists and Nozickian libertarians clearly disagree about the nature of economic justice, they both share the ability to give a rich account of it, in part because of their shared premise that self-ownership in the economic sphere is of fundamental importance. For Marxists it is the capitalist who steals the worker's labour time, for Nozickian libertarians it is the state (Cohen 1995, pp. 67-72, 146-147; Nozick 1974, pp. 167-174).⁸ In contrast, a liberal egalitarian's account of economic justice (if they have one) presents itself as weaker and less principled. While we have seen work might sometimes feature in liberal thinking about justice, work seems destined to always be treated by liberals as just one of the many realms of life in civil society – never as a fundamental starting point. And this might appear all the more worrying in light of the structural changes to capitalism that have occurred in the past few decades, with social safety nets being eroded, increasing inequality, and the equation of economic power with political power. If liberal theory cannot provide a deep critique

⁸ Although Marx himself is sometimes interpreted as rejecting any appeal to justice. See Wood 1971.

of this reality, let alone a critique of the forces that lead to it coming about, then it appears to offer an incomplete account of justice.

What I hope to do in this thesis is show that while Cohen was right that liberalism's lack of fundamental commitments in the world of work is a strength in one regard (although I would put this in terms of how this is necessary to avoid any perfectionist commitments subject to reasonable disagreement), the supposed weakness need not necessarily follow. By showing the important place of meaningful work in a liberal theory of justice – by way of connecting it to the political value of social interdependencies and reciprocity – I hope to show that liberalism, even when committed to the standard of political justification and the fact of reasonable pluralism, indeed *can* have substantive commitments when it comes to what justice requires in the world of work. And further, that the implications for political economy that result from these commitments are not so different from what one finds in accounts of economic justice situated in frameworks traditionally situated to liberalism's left (like the socialist and Marxist traditions). Of course, the argument I will provide is more indirect than the kind of argument available to someone like Cohen. For a Marxist takes as a "moral datum" that the very nature of existent capitalist relations – the extraction of a propertyless worker's labour by a propertied capitalist – is exploitative and alienating, and thereby unjust (e.g., Cohen 1995, p. 145). And while political liberals do of course have their own "moral datums" (the fact of reasonable pluralism, persons are free and equal, society is a system of cooperation, and so on), none of these apply directly and immediately to the world of work. This means my account defending the importance of meaningful work will require more links in the chain. But that does not have to be a bad thing, direct arguments aren't always stronger arguments.

Chapter 2 – What Is Meaningful Work?*

2.1 – Introduction

In the introductory chapter I outlined the burden of proof facing any attempt to defend the promotion of meaningful work from within a theory of justice that takes nonperfectionism seriously. Starting in the subsequent chapter I will offer an account of meaningful work's normative value that can meet this burden. Before doing this however, we need to take a step back and ask the basic question: What exactly is meaningful work? Providing a satisfactory answer to that question is the aim of this chapter.

After some brief comments in *A Theory of Justice* on the potential place of meaningful work within justice as fairness, Rawls goes on to say that “[o]f course, the definition of meaningful work is a problem in itself. Though it is not a problem of justice, a few remarks in §79 are addressed to it” (1971, p. 290). And while §79’s discussion on the relationship between meaningful work and social unions leads to some interesting questions about economic justice within Rawlsian liberalism (questions we will get to later), it takes a particular definition of meaningful work (work that is complex and interesting) for granted, and so ultimately fails to deliver on the promise of addressing the definition of meaningful work.⁹

* Portions of this chapter appear in Althorpe 2022a.

⁹ Rawls’ understanding of meaningful work can be implied from what he contrasts it to, and the mention of meaningful work forms part of his brief comments on how justice as fairness can enable the overcoming of the detailed horizontal division of labour. See Rawls 1971, p. 529. See also Hsieh 2012, p. 153. As far as I can tell, these passages in *A Theory of Justice* are the first use in political philosophy or political theory of ‘meaningful work’ in the strict sense of work that is complex, interesting, and antithetical to drudgery. A little unusually for Rawls, at the relevant passages he offers no historical context or theorist from the history of political thought against which he is understanding and interpreting meaningful work as a concept. Although this is speculation, I imagine he has Marx’s account of unalienated labour in mind. It is worth pointing out that in Rawls’ lectures on Marx he describes alienation from the work process as “[i]n short, work is not meaningful,” and regards the attractive labour Marx takes as necessary to overcome the division of labour as “meaningful work” (2007, pp. 363, 370, respectively). To

Contemporary political theorists and philosophers writing on meaningful work have for the most part followed in Rawls' footsteps, insofar as little attention has been paid to meaningful work itself as a concept.¹⁰ This is surprising, given the amount of attention that has been placed on the normative weight of meaningful work in recent years. There is little agreement among writers on what meaningful work actually is, and it often gets characterized as one of two views that have come to be the orthodox understandings of the term – the *autonomy view* and the *subjective view*.¹¹ The autonomy view is the understanding of meaningful work that I introduced in the introduction, and sees it, primarily, as work which has a level of complexity that enables the development of a person's skills and individuality (some proponents of the autonomy view also see democratic involvement as necessary). The subjective view is an alternative view that is popular in business ethics and organizational studies (with some proponents in philosophy), and sees meaningful work as work from which persons derive feelings of subjective meaningfulness. But what exactly makes either of these views an attractive account of meaningful work as a concept? Answers are rarely forthcoming from the meaningful work literature, where, for the most part, there is little defence of why one view of meaningful work is chosen over the other or why the view chosen is the best characterization of meaningful work. More work needs to be done to delineate the idea of meaningful work from other types of work that might have normative weight, such as valuable work, fulfilling work, unalienating work, and so on.

go beyond speculation one would need to go through the Rawls archives at Harvard to determine if meaningful work was present in Rawls' lectures on Marx before the publication of *A Theory of Justice*.

¹⁰ For three excellent exceptions, see Walsh 1994; Veltman 2016; Tyssedal 2022.

¹¹ For a decent overview of how meaningful work is understood across different disciplines, see Bailey and Madden 2020.

This chapter aims to make good this gap by defending what I call the *contributive view* of meaningful work, which focuses not only on subjective feelings and complexity in the work process, but also on the fact of social contribution and the extent to which a work process involves an individual in the contributive aspect of the work. While this chapter is concerned with what constitutes meaningful work, its conclusion will have implications for the later arguments (in Chapters 3 and 4) about its normative weight. This is because, by involving the idea of social contribution, the contributive view of meaningful work opens the door to a very different kind of reply to the nonperfectionist objection against assigning meaningful work normative weight. This means that, contra Rawls, questions about the definition of meaningful work certainly *are* a problem of justice. The answers we come to determine whether meaningful work is something that should matter from the perspective of justice in the first place.

I begin the chapter by arguing that while both the subjective view and autonomy view of meaningful work capture part of what makes a work process meaningful, taken either alone or together they are insufficient. The issue with the subjective view is that it is vulnerable to the problem of adaptive preferences (§2.2), and while the autonomy view does better, taken by itself it fails to provide a convincing explanation as to what makes a meaningful work activity distinct from a claim about meaningful activities more generally (§2.3). I then turn to the positive argument and argue that given there is utility in understanding work in terms of a contributive activity, the idea of contribution needs to feature in what makes it meaningful (§2.4). In particular, I argue that meaningful work involves the person doing it in its contributive aspect – i.e., it involves them in questions and decisions over the details of how the work is contributing, to whom it contributes, and so forth (§2.4.1). All in all, I argue that meaningful work is best

understood when its two constitutive conditions – complexity and contribution – are treated not as distinct requirements but taken as mutually supportive (§2.5). The chapter then outlines the way in which the contributive view of meaningful work can be understood as a political idea, and independent from any contentious claims from within a comprehensive conception of the good (§2.6).

2.2 – The Subjective View

The view of meaningful work I will defend is pluralist in the sense that it combines subjective feelings of meaningfulness with objective features of the work process.¹² As such, it is important at the outset to outline not only the underlying rationale for the inclusion of subjective feelings of meaningfulness, but also why such feelings cannot be sufficient and certain objective conditions of meaningful work are also required. I will consider each of these in turn.

Any convincing account of meaningful work seems to require the inclusion of subjective feelings of meaningfulness, as to call an activity meaningful suggests a certain act of interpretation or assignment of value on the part of an individual – a recognition of its meaningfulness. To say some activity is meaningful is to imply that at some point, it is meaningful *for* somebody, who identifies with it and incorporates it into some overarching point of view or outlook. It is this subjective element that seems to separate meaningful work from something like valuable work.¹³ Furthermore, when it comes to assessing whether an activity is meaningful, it is often the perspective of the person actually undertaking the activity that seems

¹² In this the account is similar to recent accounts of the goods of work, e.g. Gheaus and Herzog 2016; Clark 2017.

¹³ This does not deny that there can be a link between the two, e.g., that workers may be more likely to find meaning in work that they deem valuable, or even in work that does well against some account of objective value.

most relevant. This we can call the first-person perspective.¹⁴ Applying the first-person perspective to the topic that is our concern here, meaningful work is work that is meaningful for the worker.

The combination of the first-person perspective and the necessity of subjective feelings, naturally leads to the subjective view of meaningful work – meaningful work is work that is simply believed to be meaningful by the person doing it. Yet what I am calling the subjective view goes one step further and says that subjective feelings of meaningfulness are sufficient in classifying meaningful work. The subjective view is endorsed by much of the social science and organizational studies research on meaningful work, where meaningful work is described and analyzed purely in terms of the psychological state of the person carrying it out (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010, p. 95; Schnell, Höge, and Pollet 2013; Michaelson et al. 2014). And while I am unaware of any political philosophers who defend the *normative* weight of the subjective view, a number of writers do, in the process of defending some other sort of work’s normative value, view, or at the very least imply, meaningful work as being at bottom a subjective concept determined by feelings of meaningfulness alone.¹⁵ For such accounts of meaningful work, work’s objective features are relevant to it being meaningful only insofar as they influence subjective attitudes and beliefs.

¹⁴ Throughout the thesis I limit discussion to this first-person perspective (which includes but is not limited to subjective feelings of meaningfulness). In relation to the subjective view then, I leave aside the possibility that work which is felt as subjectively meaningful by others, but not the person (or the robot) doing it, could also be seen as ‘meaningful work.’

¹⁵ For instance, Adrian Walsh (1994, p. 247) distinguishes between meaningful work “in the distributive sense” and meaningful work as a concept “in the general sense.” And while Walsh understands the former in terms of eudaimonian activity, he recognizes that for the latter there will be a fundamental diversity given it is subject-dependent and based on internal psychological factors. Walsh’s argument concedes that in terms of an account of meaningful work by itself (and so issues of distributive justice aside), “whether or not a person’s work is meaningful is entirely determined by their subjective attitudes towards it” (p. 238, see also p. 244). Similarly, in a defence of Marxian unalienated labour, Jan Kandiyali (2020, p. 558) claims that the application of the term “meaningful work” to Marx can be misleading given that “unalienated labour is not just whatever one happens to find subjectively meaningful.”

The subjective view has intuitive appeal through the way it brings in a level of relativity to what counts as meaningful work. For instance, while the work of a tax accountant might be meaningful for them, it will unlikely be meaningful for a professional surfer, and so on, given persons' different aims and values. However, I will argue the subjective view of meaningful work is false. This is because, while incorporating first-person attitudes is necessary in a theory of meaningful work, the view's claim of such attitudes' sufficiency leads to problems with the view. The strategy here is to show that the subjective view leads to a *reductio*. When meaningful work is equated to meaningfulness in and from work, it leads to several counterintuitive prescriptions of what could count as meaningful work.

2.2.1 – Drudgery, Pointless Work, and Adaptive Preferences

There are many jobs in contemporary economies that, as a result of scientific management and the detailed horizontal division of labour, are forms of drudgery which are excessively mundane and repetitive (see Braverman 1974, pp. 70-123; Bowles, Edwards, and Roosevelt 2005, pp. 328-330). One example of such drudgery would be the role of a 'picker' in Amazon's warehouses, whose job is to repeat the same task – pick item, scan item, place in bin – for the entire shift, and who has to carry around an electronic device that tells them where to go and what to pick, which if they slow down starts to send them messages like 'your rate's down this hour, please speed up' (McClelland 2012; Bloodworth 2018).¹⁶ Other examples might be jobs in call centres where workers follow conversational blueprints that read more like if-then statements than human

¹⁶ Such repetitive work is also horribly dangerous. The rate of injury in American Amazon warehouses is three times as high as the average rate across other private employers, and twice as high as the average in the warehousing industry. Musculoskeletal injuries in backs, shoulders, and knees from the repetitive movements are the most common. See National Employment Law Project 2020.

conversations, or jobs in fast food chains where workers are constantly monitored by security cameras and being timed, or the way an Uber driver is not able to choose how to get from point A to point B but has to follow the app's algorithm. In all these cases any semblance of complexity is designed out of individual jobs and each role becomes simplified down to the execution of basic tasks. While terms like 'scientific management' and 'Taylorism' might first call to mind images of factories and warehouses from the past, they continue to be the defining feature of many contemporary work environments given the way technological changes can enhance the profit rate through deskilling (Head 2005; Evan and Holmes 2013).

Or consider jobs that are simply pointless, insofar as they do not contribute anything of value to anyone at all. These are the jobs that the anthropologist David Graeber terms 'bullshit jobs,' examples being security guards who sit in empty rooms in museums for weeks on end, or office workers undertaking useless tasks simply so a company can claim it has been done, even though everyone involved knows it is just a front and nothing will ever come of the work (such as making mind maps nobody will see) (see, respectively, Graeber 2018, pp. 95, 129-130). These jobs are not pointless relative to some contested idea of value or purpose, but are pointless in an immediate sense.

The objective features of these two sets of jobs – drudgery and pointless work – make them (taken together) analogous to an exemplar of unmeaningful activity, Sisyphus' fate in Greek mythology. Sisyphus' fate was to constantly roll a boulder up a mountain only for it to roll back down again when he reached the top, requiring him to walk back down and start again, ad infinitum. Just like Sisyphus' day is taken up with the same few movements with no prospects of

change, so too is the day of the Amazon picker. And just like Sisyphus begins his day knowing at the end of his efforts the boulder will only roll back down again, so too do many workers start their shift knowing that they are not going to produce or do anything of value. Given then that they share the same core features, it does not seem too much of an abuse of language to call such jobs Sisyphean. And just like we might think that the activity of Sisyphus cannot be a meaningful activity no matter how Sisyphus himself comes to think of it,¹⁷ so too might we also think that drudgery and pointless work cannot be meaningful no matter how the persons doing the work feel about it. This is the *reductio* for the subjective view, as denying this seems the wrong conclusion to draw. It is not the way these workers feel that drives the intuition that their work is not ‘meaningful work,’ it is the nature of their work itself, its endless repetition of mind-numbing drudgery, or its pointlessness, that seems to discount it.

We might try to avoid this *reductio* by insisting that drudgery and pointless work could never be experienced as subjectively meaningful by those carrying them out. Yet such a reply ignores the way subjective feelings of meaningfulness are vulnerable to the problem of adaptive preferences.¹⁸ It is not implausible that persons could – indeed they do – derive a sense of meaningfulness from either uncomplex drudgery or pointless work.¹⁹

¹⁷ See Wolf 2010, pp. 19-30 for an influential argument to this effect. For the contrary claim that Sisyphus’ activity can be meaningful purely as a result of Sisyphus’ beliefs towards it, see Taylor 2000, pp. 319-334. The latter clearly builds on Albert Camus’ famous treatment of Sisyphus’ plight: “All Sisyphus’ silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing ... One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (2000, p. 78). My argument is not coming down on one side of this debate but is instead claiming that understood only as a *work* activity, Sisyphus’ fate seems to require more than subjective meaningfulness in order to be meaningful.

¹⁸ Broadly understood, the idea of adaptive preferences is that given persons often adapt their preferences as a reasonable response to unfavourable circumstances, the subjective feelings of an individual cannot alone determine the wrongness of certain situations. See Nussbaum 2000, pp. 111-166. David Schweickart (1993, p. 226) uses the fact of adaptive preferences to argue ‘felt dissatisfaction’ cannot be the sole measure when it comes to assessing the justice of work structures.

¹⁹ This relates to the (perhaps) surprising result that the distribution of job satisfaction across countries is not congruent with the distribution of work quality. See Muñoz de Bustillo et al. 2011, pp. 450-453.

First, a subjective attitude of meaningfulness might be a result of intentional manipulation by those with power. If we adapt the Sisyphus myth so that Zeus and his cronies installed signs along the mountain path, saying things like ‘the start of something great,’ and ‘nothing worth having is easy,’ it does not seem implausible that such features would manipulate Sisyphus’ state of mind towards the activity, at least eventually. In many workplaces analogous exploitation of meaningfulness is widespread, given how such an attitude can affect performance outcomes like productivity and engagement, reducing absenteeism, and so on. Much of the research in management and organizational studies on meaningful work (where the subjective view is dominant), has this goal front and center, where the ‘management of meaning’ is seen as a vital means to attain organizational goals (Chalofsky 2010; Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010, pp. 92-93, and the references there; cf. Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009). Strategies range from implementing corporate euphemisms (at Amazon there are no bosses or managers because everyone is a ‘team member’ and there are giant messages plastered on the walls such as ‘work hard, have fun, make history’) (Bloodworth 2018, p. 18), to using ‘transformational leadership’ to frame workers’ experiences to change the way they perceive the nature of their job (Piccolo and Colquitt 2006).

Jobs might also come to be seen as meaningful as a function of what the current alternative opportunity set is for workers, and the relative comparisons which are available to them. Returning to Sisyphus, as time progresses and he begins to forget his past, rock rolling will naturally define the horizons of his life. As such, it seems plausible that he might come to see the activity as meaningful due to there no longer being alternatives against which to measure its merits. Similarly, knowing the poor conditions and treatment of workers, one might wonder how

a person could ever derive feelings of meaningfulness from working at a place like Amazon. But this ignores the alternatives – even worse work, or no work at all. Working at a place like Amazon might be seen as subjectively meaningful simply because its conditions have become the standard of low wage work, and it is better than sitting at home worrying about how to pay the rent and keep the heat on. In addition, given part of an education system’s goal is to increase the employability of students, this involves modifying adolescents’ expectations about what work opportunities will be available to them, or the kind of work that ‘suits’ them – and subjective feelings of meaningfulness are surely sensitive to these kind of expectations.²⁰ It might be objected that this kind of adaptation to existing circumstances is not problematic for an account of meaningful work, given it relies on no kind of intentional manipulation by individuals with advantages of power, but instead results from the impersonal forces of the market, technological advancement, and changes in supply and demand. But this presents an inaccurate view of the work environment as an unchangeable and untouchable space to which persons have to adjust. This underplays the ability of political institutions and human action to affect economic structures and the characteristics of the work process. Adjusting to one’s prospects as an Amazon picker is not like adjusting to the fact that there are no more blacksmithing opportunities available.

Alternatively, constructing some story of meaningfulness might simply be a palliative survival strategy just to get through the days of brutally tedious and monotonous work (e.g., see Graeber 2018, p. 307), in the same way that Sisyphus, contemplating the eternity of rock rolling

²⁰ For an account of how existing education systems socialize those from economically disadvantaged and racialized backgrounds to expect lower quality work, see Gomberg 2007, pp. 34-38.

ahead of him, might end up believing his activity is meaningful because this is the only thing that can make it bearable.

These examples should give one pause in endorsing the subjective view, as they demonstrate a distinction ought to be kept between a work activity being subjectively meaningful for the worker carrying it out, and the claim that work activity is actually ‘meaningful work.’ Trying to avoid the *reductio* by claiming uncomplex drudgery or pointless work could never be experienced as subjectively meaningful ignores the reality faced by many workers in the economies of today. Unless then we bite the bullet and concede that Sisyphean work can be meaningful work, we should reject the subjective view. While meaningful work requires a subjective sense of meaningfulness from the worker, the argument here suggests it also requires objective conditions. The question then becomes what these conditions might be.

2.3 – The Autonomy View

I have argued that the objective features of at least one class of jobs – jobs that are uncomplex drudgery – exclude them from being properly considered meaningful work, no matter whether those working these jobs derive a sense of meaningfulness from them. This naturally leads to the second orthodox view of meaningful work – the autonomy view. Richard Arneson (1987, p. 522) provides a nice summary of the view: “[w]hat I am calling ‘meaningful work’ is work that is interesting, that calls for intelligence and initiative, and that is attached to a job that gives the worker considerable freedom to decide how the work is to be done and a democratic say over the character of the work process and the policies pursued by the employing enterprise.” As expressed here, the autonomy view sees meaningful work constituted by two objective features –

a level of complexity that enables initiative and discretion on the part of the worker,²¹ and democratic involvement such that workers have a level of decision-making making power over the work process.²² Clearly, it is the complexity aspect of the autonomy view which allows it to exclude work resulting from the detailed horizontal division of labour, such as the Amazon picker, as potential forms of meaningful work. Indeed, this aspect of meaningful work is antithetical to the very idea of scientific management, given the latter's aim is to pre-plan the labour process such that all thinking and initiative is taken out of the role.

The democratic and complexity aspects of the autonomy view reflect the fact that it is both the overarching organizational structure of the work, and the content of the work itself, that are relevant to the autonomy of the worker being supported.²³ The democratic condition is focusing on how workers exercising considerable decision-making power seems necessary for a work process to be seen as the result of their self-determined and unconstrained choices (Esheté 1974, p. 43; Schwartz 1982, pp. 639-642; Arneson 1987, p. 522; Hasan 2015, p. 482; Breen 2019, pp. 59-61). The complexity aspect, meanwhile, is highlighting that when the work process fails to be reasonably complex, it leaves the worker with no room to use their own discretion in deciding for themselves how to carry it out.²⁴ The narrow functions of the work process are

²¹ Emphasizing complexity in the work process does not mean a focus on 'intellectual' work at the exclusion of 'manual' work. Manual and practical work can be very complex, requiring skill, adaptability, and planning. For some examples, see Rose 2004; Crawford 2009.

²² The existence of one of these features will not guarantee the existence of the other, see: Schwartz 1982, p. 641; Hasan 2015, p. 482n.

²³ Many writers then make the further point that as work has such a dominant place in many persons' lives, the skills and capacities developed in complex work are then crucial for the development of a person's capacity for autonomy generally. For some examples, see: Schwartz 1982, pp. 637-638; Hsieh 2008, pp. 77-79; Roessler 2012, pp. 76-85; Yeoman 2014, pp. 238-239. I discuss the shortcomings of this strategy in §3.2.

²⁴ Two stipulations are in order here. One, given work is tied to the achievement of some end, the discretion complex work affords will still have limits (a surgeon might kill their patient if they go too rogue). And two, complexity should not be understood in a maximizing way where its increase automatically affords the worker more autonomy – work that is too complex is simply overwhelming (only the very talented are able to exercise discretion

constraining in themselves (Esheté 1974, p. 42; Nozick 1974, p. 247; Schwartz 1982, pp. 639-642; Hsieh 2008, pp. 76-79; Moriarty 2009, p. 448). Furthermore, some writers on meaningful work also link complexity in the work process to a slightly more substantive idea of autonomy,²⁵ focusing on how the developed skills and talents required in complex work are necessary for a level of personal agency, initiative, and individuality in the work. For this idea of autonomy, complexity allows a person's work to become self-determined and 'theirs' not only through the way it is a result of their own choices, but also insofar as it enables and is dependent on their own individual capacities and abilities (Schwartz 1982, pp. 635-638; Attfield 1984, p. 143; Roessler 2012, pp. 85-91; Yeoman 2014, pp. 238-239; Osawa, 2020, pp. 333-336).²⁶

The autonomy view of meaningful work is the dominant understanding of meaningful work within political philosophy, where it is endorsed both by those who think it has normative weight, and those who don't.²⁷ In this chapter I focus primarily on the complexity aspect of the autonomy view, for two reasons. First, as I have noted already while complexity is generally seen as an inherent component of meaningful work, not all writers see democratic involvement as strictly necessary (e.g., Roessler 2012, p. 85), or they regard it as a second-best solution in

in cutting-edge theoretical physics). Nevertheless, there is still a qualitative difference between these more natural limits to autonomy through complex work, and drudgery's complete occlusion of autonomy and discretion in work.

²⁵ A different characterization of meaningful work in terms of 'thin' or 'thick' autonomy is given by Hsieh 2008, pp. 76-77.

²⁶ The autonomy view has similarities with, but is not quite the same as, those accounts which link complex and engaging work with the Marxian concept of unalienated labour (Elster 1986; Schweickart 1993, pp. 224-241). There are indeed moments when Marx's criticisms of the nature of work under capitalism seems related to its occlusion of autonomy, given the worker "does not confirm himself in his work" (Marx 2000a, p. 88), and that work "los[es] all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him" (2000b, p. 251). However, Marx's positive conception of what complex work achieves is far thicker than autonomous activity, as it is seen as enabling the self-realization of persons as species-beings, guaranteeing "real freedom, whose activity is precisely labour" (2000c, p. 403). For an account of the normative importance of work that resembles the autonomy view due to it expressing distinctly human capacities in a way that is indebted to a Marxian account of the good, see Smith 2012, pp. 193-200.

²⁷ For the latter, see: Nozick 1974, pp. 246-250; Arneson 1987; Arneson 1990; Kymlicka 2002, pp. 190-195. The remaining references in the prior paragraph form the other side of this debate.

situations where complex work is unable to be brought about (e.g., Hsieh 2009, p. 408). Second, it is the way complex work and its connection to discretion and autonomy can be tied to the first-person perspective that I think makes it especially relevant to work being meaningful. To say meaningful work requires the inclusion of a first-person perspective leaves space for more than subjective feelings in the account and is consistent with a focus on how the features of work influence and affect the objective actions and states of the individual persons doing the work, and the things such features enable or inhibit them to do or to be. While I do think there is space for democratic involvement within the idea of meaningful work, I argue in §2.4.1 that this is best derived from the idea of contribution, not autonomy.

Surprisingly, the connection between complex work and meaningful work is often taken for granted, and in the absence of an explanation one wonders why writers employ the term meaningful work at all.²⁸ What is it then about complex work that connects it to the first-person perspective in a way that makes it meaningful? The key, I argue, is the way the discretion afforded by complex work enables the work to be engaging for the person doing it, such that it relies on their own agency and the development of their individual skills, talents, and capacities, all of which are distinct from the skills and talents required of other persons in other forms of work. This allows both the person undertaking it, and others, to recognize and identify the work as ‘their’ work, not because the work is not substitutable (I could hire a different carpenter to get the same table), but because it relies upon a person’s own self-directed planning and execution and is a result of their own agency, in a way that is not possible for work that is simple drudgery (even if such drudgery occurs within a democratically organized firm). Any connection to

²⁸ Exceptions are Attfield 1984, p. 143; Roessler 2012, pp. 86-88. For accounts emphasizing the connection between complex work, autonomy, and the development of skills and talents, but with no reliance on ‘meaningful work,’ see Taylor 2004; Arnold 2012.

agency and initiative is clearly missing in jobs defined by the detailed horizontal division of labour. Amazon pickers get to do lots of picking, but they don't get to do any choosing. It is this consequence of complex work that provides the rationale for it being meaningful. As outlined earlier, for work to be meaningful it must be meaningful for somebody. The issue with uncomplex drudgery, with the way it precludes any sort of development or initiative in the worker, is that it takes the somebody – the individual – out of the equation.

So far so good for the autonomy view, but is it enough? What about the other type of work that seems equally unmeaningful – pointless work? Let's return to Sisyphus one more time. Perhaps now at each switchback in the mountain path, Sisyphus is presented with a variety of complex tasks (diagnosing and fixing a misfiring engine, designing a bridge, you can fill in whatever activity you like) that he must complete to continue his journey. These are tasks that require much use of developed skills and initiative, such that the tasks become self-determined for Sisyphus and can be appropriately regarded as 'his own' work. However, Sisyphus still faces the same fate once he reaches the top of the mountain, the boulder rolls back down (only now it also destroys all the products of his work) and he has to start the journey all over again.

And so while Sisyphus' circumstances have undoubtedly improved, there is still clearly a deep sense of pointlessness and futility overhanging the activity, and this is something that seems relevant to it being meaningful. And as we have seen, the prevalence of David Graeber's bullshit jobs suggest that there is no guarantee complex work won't be pointless. I doubt we want to say that a worker whose job is to make pointless mind maps that nobody will ever use has meaningful work, no matter how much complexity and skill is required in their construction.

Here insisting on work's complexity (even in combination with subjective meaningfulness) does not seem to fully capture what might make work meaningful, some other sort of objective feature seems required. The example of pointless work suggests the idea of *contribution* needs to also feature in an account of meaningful work.

Could we not say, though, that pointless work is not really work at all? And that this is why it is not possible for things like Graeber's bullshit jobs (or Sisyphus' person-engaging rock rolling) to be instances of meaningful work. Such a move relies on what we can call a disjointed approach to meaningful work – disjointed because it uses one condition to delineate work from nonwork activities and then another condition to delineate meaningful from unmeaningful work. If a proponent of the autonomy view endorses such a disjointed approach, then they can say that contribution is only related to meaningful work as a philosophically uninteresting precondition. It would be like saying a condition of a meaningful book is that it first has a front and back cover.

But adopting this move makes it unclear what makes meaningful work any different to meaningful activity more generally, and this is problematic. Meaningful work needs to be conceptualized as more than meaningful activity that *just so happens* to occur at work. If we think about other activities, their nature seems highly relevant to what might make them meaningful. For example, we might think that a meaningful friendship is one that is based on traits such as trust and empathy, but these traits are connected to a friendship in the first place, and not just to the idea of meaningful by itself. What makes work meaningful is going to be different to what makes a friendship meaningful, or a marriage meaningful, or sports rivalries

meaningful, and so on. However, if we adopt the disjointed approach to meaningful work then we will run into something of a boundary problem here, insofar as the features which are taken as relevant (complexity and self-determined choices) are not unique to the work activity. As far as I can see then a proponent of the autonomy view is then left with two options, either concede that the view potentially classifies examples of pointless work, such as Graeber's bullshit jobs, as meaningful work, or accept that the idea of contribution needs to feature in what makes work meaningful.

2.4 – The Contributive View

The reality of pointless work suggests that an account of meaningful work requires not only the conditions for the work to be self-determined and autonomy-enabling, but also what I am calling a contribution, or contributive, condition. Just as the case of the Amazon picker naturally led to the autonomy view and its emphasis on complexity, I will argue that the examples of pointless work lead to the contributive condition of meaningful work.

While such a focus is rare, there are several writers who claim that details about a work activity's contribution to others, or its 'social worth,' is relevant to whether that work is meaningful (Veltman 2016, pp. 124-131; Breen 2019, p. 53), or if not to it being meaningful to it having normative weight (Gomberg 2007, pp. 66-74; Gheaus and Herzog 2016, pp. 75-76; Brudney 2018; Kandiyali 2020).²⁹ The connection here might first appear trivially obvious – if a worker's mind maps actually contributed to some end or purpose, or if Sisyphus' rock rolling went towards building a hospital at the top of the hill, then the work becomes more meaningful.

²⁹ In organizational and management studies this is often called work's 'interactional meaningfulness.' See Bailey and Madden 2016.

However, the way the example of pointless work leads to the contributive condition of meaningful work is not as straightforward as it first appears. For a convincing account, we need to take some extra steps and give more argumentation. The rest of the chapter is devoted to that task.

We have seen reasons to think the ‘meaningful’ in meaningful work needs to be understood in relation to the nature of work as an activity. What I will now defend is the premise that work is best understood in terms of a contributive activity. While I won’t attempt to provide an analytical definition of work, I argue in the spirit of social ontology that there is utility in understanding work as an act of social contribution towards unassociated others.³⁰

It has been argued that one major feature of work that separates it from other activities is its inherent instrumentality, and how it requires a sustained effort directed at the achievement of some task or end outside of (or in addition to) the satisfactions of the activity alone (Becker 1980, p. 44). I find this a useful starting point as it seems to nicely capture how work is inherently different from play or leisure, wherein it is explicitly the satisfaction of the activities alone which explain why they are done. However, without further refinement the idea of work as effort towards some end is overinclusive. A person making a ship in a bottle for their grandchild has a particular end and the activity requires much effort, and so on with many other obviously nonwork activities.

However, if we refine instrumentality by understanding work as activity that contributes to the needs and or wants of unassociated others, the account seems to do much better at

³⁰ On work as a concept being social and historical, see Appiah 2021, pp. 9-10.

capturing a set of activities that we would want to call ‘work.’ I add the stipulation of contribution to *unassociated* others as while some nonwork activities are self-focused, many others are not and do contribute to the needs and or wants of close connections (such as the above example of making a ship in a bottle for a grandchild).

By talking of contribution to the *needs and or wants of others* I mean the following: activities that contribute to the successful carrying out of the aims and plans of others, insofar as such aims and plans meet a minimal standard of reasonableness. All I mean by the rider is that the content of a person’s aims and plan of life meets uncontroversial standards of acceptable conduct between moral equals (does not harm or manipulate others, for example). In determining then whether an activity is a work activity, what counts is assessing whether it is useful for other (unassociated) persons, given their particular circumstances, abilities, and plan of life. Activities could be a contribution either by providing some good or service that is useful to specific plans of life (the work of luthiers is useful to musicians and music buffs), or by being useful generally (the work of garbage collectors is useful to everyone). I characterize work as contribution in this way to capture the idea of work being an act that meets ‘society’s needs,’ or an act of ‘social contribution,’ or as activity that is ‘socially necessary’ (see, respectively: Pateman 1970, p. 55; Gomberg 2018, p. 514; Geuss 2021, pp. 18-21), but in terms that are less vague and opaque. If a person’s work is a social contribution then at some point it must be useful for somebody else, albeit often indirectly.

The account of contribution does not indiscriminately track subjective wants or preferences but relies on activities’ objective utility to other persons given their plan of life. In

cases where a person is mistaken about the facts of the matter, or has not properly considered the consequences of actions, the meeting of certain preferences might be ineffective as a means towards the achievement of their plans or, in extreme cases, could even be destructive of such plans. For example, according to the account presented here, if a person spends their paycheck gambling on slot machines and later comes to regret their decision in light of their overall plan of life, then in this case the casino owner has failed to provide an objective contribution. Furthermore, activities that are useful to aims that are plainly unreasonable are also not contributive in the way I understand it, even if they satisfy subjective wants. To use the same example, if the casino owner wanted slot machines merely to greedily exploit the addictions of the vulnerable, then the builder of the slot machines has also failed to provide an objective contribution through their selling of the machines to the owner. At the same time however, the account takes seriously the diversity of desires and aims between persons, given objective usefulness is understood only in relation to the standpoint of the recipient, and the content of their own plan of life. It is this combination of an objective element along with the taking of the aims and plans of individuals as primary, that explains why I talk of contribution to needs and or wants of others. For the account of contribution used here, what people *need* is partly contingent on what they actually *want* to do with their lives and the things they want to prioritize.

Conceptualizing work in these terms captures most of the activities defined by the employment relationship, which obviously need to be included under ‘work.’ The rationale here is simply the information function of the price mechanism, it is because people have had, or will have, their needs met by your activity that they are willing to pay. As Brookes Brown recently puts the point: “[t]he price of a stay at a resort in the Bahamas signals that these locations are

coveted – which they are. The price of a rotting tomato signals that people don't like inedible produce – which they don't. Such a system solves a complex coordination problem, making effective distribution possible even in the absence of clear knowledge of the billions of different factors that influence need and production” (2022, p. 232). Joseph Carens, in discussing the kind of motivations that could potentially underly market activity in a just society, suggests much the same thing as “[t]he market then is simply a mechanism which makes it possible for the community to indicate to people what productive activities they can engage in if they wish to help the community achieve its goals. Prices are merely sources of information about what the community wants done” (1981, p. 195). For Carens, an individual has a duty to contribute maximally to society (more on this later), but the way this is cashed out is in terms of a person's duty to earn as much pre-tax income as they can (a similar argument seeing market activity as a positive-sum game, increasing the ability of persons to carry out their plan of life, can be found in Brennan 2012, pp. 318-320).³¹

We can acknowledge the basic point of the connection between market prices and contribution while at the same time recognizing that it goes too far to equate *all* market activity with social contribution, because as we have seen, there will be some market activities that do not contribute to the successful carrying out of a person's plan of life at all, or which contribute to plans of life that are plainly unreasonable.³² Furthermore, it would be mistaken to correlate an individual's contribution directly to their level of income, given the existence in markets of rent-

³¹ One of the most influential accounts of this allocative power of market prices is Hayek 1945.

³² One way of delineating work as contribution from a paid job is to imagine the consequences of an entire sector coming to a halt. Rutger Bregman (2017, Ch. 7) compares how a bank strike in Ireland lasted for six months without seeming to cause any real disruption, while a strike of garbage collectors in New York City lasted only nine days before the effects were enormous.

seeking activities and professions.³³ These stipulations need not detract from the contributive view, as the point is not to reduce contributive activity to the market, but instead that market activity can be a useful (albeit imperfect) proxy for activity that meets the needs and or wants of others. Such a view can provide an underlying rationale as to why we want to call participation in the labour market ‘work,’ yet in doing so still highlight that there is utility in maintaining the distinction between the activity of ‘work’ and the thing of a ‘job.’ This after all is one of the takeaways from studies like Graeber’s – in some jobs people aren’t really working at all.

But contribution to unassociated others also captures why certain activities that are unremunerated should still properly be classified as work (and potentially be forms of meaningful work).³⁴ Market exchange is not the only kind of social cooperation, as it can fail in promoting certain kinds of benefits (see Heath 2006a). Take parenting as an example, while many of the activities one does as a parent that meet the needs of a child are going to be personal and affective such that it would be inappropriate to regard them as work, these are not the only sorts of activities involved. Parenting is also an act of social reproduction where one contributes to the development of traits and capacities of future public citizens, which is not only meeting the needs of the child (although they are this), but also contributing to eventually meeting the needs of unassociated others. As argued by Stuart White, parents “should see themselves, in part, as trustees for the wider community, who, in return for public support [e.g., paternity leave], are responsible for raising children in ways that serve the public good, e.g. to help nurture the virtues and capacities relevant to effective citizenship” (2003, p. 111; see also Robeyns 2012, p. 164).

³³ Evidence suggests there is no direct (and even possibly an inverse) relationship between the level of income earned from work and the positive contribution it makes. See New Economic Forum 2009; Lockwood, Nathanson, and Weyl 2017, pp. 1660-1663.

³⁴ Most accounts of meaningful work are limited to paid employment, but there are exceptions (e.g., Breen 2019, p. 55), and those who acknowledge the limitation as a shortcoming (Hsieh 2008, p. 73n; Roessler 2012, p. 73).

Similar comments can I believe be made regarding other unpaid activities (care work, volunteering, etc.) that we think should be classified as work. Such contribution is an objective feature of such activities, the particular reasons why they are unremunerated (such as societal devaluing of what is seen as ‘women’s work,’ or persons free riding on public goods) does not detract from this fact.

It seems reasonable then to see work as an activity that contributes to unassociated others. Work is activity that meets the needs of others, needs that are determined by the content of their particular aims and plan of life. Doing so allows the account to pick up on the idea of work as, in part, an interpersonal and social activity based on and reflecting the mutual, but often indirect, interdependencies of talent between persons. Work cannot be entirely ‘me time’ in the same way leisure and nonwork activities can – this is why a bullshit job comes across as oxymoronic, but not bullshit leisure.

2.4.1 – Involvement in Work’s Contributive Aspect

Given I have argued that the ‘meaningful’ in meaningful work should be understood relative to the nature of work (end of §2.3), the consequence of the above argument on the connection between work and contribution is that the idea of contribution *should* feature in the idea of meaningful work. In this section I outline *how* I think the idea of contribution is best incorporated as a constitutive aspect of meaningful work.

The first thing to say is the mere fact that through work one is contributing to the needs of unassociated others does not suffice for the contributive condition of meaningful work. If this

were the case, given my argument that there is utility in understanding work as a contributive activity, this would then mean that it would be difficult for any sort of work to not satisfy the contributive condition, and so this would not make for a very useful inclusion in an account of meaningful work.

We can get around this problem however by recalling the first-person perspective implied by the idea of meaningful work – i.e., for work to be meaningful it must be meaningful for the person actually doing it. It is worth noting here that work which is highly contributive and vital to social reproduction could be extremely meaningful from a *social* perspective, despite, because it is drudgery, failing to count as meaningful from a first-person perspective (think of backbreaking food harvesting or dirty and repetitive sanitation work).³⁵ Of course, the overall social meaning of a person's work will often play an important part in their subjective feelings of meaningfulness in the work (perhaps they identify with the good it serves). But, even if an individual worker was to derive such feelings of meaningfulness from contributive drudgery, the work would still fail to qualify (given the argument of §2.3) as properly 'meaningful work' from the first-person perspective. It still fails to provide the worker the necessary discretion to develop and deploy their individual skills and talents such that the work can be seen as 'their' work that results from their own agency.

How else then might work's contribution be linked to the first-person perspective? We could focus on how occupations from different sectors of the economy vary in their contribution (if they contribute at all), as a result of the nature of the product being produced or service being

³⁵ While I think this is plausible, full consideration of what might constitute socially meaningful work lies outside this dissertation's scope. See note 14.

offered. This is the approach most often taken by accounts that do consider the normative relevance of work's social worth (Gheaus and Herzog 2016, pp. 75-76; Veltman 2016, pp. 124-131; Breen 2019, p. 53). However, I want to avoid making these sorts of judgements on the nature of contribution or on what sort of work might contribute 'more' than others. This is why I characterize contribution as activity that meets the needs of persons given their particular aims and plans of life, without speaking much on the content of such aims (other than them meeting an undemanding baseline). The reason I employ this strategy is because while some answers are plainly obvious (a paramedic contributes more than a corrupt lobbyist, a parent contributes despite not being paid), such judgements over what types of work contribute more will quickly fall back on particular and contested ideas of value once we make more fine-grained distinctions. Does a professional surfer or a tax accountant contribute more to society? People will reasonably disagree about this and the multitude of other such comparisons. This is not to say such judgements about contribution cannot be made or are not worth pursuing, but only that such judgements seem inappropriate within an account of meaningful work given its inherent first-person perspective. (As an aside, this difference between contributing against a binary standard and contributing against a continuous standard will be crucial to my argument connecting meaningful work to self-respect in Chapter 4).

An alternative way to link contribution to the first-person perspective is to focus on the position and involvement of an individual in the contributive aspect of their work, a position that often seems to be taken for granted by those accounts focusing on the nature of the contribution. By the 'contributive aspect' of a work activity, I mean the portion of a work process that is concerned with the details and specifics of how the work actually does meet the needs of

unassociated others by contributing to them successfully carrying out their aims and plan of life. It is the portion of the work process that is involved with questions such as ‘why this product over that product?’, ‘who are the people that will most benefit from this activity?’, and the like. There are two relevant features here, the extent to which a worker *understands* and is confident in how their work is actually contributing to meeting the needs and wants of others, and how a work’s structure objectively *involves* (or fails to involve) workers in the aspects of the work process pertaining to its contribution. The necessity of each of these features correlates to the subjective and objective aspects of the first-person perspective implied by an account of meaningful work.

The basis of including involvement in the contributive aspect of work in the account of meaningful work derives from what we take work to be – an activity that contributes to others. The idea is that it is only when a person is involved in a work process’ contributive aspect that there can be an alignment between the individual features of a person’s work and the characterization of work more generally as a contributive activity. Such involvement with the details of contribution enables a person to be acquainted, integrated, and engaged with the particular needs their work meets, enabling their work to be constituted by a more direct connectedness with the persons who benefit from it in some way. Without such involvement the work process, from the perspective of the individual, is disconnected from what makes it work in the first place.³⁶

³⁶ I talk of a worker’s disconnect from the outcome of their labour instead of alienation from labour’s outcome in order to avoid the perfectionist commitments suggested by the latter.

Not all types of work involve persons in this contributive aspect to the same degree. Consider the following:

“It’s hard to take pride in a bridge you’re never gonna cross, in a door you’re never gonna open. You’re mass-producing things and you never see the end result of it. (Muses) I worked for a trucker one time. And I got this tiny satisfaction when I loaded a truck. At least I could see the truck depart loaded. In a steel mill, forget it. You don’t see where nothing goes.” (Terkel 1974, pp. 1-2)

“Most people at the bank didn't know why they were doing what they were doing. They would say that they are only supposed to log into this one system and select one menu option and type certain things in. They didn't know why.” (Graeber 2018, p. 173)

In each of these cases the issue is not that the work is not contributing at all, but that the person in their role has been disconnected from the details pertaining to its contribution, there is a large distance between the person and the outcome of their labour – their contribution is not palpable. This makes such work very different to many other kinds of work, where details about the work’s contribution are front and center for the person carrying it out (think here of the work undertaken by a parent, or a self-employed craftsperson, or a garbage collector).

What sort of factors then influence the extent to which a person is involved in the contributive aspect of their work? In relation to the worker *understanding* the nature of their contribution, we might first think that it is the detailed horizontal division of labour, with the way it restricts workers to narrow functions, that brings about a disconnect between the worker and details over how the outcome of their labour contributes to others (Braverman 1974, p. 125). This is a point recognized by J. A. Hobson, as he sees the division of labour (and also the proliferation of markets) as undermining the social meaning of labour and how it meets the needs of others from being conscious to the worker. It is only when the worker sees the man wear the

watch they make, thinks Hobson, that they can fully appreciate the social value of their work (Hobson 1914, p. 250).³⁷ Similar comments are also of course found in Émile Durkheim's comments that the detailed horizontal division of labour does not permit "a regular harmony of functions," which can be supported by a less degrading kind of division that presumes "[t]he worker, far from being hemmed in by his task, does not lose sight of his collaborators, that he acts upon them, and reacts to them. He is, then, not a machine who repeats his movements without knowing their meaning, but he knows that they tend, in some way, towards an end that he conceives more or less distinctly. He feels that he is serving something" (1964, p. 372). And it is indeed the detailed horizontal division of labour that is causing the disconnect in the above example of the bank worker, their being limited to a small set of functions precludes their involvement with the contributive aspect of the work. Contrast this with, say, a skilled car mechanic in a workshop who repairs a customer's car through a series of complex tasks over which they have discretion.³⁸ For the mechanic, the nature of their contribution is clear. This suggests that complexity and discretion in the work process might not only be relevant to it being meaningful through the way it enables autonomy and individualization in the work, but also through the way it enables a greater palpable involvement in its contributive aspect.

³⁷ Hobson thinks state-controlled (or at least heavily regulated) industry can be legitimate in part out of its ability to enable individual workers to recognize the social value of their work. Such state control is not necessary in the 'creative' professions, as these workers are independent market actors and the social value of their work is front and center. See Hobson 1914, pp. 250ff. For similar concerns about persons identifying with the social aims of their work, but with a focus more on education and training, see Dewey 1916, Chs. 19, 23. For example: "an education which acknowledges the full intellectual and social meaning of a vocation would include instruction in the historic background of present conditions; training in science to give intelligence and initiative in dealing with material and agencies of production; and study of economics, civics, and politics, to bring the future worker into touch with the problems of the day and the various methods proposed for its improvement" (p. 318).

³⁸ Trends in work organization away from Taylorism and towards 'team production' (where worker groups are given discretion and fragmented tasks are replaced with jobs that are more complex and larger in scope), have been shown to give workers a more intimate understanding of the overall production process and how their work contributes to the larger organizational output. For examples in the automotive sector, see Berggren 1993.

However, focusing on the complexity of work does not seem to guarantee involvement in the contributive aspect of all types of work. In the operation of modern complex economies, the social division of labour across and between occupations means that many social contributions are not only the result of the skills of a single individual, but the different and in some ways complementary talents of several. For example, if we return to the skilled car mechanic, even if they are a master with decades of experience there are still likely certain jobs that they simply cannot do. If, say, a car had a damaged piston inside the engine, the mechanic would likely send it off to a specialist whose expertise is fixing those particular engines. As such, for the mechanic and the specialist their work is now only one part of a larger process, where it is the totality of which that ends up contributing to others. I do not think the social division of labour in this simple example influences to any meaningful extent the involvement of either the mechanic or the specialist in the contributive aspect of their work. However, I do think the example has heuristic value if we generalize out to consider the social division of labour that exists in economies around us.

Indeed, I argue there is one class of work where there is a danger of workers being disconnected from the contributive aspect of their work to an extent that becomes relevant to it being meaningful. This is work within firms that are large and complex. These firms contain within them a significant degree of specialization across a diverse set of roles. Large banks, to take just one example, employ data scientists, lawyers, accountants, consultants, analysts, and so on. While these jobs are surely highly complex and give workers much discretion in how to carry them out, the diversity within the firm (as well as simply its sheer size) brings in the potential for the actual way a worker's labour contributes to meeting the needs of others to be far less

palpable. This means that for these workers, despite their work being complex and engaging there is the potential that, to use the words of the aforementioned steel mill worker, they “don’t see where nothing goes.” From the perspective of the worker, the more links in the chain of production the more “notional” the idea of social contribution becomes (see Brudney 2019).

Does this mean prospects for meaningful work are simply precluded for those who work in large complex firms? No. But it does at least initially suggest that meaningful work in these kind of workplaces might be sensitive to the extent management practices exist which inform workers about how their work forms part of the contribution made by the firm more generally, or which situates them closer to the beneficiaries of their work (for exploration of some of these practices see Podolny, Khurana, and Hill-Popper 2005, pp. 25-29; Piccolo and Colquitt 2006; Grant 2007; Rosso et al. 2010, p. 101). Interestingly, this exclusion of workers from any “imaginative share in the work of the enterprise as a whole [resulting in] their sometimes total ignorance of the value, social utility and destination of the things they manufacture” (2002, p. 51), was one Simone Weil’s major criticisms of the nature of work as it occurred in mid-century firms, and she proposed several processes as a corrective (from technical demonstrations about the nature of products to lessons about where products end up, the kinds of persons that use them, and the sort of social surroundings to which they contribute) (2002, p. 70; see also Gaus 1983, p. 283). Indeed, it seems likely that at least for some of the qualitative accounts on which Graeber built his theory of ‘bullshit jobs,’ the issue is less about the absence of any social contribution through work but the disconnect between an individual and the social effects of their work (see Soffia et al. 2022). Additionally, another relevant factor might be whether management in these firms demonstrate a good track record of responding to and anticipating the

needs and wants of consumers. If they have, then directives will likely be seen by workers not just as the whims of management but as rational responses to market demand. This ought to give workers confidence their work is productive given successful market activity can (often) be a useful proxy for contributive activity.

But to fully capture the importance of social contribution from the first-person perspective, involvement in the contributive aspect of a work process requires more than workers merely understanding how their work contributes, but also requires workers' *objective involvement* in the aspects of the work process pertaining to its contribution. This then suggests the further point that the organizational form of firms (especially when they are large and complex) will be relevant to the question of what might make work meaningful within them. By themselves there is nothing wrong with firms from the perspective of meaningful work as, if anything, the way they exploit the social division of labour allows individuals to contribute to a greater set of needs than if they were independent market actors. However, when firms are organized hierarchically certain aspects of the work process, aspects that are directly related to the contributive aspect of the firm, are often under the exclusive control of high-level managers and executives.³⁹ I have in mind here not so much those decisions pertaining to the work process itself, but the decisions relating to the *externally oriented strategic* decisions of the enterprise, i.e., decisions pertaining to the overarching goals and end of the firm.⁴⁰ These are the sorts of decisions that bear on, for instance, the markets in which the firm will operate, or the ways in

³⁹ It goes without saying that the reason firms are in actuality often organized vertically, is because such an organization is more efficient. But all that shows is that the determinants of maximally efficient work and meaningful work might sometimes be in tension, and this should hardly be surprising. The brutally repetitive and monotonous conditions in Amazon warehouses are based on efficiency too.

⁴⁰ For useful typologies of the range of issues within a firm over which control or involvement may be exercised, see Bernstein 1976, p. 493; Doppelt 1981, p. 267; Young 1990, pp. 223-224; Hsieh 2005, pp. 122-123; Arnold 2017, p. 113.

which the firm decides to respond to consumer demand. As such, these decisions are directly concerned with the social contributions and consequences of a firm's activity, encompassing details regarding the larger role of the firm's work, how it is situated in relation to other contributive firms and social institutions, the kinds of persons it benefits, the nature of how it meets needs, and so on.

What makes democratic involvement in the externally oriented decisions of a firm necessary in an account of meaningful work is the way it aligns the work process of individual workers with the activity of work as social contribution. When firms are large and complex, democratic involvement brings about an objective change to persons' work that allows it to align more closely with the characterization of work as a contributive activity, enabling them to be more integrated and engaged with the particular needs their work meets. When a work process fails to involve a worker in these questions, it disconnects them from the very thing that makes their activity work in the first place. As such, it becomes difficult for the individual's work activity to be regarded as meaningful *work*. And while this democratic involvement will likely increase workers' understanding of how their work fits into the firm's larger activity and how it is useful and contributive (Rothschild-Witt and Witt 1986; Sayer 2009, p. 6; Soffia et al. 2022, pp. 833-836), the point here is not just about epistemic consequences, but about how involvement in decisions traditionally left to management connects workers' day-to-day activity more objectively to the social consequences of a firm's economic activity and the way it impacts and effects the lives of others. This is why managerial practices aiming only to increase a

worker's understanding of how their work contributes will not suffice as a corrective to the disconnect between workers and the contributive aspect of their work.⁴¹

There are several ways to institutionally afford workers democratic involvement in firms' externally oriented decisions, ranging from more moderate proposals such as management actively consulting or partnering with workers, to more radical calls for worker control within full-fledged workplace democracy (with other possibilities in between, like worker representatives on boards or workers having veto power over certain decisions). The reason I have been referring to the somewhat vague notion of a worker's 'democratic involvement' in the contributive aspect of a work process, is because the account of meaningful work defended here does not prescribe as necessary one kind of democratic involvement over another, all it requires is that the involvement gives workers actual power and influence – it cannot be mere tokenism.⁴²

One consideration that will be relevant however, will be the extent more radical forms of democratic involvement, like full worker control, might have certain costs and inefficiencies which resultantly decrease the extent workers actually contribute to others (a result relevant to work being meaningful). And while this is possible, there are also those who argue that any such inefficiencies, insofar as they do exist, are not inherent to democratic firms per se but are the result of the socialized expectations and motivations from within economies where hierarchical

⁴¹ Of course, it may well be that once workers are involved in the managerial decisions of a firm, they might come to realize that there is not much of any social benefit to their work at all, given the way market activity is only an imperfect proxy for contributive activity. As an example, workers in a steel production factory might, upon being involved in the firm's externally oriented decisions, come to realize that the firm's major customer is an illegal arms manufacturer. While it might be good business to sell their products for such use, it clearly is not social contribution in the terms I have defended above. But this is an implication of the argument that I am not unhappy with – given the nature of their work, the workers' inability to understand their work as meaningful seems appropriate.

⁴² For a good criticism of the way 'participation' is used as a form of tokenism in management practices, see Pateman 1970, pp. 70ff. For a classic typology of actual forms of participation and mere tokenism, but in the context of citizen involvement in state policy, see Arnstein 1969.

firms are the norm (Bowles and Gintis 1993). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest several epistemic advantages for workplace democracy, and that once externally oriented decisions are made by workers (or perhaps more accurately, by managers that are accountable to workers as opposed to managers carrying out top-down directives from executives),⁴³ then this can lead to increased long-term sustainability of a firm, given workers are more likely to be concerned with the social benefits and long term effects of a firm's activity compared to concerns with short-term profitability (Landemore and Ferreras 2016, pp. 71-72; Gerlsbeck and Herzog 2020, pp. 314ff.; see also Ciepley 2013, pp. 147-149).

Now, as we have seen for at least some of the proponents of the autonomy view workplace democracy (or at least democratic involvement) is a necessary component of meaningful work as it is only when workers have a say in the firm's policy and planning that their work be properly understood as self-determined and unconstrained.⁴⁴ However, this does not mean that the contributive aspect of meaningful work, and its implications for workplace democracy, simply fold into the autonomy dimension. This is because while I am not denying the link between workplace democracy and autonomy, I do not think this fully captures what it is about the vertical division of labour that can sometimes be problematic from the perspective of meaningful work. The value of democratic initiatives is not only found in the agency they give workers through procedural involvement in the firm's decisions, but also in the way they substantively change the set of decisions and details that constitute their work in the first place.

⁴³ Even the more radical forms of full worker control do not imply that management *per se* will be abolished from the enterprise. As Marx notes (1991, Ch. 23), a worker-controlled enterprise will still require management as "all labour in which many individuals co-operate necessarily requires a commanding will to co-ordinate and unify the process, and functions which apply not to partial operations but to the total activity of the workshop, much as that of an orchestra conductor. This is a productive job, which must be performed in every combined mode of production." See also Cohen 1978, pp. 113-114; Young 1990, p. 216.

⁴⁴ See §2.3.

And such a change to a person's work, from the perspective of the individual undertaking it, can go some way in transforming it into a more palpable contribution to the needs of others, enabling both the worker and others to regard their activity as properly reflecting the connectedness to others that the characterization of work requires.

The relevance of contribution to the account of meaningful work extends then beyond the question of just *whether* or *how much* a person's work is contributing to others, but also how they, as an individual person, are situated and *involved* with that contribution. Details pertaining to the contributive aspect of work are front and center for many workers, but for others – and I have suggested especially those workers who are employed in large and complex firms – there is an objective disconnect between their daily work and its role as a form of social contribution. This means that it will often not be enough to look at the contribution of a large and complex firm and, almost as a logical extension, assume that its employees who have jobs with complexity and discretion will have meaningful work. This misses how involvement in the contributive aspect of work is often unequally distributed.

2.5 – Meaningful Work as a Person-Engaging Contribution

I have argued that two popular accounts of meaningful work, the subjective view and the autonomy view, are both insufficient, and do not capture the heart of the concept. Meaningful work is more than work from which persons derive subjective feelings of meaningfulness, and it is more than work whose complexity enables autonomy and discretion such that the work is person-engaging. I have argued that the work of an individual can only be properly meaningful when its features align with the larger characterization of work, which requires the individual to

be substantially involved in the details over the contributive aspect of the work. For the view defended here, for work to be meaningful it needs to provide persons the opportunity to perform a ‘person-engaging contribution.’⁴⁵ For the rest of this thesis, talk of ‘meaningful work’ will be in these terms. A work process is meaningful when it is person-engaging (and so requires sufficient complexity), and when it objectively involves the person in its contributive aspects (and so in large and complex firms requires democratic involvement). It is then the normative importance of activity so defined that is relevant when considering the compatibility of meaningful work with a liberal theory of justice.

Now, seeing contribution as inherent in an account of meaningful work obviously does not mean that involvement in the contributive aspect of work is the whole story. Involvement in such a process that is otherwise not in any way complex, either in a democratic firm or as an independent worker, does not make up for the autonomy deadening aspects of the drudgery, where the rote repetition not only lacks any expression of skill or talent but actively degrades it. Furthermore, the objective features of complexity and contribution taken together are not the whole story either, as the subjective component requires the work to be felt as meaningful by the person doing it. While using subjective attitudes alone to determine what counts as meaningful work inevitably leads to problems of adaptive preferences, we cannot forget their necessity. But for what it’s worth, both the variety of skills and capabilities encouraged and fostered by work,

⁴⁵ This account of meaningful work as a person-engaging contribution to others has affinities to the kinds of work activities that Paul Gomberg thinks are vital to his account of ‘contributive justice.’ For Gomberg, justice requires the fairer distribution of the opportunity to engage in complex work, insofar as it is a means to “contribut[e] developed abilities to the good of others and [earn] esteem for those contributions” (2007, p. 66). And while Gomberg does not put his account in these terms, given the emphasis is on complexity and contribution in the labour process, we could understand the argument for contributive justice as pertaining to a fairer distribution of meaningful work. However, while Gomberg makes some brief comments on the vertical division of labour (pp. 77-80), he does not link it – as I have attempted to do here – with the contributive aspect of work and a worker’s distance to the outcome of their labour.

along with an involvement in the positive impact of one's work on others, are two features that have been found to be strong predictors of subjective meaningfulness in quantitative studies (Fried and Ferris 1987; May, Gilson, and Harter 2004; Grant 2008; Schnell, Höge, and Pollet 2013; Bailey and Madden 2016), and they (or their absence) also constantly get raised in qualitative studies looking at what persons find meaningful or fulfilling in their work (Terkel 1974, pp. 1-10, 57-59, 221-32, 256-65, 344-51, 675-83; Graeber 2018, pp. 39-40, 55, 76-77, 98, 115-16).

To characterize meaningful work as a 'person-engaging contribution' aims to convey that the two objective conditions of meaningful work are not entirely discrete but are in fact mutually supportive. When work is complex such that it enables a greater level of discretion, this bears on how the contributive aspect of work affects it being meaningful. When one is contributing to unassociated others through work which relies on individually developed skills and abilities, then it becomes more meaningful as it can be seen as 'their' contribution in a way that contribution through drudgery cannot. Complexity is important in the account of meaningful work not only because it makes an activity reflect a person's own unique skill and talents, but because it imbues a person's *contributive activity* with a more personal and individualized element. When a mechanic spends all day troubleshooting a misfiring engine and eventually comes upon and fixes the issue, they have benefitted an unassociated person through a full display and deployment of their own skills. The same cannot be said of an Amazon picker, even if they were heavily involved in the work's contributive aspect. Theirs is a contribution that is easily replaceable, in the sense that any other human body could come in and serve the same function.

The inclusion of the contribution condition also bears on the way a work process' complexity affects the way it is meaningful. Indeed, the complexity of a work process and its contribution are, in one sense, not so disjointed as they might first appear. Taking a(n) (albeit somewhat idealized) conception of the interdependencies between persons, activity that is complex has an *inherent* contributive element. In Part III of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls states:

“It is a feature of human sociability that we are by ourselves but parts of what we might be. We must look to others to attain the excellences that we must leave aside, or lack altogether.” Given this, “we cannot overcome, nor should we wish to, our dependence on others ... [persons] rely upon [others] to do things they could not have done, as well as things they might have done but did not” (1971, pp. 529)

The way these interdependencies noted by Rawls are important to meaningful work's incorporation in a political conception of justice will be explored in Chapters 3 and 4. The relevant point here is just to note how closely these kinds of interdependencies and their corollary notion of social contribution aligns with the contributive view of meaningful work. These are interdependencies between persons not simply because we rely upon others to do the sorts of things that we don't want to do, or things we cannot be bothered doing, but because we need others to do the things that we simply cannot hope to achieve at all. Seeing meaningful work as a person-engaging contribution then, is saying that work can only be properly meaningful when it enables the sort of interdependencies expressed above by Rawls. Complex work is meaningful not only because the skills and development it requires enables discretion on the part of the worker, but also because such skills are related to the ways in which persons rely and depend upon others. A person's complex work activity then has a natural connection to the idea of contributing to others, a contribution which reflects the chasm between what one individual alone can do and what persons taken together can do. As such, the view of meaningful

work as a ‘person-engaging contribution’ is not only adding an additional contribution condition to the pre-existing autonomy view and its emphasis on complexity. It is also adapting the way in which complexity is seen as necessary for the account. It is when the objective features of an individual’s work enable the person doing it, and others, to see it as their own unique contribution to the needs of other persons, that the work can be properly called meaningful.

2.6 – The Contributive View of Meaningful Work as a Political Idea

That concludes my argument that the contributive view is the most attractive account of meaningful work, and we are now ready to consider whether meaningful work could have a place in a theory of justice that takes nonperfectionism seriously. That task begins proper in Chapter 3, but what I want to do here is first outline how the contributive view of meaningful work itself can be reasonable for persons to accept regardless of whatever comprehensive conception of the good they happen to hold. It is necessary to show this because if the account of meaningful work presented here was only available to persons who hold certain comprehensive beliefs, then any inclusion of meaningful work in considerations of justice would be illegitimate as it would fail the test of political justification (see §1.2).

There are three major reasons why the account of meaningful work can be acceptable to all and thereby meet the justificatory constraints imposed by political liberalism. First, recall that the contributive view of meaningful work relies on an argument that work itself is best understood as a contributive activity, where a person’s work satisfies the needs and or wants of unassociated others. This account of work need not depend on any particular conceptions of the good or contentious claims about value. The first reason for this is because the account of work

is only understood in terms of persons making contributions that are *useful* for others, given the aims and plans of life that they happen to have. This is distinctly not a claim about what is *good* for persons at the level of value theory. For example, the activity of a luthier can be seen as work simply out of recognizing that it is useful for a variety of persons – musicians, music buffs, and so on – no judgement needs to be made about whether it is good that persons devote much of their life to playing or listening to the music made from stringed instruments. The latter question is surely open to reasonable disagreement, but the account of work as a contributive activity does not rely on any particular answer here. The argument only relies on there being merit to understanding work as an activity which has social utility, and to make sense of this idea seeing work as contributive activity in terms of its usefulness to the aims and plans of others is all that is needed.

Second, the description of work on which the account of meaningful work is built is not presented as some a priori or analytical definition of work, but as an account of work that coheres with the social activity of work in contemporary societies. For example, it aligns with the historical genesis of corporations, where it was the potential of positive social contribution that justified the governmental intervention in property rights (e.g. limited liability, corporate personhood) in the first place (Ciepley 2013; see also Gerlsbeck and Herzog 2020, pp. 314-316). Furthermore, such an account of work finds support across diverse philosophical strands of thought. The premise of work as social contribution is behind anti-capitalist anthropologist David Graeber's (2018, pp. 232-239) claim that there is something deeply oxymoronic about a paid job that contributes nothing of value to anyone. But it is also found in the classical liberal and libertarian use of 'invisible hand' reasoning to defend capitalism and reject centralized

planning as inefficient at utilizing social functions and meeting needs (e.g., Hayek 1945). Indeed, in Axel Honneth's (2010) attempt to provide an 'immanent critique' of the relations of work in contemporary society (i.e., to structure normative demands for meaningful and structured work on claims embedded in presently existing social relations), work is seen not as a 'private' activity but as those activities that are socially necessary.⁴⁶

Third, and I think most importantly, the account of meaningful work is limited to questions over what makes work *itself as a distinct activity* meaningful and intentionally avoids linking meaningful work to debates about fundamental meaning or meaning in life. Given the way questions of fundamental meaning are deeply tied up with comprehensive conceptions of the good, such avoidance is crucial for meaningful work to be compatible with political liberalism. I differ then from the methodology adopted in accounts which explicitly treat meaningful work in terms of fundamental meaning. For instance, Andrea Veltman (2016, p. 105) argues that "[t]he question of what makes work meaningful is indeed of the same stock as the more general question of what makes life meaningful."⁴⁷ I disagree. I do not think the question of what makes work meaningful necessarily needs to be "of the same stock" as the question of what makes life meaningful; we can try to sidestep such claims of fundamental meaning altogether.

However, one source of skepticism about such sidestepping of fundamental meaning might be that because the idea of contribution plays an integral part in the account of meaningful work, then once we start unpacking what it means to 'contribute' certain questions of

⁴⁶ This is a departure from Honneth's earlier attempt to ground a normative critique of contemporary work relations in the claim that an "undistorted" work activity is "a self-contained, self-directed work procedure which embodied the worker's knowledge." See Honneth 1995b, p. 22.

⁴⁷ See also Yeoman 2014, who derives an account of meaningful work from a larger account of the fundamental human need for meaning in life. In addition, see: van der Deijl 2022; Tyssedal 2022.

fundamental meaning will inevitably crop up (e.g., related to considerations regarding our social condition as a species defined by an inherent interdependence. See Yeoman et al. 2019, p. 6). But my argument in §2.4 shows that this need not be the case. A robust analysis of the idea of contribution can be made without falling back onto claims at the level of fundamental meaning, and such an analysis can still lead to a rich and convincing account of meaningful work.

Of course, many persons will inevitably associate their work with questions of fundamental meaning. For example, perhaps a luthier sees their work as fundamentally meaningful because they see a life devoted to music as objectively more valuable than other kinds of life. This suggests something important: for the account of meaningful work to be a properly political idea acceptable to all persons, it needs to not only abstain from questions of fundamental meaning, but also be consistent with the variety of answers persons come up with regarding fundamental meaning (not only in work but also in other spheres of life). If an account of meaningful work was inconsistent with some of these answers then it would be inconsistent with certain comprehensive conceptions, and thus fail the justificatory constraints imposed by political liberalism.

How then can we show the contributive view of meaningful work is consistent with the variety of reasonable positions persons hold regarding fundamental meaning? We can start by outlining that one extremely influential account of fundamental meaning in life is the ‘external connection’ account. This is developed both by Robert Nozick and Susan Wolf, and argues that a necessary aspect for activities being meaningful (in the fundamental sense) is that they involve the persons doing them with some thing or some value that is outside of themselves, and do not

merely reduce to the person's interest in them (Nozick 1981, pp. 594-595; Wolf 2010, pp. 19ff.). This external connection is necessary for an activity being fundamentally meaningful, at least for proponents of this view, because it enables seeing "one's life as valuable in a way that can be recognized from a point of view other than one's own" (Wolf 2010, p. 27). Both Nozick and Wolf argue that when we look at the kind of activities that provide people with meaning, they all meet this condition, "[c]hildren, relationships with other persons, helping others, advancing justice, continuing and transmitting a tradition, pursuing truth, beauty, world betterment – these and the rest link you to something wider than yourself" (Nozick 1981, p. 595). While the variety of accounts of fundamental meaning all of course disagree about the nature of this external value, they all agree that it is from the individual connecting to something outside of themselves that fundamental meaning is derived.

There is quite clearly a natural affinity between this 'external connection' account of fundamental meaning and an account of meaningful work that relies on social contribution, given the latter connects persons to something outside themselves (meeting the needs of others). Now I don't take this affinity as providing argumentative support for the account of meaningful work I defend. Instead, I merely want to outline here that because of such an affinity, it seems unlikely that for persons who subscribe to accounts of fundamental meaning that align with the 'external connection' account, there will be an inconsistency or any tension between this account of fundamental meaning and the account of meaningful work that I have presented.

The point can be expressed through an example. Take for instance a passionate archaeologist who derives fundamental meaning in their life from the way their work connects

them to and enables them to learn new things about an ancient civilization. This pursuit of truth and knowledge in itself is enough for them to derive fundamental meaning from their work. Yet it certainly seems possible for our archaeologist to also regard their work activity as meaningful purely in terms of a work activity. For this to occur, the relevant feature would be how their work ends up contributing to the needs and or wants of others. Their work might be meaningful as a work activity through the way it helps other scientists working on similar issues, or is used as an educational learning tool in schools, and so on. Alternatively, consider an amateur archaeologist who goes out to dig on Saturdays but who works as a mechanic during the week. For the amateur, it is still archaeology from which they derive fundamental meaning in their life. However, there is nothing about the account of meaningful work I have presented which suggests it would not be possible for them to regard their work activity as meaningful – as a work activity. This is even if they think their work has no fundamental meaning because it does not contribute to the pursuit of truth and knowledge about other civilizations. It is the contribution to meeting the needs of others, that enables them to regard their work as meaningful as a work activity, despite seeing it as lacking in meaningfulness from the standpoint of fundamental meaning. This suggests the possibility for a person to regard the work they do as *both* fundamentally meaningful and meaningful only as a work activity, and also as an activity which is *only* meaningful as a work activity. The accounts of meaning can be independent and need not reduce into one another.

The ‘external connection’ account of fundamental meaning does I think a good job of explaining many of the different kinds of ways people derive meaning in their life. However, it doesn’t capture all accounts of fundamental meaning, viz. – those that either reject the notion of

fundamental meaning entirely (e.g., nihilists), or those that regard the external connection account as futile and think the only source of fundamental meaning available is from within us (e.g., existentialists). For an account of meaningful work to be consistent with political liberalism and its standard of nonperfectionism, it also needs to be consistent with these beliefs regarding fundamental meaning, given they are clearly included in the set of reasonable comprehensive conceptions. And initially, it might seem that both the nihilist and existentialist advance positions that are at odds with the possibility of their acceptance of ‘meaningful work.’ However, what provides the answer here is a similar point to what was made regarding the amateur archaeologist, accepting the account of meaningful work need not require any refutation of the positions the nihilist and the existentialist take up regarding fundamental meaning.

Taking the nihilist, all we need to point to is the possibility of making claims about an activity within some context X being meaningful (meaningful only in relation to the activity itself), even if X as a whole is devoid of fundamental meaning. For instance, from the perspective of their bare features, sports might appear pretty meaningless – basketball involves throwing a leather ball through an arbitrarily placed metal hoop, and “[g]etting a ball through a stupid little basket has no independent value on its own” (Nguyen 2019, p. 427).⁴⁸ But even if this is granted, it doesn’t seem incoherent to say that certain basketball plays can be more meaningful than others. Hitting the game winner is a more meaningful basketball play than a pointless pass in the first quarter that achieves nothing. Generalizing the point, even if the nihilist is right and all of life’s activities are fundamentally devoid of meaning (like basketball), this does not mean it is not possible to acknowledge that some of those activities can still be meaningful

⁴⁸ I don’t want to commit to a position here on sports and fundamental meaning or value, I am only granting a premise taken as true by a nihilist. For helpful discussion see: Hurka 2006, pp. 228ff.; Nguyen 2019.

understood in relation to the activity itself (like a game winning shot in basketball). This is all that is needed for the account of meaningful work to be coherent within the nihilist's larger outlook.

Similar points can be made in relation to the existentialist. Take for instance Richard Taylor's account of fundamental meaning, which relies on seeing our lives as analogously pointless to Sisyphus' rock rolling, given there is no final point to which they lead, merely repetition: "[l]ook at a busy street any day, and observe the throng going hither and thither. To what? Some office or shop, where the same things will be done today as were done yesterday, and are done now so they may be repeated tomorrow" (2000, p. 327). Given this, "[t]he meaning of life is from within us, it is not bestowed from without" (2000, p. 334). The issue for the contributive view of meaningful work then, might be that its rejection of subjective meaningfulness as sufficient might be unacceptable to persons who subscribe to points of view like Taylor's, where it is only from the subjective standpoint that any kind of meaning can be forthcoming. But again, this issue only sticks if we deny any conceptual space between an activity being meaningful in relation only to the activity itself and fundamental meaning. If we grant that the existentialist is right about fundamental meaning, it might well be that an Amazon worker (just like everyone else) will only be able to derive fundamental meaning from their work by subjectively accepting its pointlessness as liberating. But this does not mean that the Amazon worker's work will necessarily therefore be meaningful as a *work activity*. And this is not because fundamental meaning requires some 'external connection' to a value outside of the individual, but because their work fails to have the features most appropriate to what we take the work activity to be.

I hope this discussion shows that perhaps despite first impressions, the concept of ‘meaningful work’ does not itself automatically depend upon claims internal to a comprehensive conception of the good. And so while it might have features that in some ways are very similar to something like ‘unalienated labour,’ it differs because the basis for these features does not rely on contentious claims subject to reasonable disagreement (e.g., claims about human essence and so on), but instead only on a socially accepted account of what we take work to be, and the necessity of meaningful work giving preference to the perspective of the worker themselves. Resultantly, it is at least in principle possible for political liberalism to care about meaningful work in a way it could never care about something like unalienated labour.

2.7 – Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that there is more to meaningful work than is generally thought. Rather than being merely any work that people believe is meaningful, or work that enables and relies upon a worker’s autonomy and discretion, I have argued that we should understand meaningful work as a ‘person-engaging contribution.’ This means work is meaningful for an individual when three conditions are met: 1) the person doing it derives subjective feelings of meaningfulness from it, 2) it has a sufficient level of complexity such that a person can use discretion in the deployment of their skills and talents, and 3) it involves the worker in the features related to its social contribution (which for work in large and complex firms requires democratic involvement). This characterization of meaningful work results from two things: the first-person perspective implied by the term ‘meaningful,’ and the importance of contribution implied by the term ‘work.’

At this point I will not speculate on what implications the account has for discussions about the sorts of economic policies that would be effective in promoting and securing the availability of meaningful work, other than what I already mentioned in the introduction, which is that any widespread promotion of meaningful work would seem to require the overcoming (or at least the blurring) of the detailed horizontal division of labour and (some parts of) the vertical division of labour. Any such discussion is obviously moot before it is shown that meaningful work can be legitimately integrated into a political conception of justice, and so it is not until Chapter 5 that the implications of the account for political economy are fully considered.

Yet even before beginning the argument about meaningful work's inclusion into a political conception of justice, the argument of this chapter does allow us to say two things about meaningful work's normative weight. First, while most of the present arguments in political theory and philosophy that defend the normative weight of meaningful work characterize it in terms of the autonomy view, because of the contributive view's different features (and different grounds for their inclusion), these arguments are not going to work as a defence of the contributive view of meaningful work. And given I have argued the contributive view provides the most convincing account of meaningful work as a concept, this suggests that for those of us who think justice should say something substantial about meaningful work, more work might need to be done.

Second, given the account of meaningful work defended here is linked to what we take work to be as a distinct activity, an argument in support of its normative weight would seem to have available in its arsenal something which could prove effective in responding to the

nonperfectionist objection. If we recall, this was the objection that because the values persons achieve through meaningful work are (or could be) just as easily achieved in nonwork activities, any privileging of the work process would be unjustifiable out of a concern with nonperfectionism between various conceptions of the good. But, if an argument can be made that person-engaging contributions to unassociated others had normative weight, then this gives meaningful work a far less contingent normative foundation, as, at least according to the argument of this chapter, it is only through meaningful work that persons could ever undertake such activity.

Chapter 3 – Meaningful Work, Nonperfectionism, and Reciprocity*

3.1 – Introduction

We now know what we are dealing with when it comes to the concept of ‘meaningful work.’ As such, we can now explore whether meaningful work can form part of a theory of justice that takes nonperfectionism seriously. As we saw in the introductory chapter, there is a substantial burden of proof for any attempt to incorporate meaningful work into a liberal theory of justice, as any account must adequately respond to the nonperfectionist objection. Put in terms of the political liberalism variant of liberal theory, the nonperfectionist objection is that given the reasonable pluralism regarding questions over what, if anything, is valuable about work (a pluralism that is downstream from reasonable disagreement over conceptions of the good), any privileging of meaningful work would be unfairly privileging some persons over others (Nozick 1974, pp. 246-250; Arneson 1987; 1990; Kymlicka 2002, pp. 72-73, 190-195).⁴⁹

The force of the nonperfectionist objection is shown by considering how it applies to both the subjective and autonomy views of meaningful work. Taking the subjective view first: why ought the state promote the social basis of meaningfulness over the social bases of other subjective states and attitudes, such as happiness, security, or contentment? The promotion of subjective meaningfulness appears arbitrary. But, even if this problem is ignored and we grant that it could be permissible for a liberal state to promote the social bases of subjective feelings of meaningfulness, it is unclear why work ought to be the privileged process through which this is

* Portions of this chapter appear in Althorpe 2022b.

⁴⁹ A very different kind of objection to the state promotion of meaningful work is that it would be self-defeating against the perfectionist goods meaningful work can enable persons to attain. See Veltman 2016, pp. 192ff.

achieved. Why should there be a focus on meaningful work over alternative activities from which persons derive subjective meaningfulness, such as meaningful relationships, meaningful club associations, and so on? Given the reasonable pluralism in society about worthwhile ends and pursuits, surely non-work activities can be just as an important (if not more important) source of meaningfulness in persons' lives.

Even if an argument is somehow offered to justify placing emphasis on work as the privileged process to provide persons with a subjective feeling of meaningfulness, we are not out of the woods yet, as the diversity between conceptions of the good also surely means that persons will differ when it comes to what it is about work itself that makes it meaningful for them. As put by Daniel Jacob and Christian Neuhäuser in relation to the subjective view of meaningful work, “[t]o see one’s work as meaningful and another line of work as meaningless is a value judgement that seems to be closely intertwined with one’s more general comprehensive doctrines” (2018, pp. 937-938). While Marcus the gardener might find his work meaningful (it connects him with Gaia), others with different ideas of the good will surely disagree. Julia the professional athlete thinks gardening is pointless, tedious and boring, and instead derives meaningfulness from her work from how it contributes to furthering the limits of human physical performance. The fact endless examples could be offered here, demonstrates the difficulty of wading through all the differences and nuances that exist between the sources of meaning in persons' lives. As Samuel Arnold (2012, pp. 115-116) puts the point: “no policy [promoting subjectively meaningful work] could possibly respond to everyone’s definition; those left in the cold might plausibly complain of unfair treatment. (We can imagine an aggrieved party saying: ‘Why should the state promote his ideal of meaningful work instead of mine?’)”

The autonomy view does not fare much better, given its core feature (work is complex enough to be person-engaging) surely does not begin to capture the full set of goods persons do or might want to obtain from their work. Thus, treating meaningful work as special would seemingly disrespect the different legitimate choices persons make about what it is about work that is valuable. Richard Arneson (1987, pp. 528-529) for example, offers a “very partial” list of seventeen different kinds of nonpecuniary goods people have or might want to obtain from their work, and given meaningful work is only one such good this leads him to the conclusion that “there is no more reason to uphold a special right to the option of meaningful work than to uphold a special right to the option of vacation trips to Bermuda or to any other good that people want, some more than others” (1987, p. 537; See also 1990, p. 1132).⁵⁰

But even ignoring disagreement about the content of work’s value, persons also disagree about its weight. Take Will Kymlicka’s argument against the promotion of unalienated labour (which is applicable here as Kymlicka refers to arguments on meaningful work in making his point). Kymlicka (2002) argues that: “while unalienated labour is surely better than alienated labour, these are not the only values involved. I may value unalienated labour, yet value other things even more, such as my leisure. I may prefer playing tennis to unalienated production” (p. 191; See also Nozick 1974, pp. 248-249; Arneson 1987, pp. 524-527). For some people, the cost of unmeaningful work – doing unengaging drudgery where one is ordered about – might be a price worth paying given the priority they give to their nonwork pursuits.

⁵⁰ In later work Arneson (2009) has become more amenable to privileging meaningful work, but for different reasons than the ones I offer.

While the nonperfectionist objection might be fatal for any attempt to promote either the subjective view or autonomy view of meaningful work, this chapter argues the nonperfectionist objection is not fatal for the contributive view of meaningful work, and that its promotion can indeed be consistent with the justificatory constraints of political liberalism. The argument proceeds as follows. I first outline the most promising approach currently used by liberal theorists to meet the nonperfectionist objection, which focuses on meaningful work's connection to all-purpose means given the place of work in contemporary liberal democracies (§3.2). Despite its attraction, I argue that this approach has a scope of appeal limited to nonideal conditions and as such does not provide a convincing reply to the nonperfectionist objection in conditions of full justice (§3.2.1). I then outline that while the contributive view of meaningful work as a 'person-engaging contribution' has ostensibly the same features as the autonomy view (work that is complex and person-engaging for the worker and, when located in a firm, accords them democratic involvement), the way the contributive view grounds these features in their connection to social contribution opens the door to an alternative defence of meaningful work's importance to a liberal theory of justice than what is currently offered. I first argue that a person's self-respect depends upon making social contributions that are expressive of the reciprocity underlying the political conception of society as a system of cooperation between participating members (§3.3). I then outline how such social contribution in effect corresponds to engaging in meaningful work, and that thus, the opportunity for meaningful work is a social basis of self-respect and so something that ought to be of concern to the political liberal (§3.4).

3.2 – The Nonperfectionist Objection and the Formative Thesis

Several arguments have recently been put forward that claim the promotion of meaningful work (understood in terms of the autonomy view) can form part of a theory of justice that takes nonperfectionism seriously. Predictably, these arguments are based on how meaningful work is connected to all-purpose means. This, so the argument goes, makes the promotion of meaningful work consistent with nonperfectionism as it's not valued because it's connected to a conception of the good, but because it's affiliated with goods persons would want regardless of whatever else they want. For instance, Jeffrey Moriarty (2009, pp. 446ff.) argues the opportunity for meaningful work is a social basis of self-respect given it enables persons to deploy their skills and talents in the activities they undertake. While Samuel Arnold argues complex work cultivates the 'internal resources' of intelligence and virtuosity, resources which are all-purpose means given they "facilitate agency, and thus [are] attractive to citizens in light of their fundamental interest in being able to accomplish whatever ends they happen to have" (2012, p. 97).⁵¹ One can see how if meaningful work has nothing to do with fundamental meaning, and is simply work whose features enable persons to realize primary goods, the argument is on terrain acceptable to political liberalism. Indeed, my argument will too depend on linking meaningful work to a primary good – the social bases of self-respect.

But it is the combining of work's connection to all-purpose means with an empirical claim about the effects of work on persons that completes the response to the nonperfectionist objection. As Beate Roessler puts it in her defence of meaningful work: "the work we do, and its organizational form, has an influence on how we live, on who we are, and how we see ourselves"

⁵¹ While Arnold is not ostensibly concerned with 'meaningful work,' the features of work he focuses on are much the same as those in defences of meaningful work.

(2012, p. 82). This is the *formative thesis*: given persons are often required to work eight, ten, or even twelve-hour days, the values that are achieved in work (or occluded by it) bleed into the other realms of their lives.⁵² This is an old claim, going back at least to Adam Smith.⁵³ Relying on the formative thesis is ubiquitous in defences of meaningful work but also in arguments relating to other nonpecuniary goods affiliated with work (e.g., see Schwartz 1982, pp. 636-639; Shiffrin 2004, pp. 1666-1667; Hsieh 2008, pp. 77-79; O’Neill 2008, pp. 36, 46; Moriarty 2009, pp. 452-453; Arnold 2012, p. 102; Roessler 2012, pp. 76-85; Taylor 2014, p. 341; Yeoman 2014, pp. 237-240; Gheaus and Herzog 2016; Gomberg 2018, pp. 515-516).

Invoking the formative thesis is to deny that the all-purpose means affiliated with meaningful work might be just as readily attainable elsewhere (as argued by Arneson 1990, p. 1132).⁵⁴ This is then why, the argument goes, it is legitimate to promote meaningful work because when work is not meaningful – i.e., when it is uncomplex drudgery where one is ordered about – this affects a person’s ability to engage in other pursuits that might provide all-purpose means, such as the social bases of self-respect, or the internal resources of intelligence and virtuosity. These arguments reject the equation of the goods affiliated with meaningful work to things like preferences for tropical holiday destinations or proclivities for tennis, as seeing them in this way fails to take seriously work’s nonvoluntary nature and its connection to goods relevant to political liberalism.

⁵² As far as I can tell, the term ‘formative thesis’ comes from Samuel Arnold (2012, p. 102).

⁵³ Smith 1968, Bk V, Ch. 1, part III: “The understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments. The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.”

⁵⁴ It is worth noting the one nonpecuniary good Arneson does think is uniquely attached to work is “the satisfaction of earning one’s own keep,” although he argues against its importance (1990, pp. 1132-1133).

The formative thesis is undeniably well supported by the evidence.⁵⁵ Furthermore, I think it would be a mistake to think the formative effects of work are undermined by recent economic restructuring towards an informal ‘gig economy’ where formal employer-employee relationships are replaced with the self-employment of independent contractors, or a ‘personalized economy’ where rigid, hierarchical, and controlling workplaces structures are replaced with norms of flexibility, independence, and creativity (for the latter see Florida 2003; Tomasi 2012, pp. 64-65;). This is because such accounts of ‘independence’ are really misclassifications; there is often just as much authority, control, and dependence in these jobs as there is in more traditional employee relations (Cherry 2016, pp. 594-602; Cunningham-Parmeter 2016; Prassl and Risak 2016).

3.2.1 – The Formative Thesis’ Limited Scope of Appeal

However, as an argument defending meaningful work against the nonperfectionist objection, the formative thesis’ scope of appeal is limited by it being contingent on facts pertaining to the place of work under current economic conditions. The issue for those relying on the formative thesis is that it only seems to cut against those arguments that current economic structures (mostly) reflect the free decisions of persons. As an argument against proponents of the nonperfectionist objection which reject such a claim, it begs the question.

⁵⁵ Longitudinal studies show the complexity of work has strong effects on intellectual development (Kohn and Schooler 1978; Spenner 1988). Work which leaves scope for self-direction also strongly affects persons’ initiative and ambition (Kornhauser 1965, pp. 266-270; Frese et al. 1996). An example of a qualitative account supportive of the formative thesis is Bloodworth (2018, especially pp. 50-51).

Libertarian arguments of course claim current economic structures reflect the free choices of persons given that the employment contract is an exercise in voluntary choice.⁵⁶ For example, Robert Nozick asks if meaningful work was something that people valued, then where is it? Given people are free to form (and support as consumers) whatever kind of work association they like, then if meaningful work was something that mattered to persons there ought to be an array of things like worker coops reflecting the trade-off (say less pay, or higher costs of goods) people are willing to make in order to have or to support work that is complex, person-engaging, and democratically organized (1974, pp. 248-249).

The formative thesis provides good reasons to reject this kind of argument, and shows how it misconstrues the inequalities in bargaining position within a labour market, ignoring how sellers (workers) are in a far subordinate position to the buyers (capitalists) given the constant threat of unemployment. The choice faced by many persons is not between meaningful but low-paying jobs and unmeaningful but high-paying ones. It is between unmeaningful and low-paying work or no work at all (Schweickart 1993, pp. 229-232; Bowles, Edwards, and Roosevelt 2005, pp. 296-297).⁵⁷ One cannot look at the conditions faced by those at the bottom of the wage-labour system as reflecting free choices, without taking an absurdly narrow view of what counts as a constraint on freedom.

⁵⁶ For an extreme view seeing the employment contract as an exercise in voluntary choice, see Zwolinski 2007.

⁵⁷ For a classic liberal statement on the special manner of the labour market and how this can justify state restrictions that might be unnecessary in other markets. See Hobhouse 1927, pp. 83-86. “The bargain [in a labour market] is a forced bargain. The weaker man consents as one slipping over a precipice might consent to give all his fortune to one who will throw him a rope on no other terms. This is not true consent. True consent is free consent, and full freedom of consent implies equality on the part of both parties to the bargain” (1927, p. 91). This is also a point often made by Marx. For example in *Capital Volume One*, Marx contrasts the idea of the labour market reflecting freedom and equality for both buyers and sellers (2000d, pp. 489, 492), with the reality of the labour market under capitalism where there is “the subordination of labour to capital” (p. 498) and where the worker “discover[s] he was no ‘free agent,’ that the time for which he is free to sell his labour power is the time for which he is forced to sell it” (p. 513).

Under such circumstances the promotion of meaningful work might well indeed be the only way certain all-purpose means can be made available to persons. But this limits the defence of meaningful work to non-ideal conditions. If current economic structures are themselves criticized from the standpoint of nonperfectionism such that justice requires their reordering, then the empirical case about the formative effects of work might fall away, taking any argument for meaningful work with it. Take for instance the view held by Kymlicka:

“none of this [the nonperfectionist objection] will justify the existing distribution of meaningful work. I have argued that people should be free to sacrifice the quality of work for other values, like better leisure. Under capitalism, however, those with the best jobs typically also have the best consumption and leisure, while those with poor jobs often get no compensating increase in leisure or consumption” (2002, p. 194)

When Kymlicka talks then of persons choosing alienating work for more leisure (2002, pp. 191-192), he is not referring to actual choices made by persons today, but to choices persons might have the opportunity to make in a labour market without bargaining power disadvantages. Thus, Kymlicka is using the same premise behind the nonperfectionist objection against the state promotion of meaningful work to also criticize the current nature of work and its place in society. As examples, Kymlicka objects to the way perceived ‘male jobs’ are often taken as superior to perceived ‘female jobs,’ and the exaggerated distinction between mental and manual work. Such arrangements can be criticized because: “[w]e know that people in a position of initial equality would not have chosen these roles” (2002, p. 90).

This opens the door to a wide-ranging critique of the place of work in contemporary liberal democracies, and this presents a problem for using the formative thesis as a reply to the

nonperfectionist objection. If we imagine people in an initial position of equality, will the prevalent place of work under contemporary capitalism be an outcome of freely made choices? Given the pluralism that exists regarding values and ends, this seems unlikely at best. Taking the formative thesis uncritically fails to get at the heart of what is raised by the nonperfectionist objection. While some persons might find the empirical conditions leading to the truth of the formative thesis unproblematic, others, with different ideas of the good, might disagree. As put by David Jenkins in making a similar point regarding work and neutrality: “[t]he definition of the kind and quantity of work that is expected of people is fraught with the contingencies that emerge from that vast array of other decisions a state makes vis-à-vis the economy. Work as it is, is not necessarily work as it has to be” (2020, p. 838. See generally pp. 837-840; see also Muirhead 2004, p. 6).

Kymlicka does not elaborate in detail on what economic arrangements might allow persons to make free choices against a fair background, but others do. Taking one example, it is out of a concern with creating a fairer set of choices, and the means to make such choices, that drives Philippe Van Parijs’ argument for a basic income. Its implementation, according to Van Parijs, would create a fairer set of conditions for persons to choose how they want to carry out their plans of life, plans which diverge, in part, because of differing valuations of the goods affiliated with work (1991, p. 128). The ‘real freedom’ a basic income would grant (through, say, the lower barrier to self-employment it would create and its positive effects on work quality through increasing the bargaining position of workers), would provide a fairer starting point for persons to decide exactly how they want to live their lives – whether they value meaningful work a lot, a little, or not at all.

Liberal nonperfectionism in ideal conditions then itself might require institutional changes significant enough to alter the conditions which lead to the truth of the formative thesis, given a basic income would radically reduce the necessity and extensiveness of work.⁵⁸ Thus, any defence of meaningful work that relies on the formative thesis will have limited scope and be unconvincing (insofar as we want a defence of meaningful work in ideal theory). Relying on the formative thesis fails to show promoting meaningful work is consistent with liberal neutrality, as the conditions that lead to the formative thesis' truth are themselves criticized as being inconsistent with that same standard.

One objection to this argument is that relying on the formative thesis is justified given the necessity of work in the operation of modern economies (including economies that have implemented a basic income). For now, and for the foreseeable future, people need to work. Even ideal theory can't escape this "stable fact of economic life" (Moriarty 2009, p. 452; see also Roessler 2012, p. 80). This is certainly true, but the argument doesn't entail a commitment to some claim about the 'end' of work, but the more limited claim that modern liberal democracies are at a stage of economic development such that the prevalence of work that makes the formative thesis true is not a strict economic requirement. A classic argument that a stationary state economy – where capital accumulation and open-ended growth ceases – would significantly reduce the time persons spend at work, and be not only economically feasible but also normatively desirable, is given by J. S. Mill (1994, Book IV Ch. VI). And given the advancement of capitalism and the improvements in the productive forces since the 19th century,

⁵⁸ Anca Gheaus and Lisa Herzog (2016, p. 80) for example acknowledge that if something like a universal basic income was implemented, such that there was no necessity behind the work activity, the goods of work they identify become less important given that they can be achieved elsewhere.

the case for an economy that limits productivity and growth by keeping output constant – thereby reducing the emphasis placed on work – is more feasible (as a possible alternative) than ever (Cohen 1977; Jenkins 2020, pp. 837-840).

Even in the growth-intensive economies of today there are reasons to think time spent at work could be reduced, given a significant amount of work in contemporary economies might not be productive or contributive at all, at least according to some qualitative accounts (Graeber 2018), and that state regulation and limitation of working time can be a legitimate response to the collective action problem leading to the ‘rat race’ of overemployment (Jauch 2020). These points suggest that a basic income, or a reduction in the length of the working week, are economically feasible (Van Parijs 1991, pp. 121-125; Torry 2016; Van Parijs and Vanderborgh 2017, pp. 133-169), so long as they are rolled out in combination with other redistributive measures (Standing 2011, pp. 176-177; Jenkins 2020, pp. 839-840, 845). For arguments defending meaningful work by way of the formative thesis it is not enough to show work is necessary, it must be shown that the dominant place of work in society is necessary – doing four hours of unmeaningful work a day is a very different proposition to doing ten or twelve.

3.3 – Reciprocity and Self-Respect

To more satisfactorily meet the nonperfectionist objection then, a defence of meaningful work’s promotion needs to be offered that does not fall back on the formative thesis. It is to this which I will now turn. In §2.6 I made some comments about how because the contributive view of meaningful work relies only on the idea of work as a contributive activity in terms of meeting the needs and or wants of others, and it is independent (but still consistent) with the different

answers persons give to questions of fundamental meaning, that it is at least in principle consistent with a conception of justice that takes nonperfectionism seriously. I will now go further by arguing there are grounds for the promotion of the contributive view of meaningful work which can successfully respond to the nonperfectionist objection, and beyond this, that its promotion is in fact a *prima facie* requirement in a liberal theory of justice.

As we saw in Chapter 2, while the constituent features of the contribute view of meaningful work were much the same as the autonomy view (complex enough to be person-engaging, and democratic involvement when located in a large complex firm), the grounds of the conditions differed. I argued that what best explains these features' necessity for work being meaningful was the way they enable the work to be a person-engaging contribution. The constituent features of meaningful work allow the person doing it, and others, to see it as their own unique contribution to the needs of other persons, understood as those things necessary for a person to carry out their own plan of life. As I also noted in the conclusion of Chapter 2, this alternative grounding of meaningful work's conditions opens the door to a different kind of response to the nonperfectionist objection than that offered by relying on the formative thesis. This is because if the goods affiliated with meaningful work are connected to social contribution, and social contribution is what separates work from nonwork activities, then any normative weight meaningful work might have will have a firmer basis.⁵⁹ Even if, motivated by concerns of nonperfectionism, the empirical conditions leading to the truth of the formative thesis were undermined (say by instituting a basic income), the link between meaningful work and social contribution would still hold.

⁵⁹ A similar kind of methodological point is made in Jean-Philippe Deranty's use of the ontological and conceptual status of work as the necessary labour for social reproduction to defend the centrality of work in any kind of normative social theory. See Deranty 2015

Recall Arneson's lists of nonpecuniary goods that can be obtained from work (all of which he thinks can also be obtained in nonwork activities). One of these is "the knowledge that in producing particular goods or services one is being humanely useful to others or even contributing to their vital needs" (1987, p. 528).⁶⁰ Arneson is right that as stated this can be achieved in nonwork activity. But by putting the good in terms of meeting the needs of 'others,' Arneson is not sensitive to the distinction between meeting the needs of close relations and associates, and meeting the needs of unaffiliated others. And it is the latter which I have argued is inextricably linked to the work activity (by being in effect a description of it).

That at least is the methodological difference. The remaining sections of the chapter provide an argument that shows the activity of contributing to unassociated others in the way enabled by the features of meaningful work (complex enough to be person-engaging, and democratic involvement when located in a large complex firm) should be an activity that matters for the liberal. The key claim is that there's a strong connection, through reciprocity, between meaningful work and the conception (taken as axiomatic in much liberal theorizing) of society as a system of cooperation between participating members. This connection ties meaningful work to the primary good of self-respect.

The argument has the following structure:

⁶⁰ Later Arneson (1990, p. 1132) characterizes the good slightly differently as "the knowledge that one is significantly benefitting others."

- a. The reciprocity underlying the idea of society as a system of social cooperation between free and equal participating members, is partly constituted by the mutual interdependencies between the skills and talents of persons
- b. Given (a), a social basis of persons' self-respect is that, even in ideal conditions, there is opportunity to make social contributions expressive of this reciprocity
- c. Social contributions through meaningful work, understood in terms defended in Chapter 2 (complex enough to be person-engaging, and democratic involvement when located in a large complex firm), are best expressive of this reciprocity
- d. Combining (b) and (c), a social basis of persons' self-respect, even in ideal conditions, is that there is opportunity to undertake meaningful work.

I will here focus on the first two propositions. The subsequent section turns to the latter two.

The idea of society as a system of cooperation between free and equal participating members is, for Rawls, the fundamental organizing idea of justice as fairness from which a host of other fundamental ideas, and eventually the principles of justice, are constructed. Within this conception of society reciprocity plays an important part, as the fair terms of cooperation – characterized by a conception of political justice – specify and express the idea of reciprocity.⁶¹ This feature separates a system of cooperation from mere systems of social coordination, by ensuring benefits and burdens are allocated fairly (Rawls 2005, pp. 15-17; 2001, pp. 24-25).

⁶¹ For discussion on the connection between the conception of society and reciprocity, see Rawls 1971, pp. 15, 178-179; 2001, pp. 5-6, 9, 49n, 50, 140; 2005, pp. 15-22, 48-54, 299-304. On the different uses of reciprocity by Rawls, see Reidy 2007, pp. 248-249, and Freeman 2007, pp. 374-375.

The notion of society expressing reciprocal relations is partly constituted by, and presupposes, certain mutual social interdependencies between persons, and the talents and skills which they possess. The fact social relations enable persons to do and achieve more than they could in their absence was taken by Hume as one of the circumstances of justice,⁶² circumstances which Rawls of course followed. For Rawls, “social cooperation makes possible a better life for all” given that “parties have roughly similar needs and interests, or needs and interests in various ways complementary, so that mutually advantageous cooperation among them is possible” (1971, pp. 126-127). Of course, this is not to say a system of cooperation has no conflicts of interest among its members, but that there is a level of interdependencies between persons such that a just society can be seen as expressing reciprocal relations where each person depends on the work of others to carry out their aims and plans. Now, crucially, the relevant interdependencies here are of a particular sort. Persons do not just depend upon any labour of others (no matter its type), but given the potentialities of each is far greater than what they can hope to realize, they depend upon the *skills* and *talents* of others. It is the “excellences and individuality” of others that are enjoyed (Rawls 1971, pp. 523, 529). When Rawls states that “it is a feature of human sociability that we are by ourselves but parts of what we might be” (1971, p. 529), he is referring to the interdependencies between persons’ own unique skills and talents.

A useful taxonomy of the different kind of ways such interdependencies can end up benefitting persons is given by Joseph Heath. Heath (2006a) argues that it is a mistake to regard social cooperation as beneficial too abstractly, as this will miss the distinct mechanisms through

⁶² Hume 2009, Bk III, pt. II, §2: “When every individual person labours apart, and only for himself, his force is too small to execute any considerable work; his labour being employed in supplying all his different necessities, he never attains a perfection in any particular art,” but in society with its “partition of employments, our ability encreases.”

which cooperation enables social benefits to be produced. Heath specifies five such mechanisms: the gains from trade that can be had from the fact persons have different needs and abilities, economies of scale given that in certain activities adding more persons generates disproportional increases in productive output, the abilities of groups to pool risks, as well as enforce self-binding institutions (like retirement plans), and the way cooperation and communication can help people avoid costs affiliated with acquiring information. The account of social cooperation I develop here primarily focuses on benefits that can accrue through the first two mechanisms.

To further explicate the idea, the point is not that there exists a widespread direct reciprocity between persons in the sense of tit-for-tat exchange (I might not be dependent on the activities of a passer-by, nor they on me), but instead a reciprocity based on more indirect exchanges and benefits, given the mutual interdependencies between citizens more generally. While each person gives benefits to another, and receives benefits from another, the benefactor and recipient are often not the same individual.⁶³ In the simplified example of G. A. Cohen, “shoes produced by A protect the feet of B who produces a shirt worn by C who produces wheat consumed when A eats a bun” (1978, p. 111).

A helpful account of indirect reciprocity is also given by Lawrence C. Becker, who argues reciprocity is best understood in terms of being a general feature of social interactions, specifically those which are necessary for creating and sustaining the conditions under which social life is possible in the first place (1990, pp. 90-91). Now as we have just seen, with this kind of reciprocity persons often cannot return the benefit that is given to them by their

⁶³ Useful descriptions of the structure of this kind of indirect reciprocity exist in sociology, where it is called ‘generalized exchange.’ See Takahashi 2000, pp. 1106-1107; Molm 2010, pp. 120-122; Whitman 2021, pp. 503-505.

benefactors directly. For example, a music buff might not be able to return the exact benefit that is accorded to them by a luthier directly (the ability to live a life that gives certain music priority). But this does not mean the opportunity for reciprocal relations is foreclosed. Instead, what the music buff can do is make a return that provides a benefit of the same general sort to somebody else. That is, just like the skills of the luthier enable the buff to live a life that accords with and supports their own aims and plan, so too can the buff, through the use of their developed skills and talents (whatever these might be), enable someone else to carry out their own aims and plan of life, who can then do the same thing for somebody else, and so on it goes. As Becker puts it, in these sorts of circumstances “[t]he sort of return it would be fitting to make is something comparable to the type of thing our benefactors did: e.g. make a contribution to the common stock of public goods; make a contribution to the private goods others may enjoy” (1990, pp. 126-127. See also p. 115).⁶⁴

Now, taking society as a system of cooperation between free and equal participating members as a fundamental idea, is to claim it would be reasonable for persons to accept regardless of whatever particular conception of the good they hold.⁶⁵ And while by itself this conception of society is ubiquitous in various forms of political liberalism, perhaps characterizing a system of cooperation in terms of mutual interdependencies is bringing in a notion of social relations that are unable to meet a nonperfectionist standard (especially if the

⁶⁴ On this point my account differs from that of Brookes Brown who claims that, because of the “problem of diversity,” the only contributive activities in which persons can reciprocally return the benefits they have received from others are “civic works” which contribute to the enjoyment of public goods (2020, pp. 398ff.). Part of the disagreement here is that Brookes is making an argument about the role of social contribution in an account of political obligation based on fair play, and so the context of benefit is slightly different.

⁶⁵ To support this claim, consider the way that even in Nozick’s (1974, pp. 183-197) argument against Rawls’ use of social cooperation to justify a patterned principle of distributive justice, the claim is only against the move from the fact of social cooperation to a single proposal of distributive justice, and is not denying (and even concedes) the importance of social interdependencies between persons. See especially pp. 186-187, 193-194.

skills expressive of reciprocity are linked to disputable claims about what constitutes persons' 'excellences and individuality'). Indeed, Rawls' most extensive treatment of these mutual interdependencies occurs in discussion of society as a social union of social unions in Part III of *A Theory of Justice*, suggesting the argument might rely on claims Rawls later viewed as inconsistent with nonperfectionism (but see Chapter 4 for an argument about the mutual interdependencies across a social union of social unions being consistent with nonperfectionism). For instance, seeing society as a system of cooperation in this way might imply its members collectively share substantive goals and thick commitments – an implication surely at odds with political liberalism's project of political justification amongst diverse conceptions of the good (Skorupski 2017, pp. 181-186; Roberts 2021, pp. 575-577).⁶⁶

However, so long as the relevance of persons' developed skills and talents is limited to their enabling of others carrying out their own aims and plan of life, the argument remains on terrain acceptable to the political liberal. Pointing to relations of interdependence is not claiming certain kinds of life are better or more valuable than others, nor that there is a singular and dominating end to which all cooperation collectively aims. This perhaps explains why even after his 'political turn,' Rawls never gave up on characterizing society as a social union of social unions (2001, pp. 142, 201; 2005, pp. 320-323. But cf. Freeman 2007, pp. 320-321; Gombert 2007, p.151n; Weithman 2010, p. 295). But more on that in Chapter 4.

The upshot of the preceding discussion is this: the mutual interdependencies between persons' skills and talents are not just any sort of relation or activity towards which a conception

⁶⁶ Alternative objections relate to such a conception of society making justice inappropriately exclusive. I respond to these in §4.4.4.

of justice should be indifferent. Instead, there is something deeply political about them, and this is what ties the act of social contribution to self-respect. A person's opportunity to engage in reciprocal relations, by contributing to others through the development and exercise of their own skills and talents, is connected (at least in a well-ordered society) to their status as a free and equal participating member of society. And insofar as a person's "self-respect is rooted in [their] self-confidence as a fully cooperating member of society" (Rawls 2005, p. 318; see also pp. 81-82), their self-respect requires contributing to others in ways expressive of reciprocity. This parallels the way other aspects of a conception of justice support persons' self-respect through serving as a public recognition of their status as free and equal members of society as a system of cooperation (Rawls 2005, pp. 319-320). As Seana Shiffrin puts it: "the protected opportunity to participate in social cooperation may serve as a source of social status as an equal" (2004, p. 1668).

As such, the connection between social contribution and the political conception of society implies not only that persons are under an obligation to contribute (through work) in order to fairly respond to the contributions and efforts made by others (Becker 1980; Gutmann and Thompson 1996, pp. 273-306; White 2003, pp. 49ff.).⁶⁷ While I don't deny this point, I want to emphasize that the connection also provides an argument for what persons are entitled to – viz., the opportunity to engage in the right sort of social contribution in the first place. Absent such an opportunity, a person's self-respect as a participating member of society as a system of cooperation is understandably threatened. This opportunity then is something that should matter to the political liberal.

⁶⁷ Brookes Brown (2020) makes the interesting argument that reciprocal returns through socially contributive work can satisfy the general duty of political obligation (and even replace the more traditional obligatory acts of paying taxes or obeying the law). See also Zhu 2015.

3.4 – Meaningful work and Self-Respect

What does all this have to do with meaningful work? Well, several liberal philosophers move directly from the premise of society as a system of cooperation between free and equal contributing members, to an argument that justice involves certain requirements in the workplace (Anderson 1999, pp. 321-326; Lindblom 2011; von Platz 2016; Osawa 2022). Indeed, Rawls at times makes a move just of this sort: “[a] scheme of cooperation is given in large part by how its public rules organize productive activity, specify the division of labour, assign various roles to those engaged in it, and so on” (2001, p. 63. See also p. 179).⁶⁸ But insofar as these kinds of moves rely on the formative thesis (i.e., work is the best way to undertake social contribution given its place in, and the nature of, contemporary economies), then it will be unconvincing from the standpoint of political liberalism, for the reasons I outlined in §3.2.1.

The strategy I use here to defend meaningful work’s normative weight is different to this, as it is based on the *conceptual* overlap between the account of meaningful work defended in Chapter 2, and the nature of social contributions necessary to express the reciprocity underlying a system of cooperation between free and equal persons. This argument, unlike those relying on the formative thesis, will still apply in ideal conditions given it is based not on the place work just so happens to hold in contemporary economies, but is based on the nature of meaningful work itself, a(n) (ideal) political conception of society, and the nature of the persons who make it up. So long as meeting the needs and wants of others is a justice-relevant activity, then the

⁶⁸ For an argument that such a connection is implicit in Rawls’ characterization of the worst off in society being the least advantaged worker, see Freeman 2007, pp. 106-107.

opportunity persons have to undertake meaningful work (both paid and unpaid) will be fundamentally linked to justice.

Seeing society as a system of social cooperation between free and equal participating members corresponds to seeing citizens participating, in part, through meaningful work, for the following reasons. First, recall that the mutual interdependencies underlying a system of cooperation are of a certain sort, which depend on the deployment of persons' own initiative and skills. This has very clear affinities to the contributive view of meaningful work, which requires work to offer scope for self-direction and agency, enabling acts of initiative and skill. It is only when a person's work is person-engaging that they will be carrying out social contribution expressive of the reciprocity and complementarity of talents tied to the political conception of society. The reason contribution through drudgery won't suffice as a basis for self-respect is that there is no real talent or agency being expressed, merely hard toil.

Second, the account of meaningful work's sensitivity to work's social contribution, and a worker's involvement in the contributive aspects of a work process, aligns with the emphasis reciprocal relations place on persons actually meeting the needs and wants of others. When a person's work is negligibly contributive, or when features of a workplace fail to make them aware of their contribution or to involve them in the externally oriented decisions related to contribution, then they are being disconnected from a key aspect of their status as a participating member of society. Person-engaging work alone, while it might have other intrinsic benefits, will not guarantee any connection to a person's role in a system of cooperation. It is therefore the features of meaningful work (complex enough to be person-engaging, and democratic

involvement when located in a large complex firm) taken together which are required for persons to be secure in their status as free and equal participating members of society. This is why the opportunity for meaningful work (both in its market and non-market varieties) is a social basis of self-respect.

Surprisingly, Rawls comes to the same conclusion (without explaining what he means by meaningful work nor properly outlining the rationale for why it is important), as he lists one of the essential prerequisites for the basic structure is having society serve as employer of last resort:

“lacking ... the opportunity for meaningful work and occupation is not only destructive of citizens’ self-respect but of their sense that they are members of society and not simply caught in it” (Rawls 2005, p. lvii. See also 1999, p. 50)

Both Rafeeq Hasan (2015, pp. 490-492) and Jeffrey Moriarty (2009, pp. 449-453), in attempting to reconstruct this claim by Rawls, consider (before rejecting) the possibility that meaningful work could be linked to self-respect given it enables persons to contribute to society. Instead, they argue Rawls must be connecting meaningful work to self-respect through the way person-engaging activity can enable the realization of the Aristotelian Principle, which itself is a prerequisite for self-respect (I consider this line of argument in more detail in Chapter 4).⁶⁹ And while I agree that contributions that are mundane forms of drudgery cannot be supportive of self-respect in the relevant sense (Moriarty’s examples are bolting on car wheels or painting highway lines), all this shows is that contribution alone is insufficient as a social basis of self-respect, not that it is unnecessary.

⁶⁹ See also Doppelt 1981, pp. 274-275, for the similar point put negatively against Rawls’ inattention to justice in production. For the definition of the Aristotelian Principle see the beginning of §4.3.

The account of meaningful work offered here provides a different interpretation, pinning meaningful work's importance directly to a person's political status as a participating member of society – a connection made particularly explicit by Rawls in the above quote. And while discussion of Rawls' political economy needs to wait until Chapter 5, it is worth pointing out here that part of Rawls' argument for a property-owning democracy over welfare-state capitalism is that the former “put[s] in the hands of citizens generally, and not only of a few, sufficient productive means for them to be fully cooperating members of society on a footing of equality” (2001, p. 140). Just like with the above quote from the introduction to *Political Liberalism*, Rawls here is tying citizens' political status directly to their participation in the productive sphere.

At this point we are in a position to outline how defending the promotion of meaningful work by connecting it to a political conception of society is able to respond to the nonperfectionist objection. The objection of course is very much still live given that even in ideal theory persons are inevitably going to assign different value to the activity of meaningful work. Taking the proverbial example, won't the promotion of meaningful work, as a means to provide the social bases of self-respect, be unfair to people like Malibu surfers who don't care one iota about contributing to others in a person-engaging way? The response here is to emphasize that the claim which grounds the justice-relevance of meaningful work offered here, that society is a system of social cooperation partly constituted by mutual interdependencies and a complementarity of talent between persons, is a very different kind of claim to the empirical point on which the formative thesis relies. The formative thesis is not inevitable or unchangeable and alternative policies, like a basic income, could enable persons to attain all-purpose means

outside of work. This is why, if the promotion of meaningful work is grounded in the formative thesis, a Malibu surfer's complaint against it is reasonable. They can point to an alternative possible world that allows persons to more freely decide how they want to live their lives.

But the social fact of mutual interdependencies is not a changeable fact in the same sort of way. What alternative world could a surfer point to as a complaint against the fact of reciprocal benefit – a world of self-supporting Robinson Crusoes? This complaint would not be reasonable. A surfer is only able to pursue their own plan of life thanks to the skills and talents of others (the board makers, the waterproof camera designers, the persons protecting the sand dunes, and so on). To complain that the opportunity to engage in the sorts of reciprocal relations relied on here is merely one sort of contestable value among others is to be unreasonably dismissive of the conditions that make justice required in the first place. This is why promoting meaningful work need not treat the Malibu surfer unfairly, as its connection to self-respect is a consequence of a claim that it is not unreasonable to expect persons, no matter their particular conception of the good, to accept. Indeed, so long as society's economic institutions are such that there exists an array of meaningful work options for the surfer (I outline what this might involve in Chapter 5), then the value of reciprocity additionally suggests the surfer is doing something unjust by failing to exercise their talents in a way that is contributive.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Here one is reminded of Rawls' remark that "those who surf all day off Malibu must find a way to support themselves and would not be entitled to public funds" (2005, p. 182n). In *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* he then adds the stipulation that for the requirement to be acceptable "society must make sure that opportunities for fruitful work are generally available" (2001, p. 179). These comments by Rawls are in relation to including leisure time in the index of primary goods, and he makes no explicit connection between a work obligation and the value of reciprocity.

My argument here doesn't deny some persons will have greater overlap than others between their conception of the good and meaningful work, which, by extension, means that some persons will have greater overlap between their conception of the good and a social basis of self-respect (although this is tempered somewhat by meaningful work not being limited to market activity). But this does not mean the promotion of meaningful work is illegitimate from the standpoint of political liberalism, as any plausible standard of nonperfectionism forgoes attempts to be completely neutral in effect towards the many conceptions of the good held by persons. My argument then differs from both the claim that because certain organizations of work are favoured by, or necessary for the self-respect of, some persons given their conception of the good, the state should promote them out of concerns of neutrality (Miller 1989, pp. 72-971; Jacob and Neuhäuser 2018, pp. 939-942), and the claim that promoting meaningful work can be a legitimate response to correct the way the market favours forms of work that are not meaningful (Hsieh 2008, pp. 76-77; Moriarty 2009, p. 453). Rather, what counts is that policies have a neutral justification – i.e., that they are acceptable to persons as part of a shared political conception of justice, and that they do not rely on any views about the good on which persons reasonably disagree (Larmore 1996, pp. 125-126; Kymlicka 2002, p. 218; Rawls 2005, pp. 192-194). What I have argued is that it is reasonable to take as part of that shared conception the idea of society as partly constituted by reciprocal interdependencies, and that the self-respect of its members is connected to their opportunity to engage in such relations.

3.5 – Conclusion

The focus throughout this chapter has been on whether the promotion of meaningful work – i.e., work which is complex enough to be person-engaging and which, when occurring in a large firm

accords workers democratic involvement – can be a legitimate part of a theory of justice that takes nonperfectionism seriously. I have argued it can be. This is because the opportunity for meaningful work is a social basis of self-respect for persons who are (and regard themselves to be) free and equal participating members of society as a system of cooperation. This makes the promotion of meaningful work legitimate in a society defined by reasonable pluralism because it is connected, inextricably, to a primary good, and is thus in the interests of persons generally.

Defending the promotion of meaningful work by uncritically taking for granted the place of work in the nonideal and unjust circumstances of today won't provide an argument that meaningful work matters in conditions of full justice. What can provide such an argument, is recognizing the political value of ensuring not only the benefits of social cooperation are distributed fairly, but also the opportunity to engage in such a system and to produce the benefits on which one's fellow citizens depend.

As I noted in the introduction, in this thesis I will not be considering in great detail how the promotion of meaningful work might be ranked against other requirements of justice. My aim is just to show that meaningful work, through its connection to self-respect, can legitimately form part of a liberal theory of justice and what institutional implications its promotion might require. If proponents of different liberal conceptions of justice find my argument convincing, they will be able to integrate the promotion of meaningful work into their theories in different ways. Details will be determined in part out of the different rankings given to the importance of self-respect.

But, with our Rawlsian caps on what we can at least say here is that if the opportunity for meaningful work is indeed a social basis of self-respect, then it seems unlikely that its promotion would have lexical posteriority. This is because the primary good of self-respect is “perhaps the most important primary good” (Rawls 1971, p. 440), and amongst Rawlsians is key in arguments for both the priority of the basic liberties and the priority of the fair equality of opportunity over the difference principle (for the former, see Rawls 1971, pp. 544-547; 2005, pp. 318-320; Doppelt 1981, pp. 261-262; Cohen 2002, pp. 108-111; Eyal 2005, pp. 197-201. For the latter, see Freeman 2007, pp. 91-94, 134-135; Shiffrin 2004, pp. 1668-1670). This suggests, at minimum, institutional changes increasing the opportunity for meaningful work might be justified even if there is a trade-off in income.

Chapter 4 – Meaningful Work and Social Unions

4.1 – Introduction

In Chapter 3 I outlined how the mutual interdependencies between the skills and talents of persons can express the reciprocity underlying the idea of society as a system of cooperation, and then suggested that this ties such activities to persons' self-respect, given they are connected to persons' political status as members of such a society. And given such reciprocity corresponds to what I have argued is the most convincing account of meaningful work, this provides an argument for meaningful work being a social basis of self-respect. This is the basic rationale for my claim that the promotion of meaningful work can form part of a liberal theory of justice that takes a commitment to nonperfectionism seriously.

That argument relied on the combination of, on the one hand, a certain 'political' characterization of self-respect that is found in *Political Liberalism*, where the social bases of self-respect are understood as those things necessary for a person to be confident in their status as a participating member of society (e.g., see Rawls 2005, pp. 81-82, 318), along with, on the other, comments made by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* on the nature of the social interdependencies that make up a well-ordered society (e.g., see 1971, pp. 523, 529).

And while the argument of Chapter 3 provides what I take to be a convincing ground for the importance of meaningful work to a liberal theory of justice, I recognize the argument might come across as awkwardly relying on a combination between two distinct periods of Rawls' work. This is especially so given Rawls' most extensive treatment of the social interdependencies on which my argument relies is part of a larger discussion in Part III of *Theory*

on social unions and their role in securing for persons the social bases of their self-respect. And while I have noted that Rawls does not drop discussion of social interdependencies and social unions from his work post-*Theory* (see especially 2005, pp. 318-323; 2001, pp. 75-76, 145), the way Rawls formally characterizes self-respect in *Theory* is indeed rather different from the ‘political’ characterization of self-respect found in Chapter 3.

The aim of this chapter is to turn to Rawls’ account of self-respect and social unions in Part III of *Theory* and argue that with a certain reconstruction, not only can it be made consistent with the ‘political’ characterization of self-respect seen in Chapter 3, but that it can actually help ground the characterization of self-respect Rawls later came to hold, and explain its connection to meaningful work. The key is emphasizing how social interdependencies relate to a feature of personhood. I will argue, using premises found only in the framework of *A Theory of Justice*, that the activity of meaningful work can relate to a shared end between persons in society that thereby brings them together into a social union of social unions (all in a way acceptable for political liberalism). With this laid out, the connection between meaningful work and self-respect is then provided by the fact it is only when persons have the activities affiliated with a social union of social unions recognized and appreciated by others that their self-respect can be properly supported.

To repeat, I think the argument of Chapter 3 suffices to give the political liberal reason to regard the promotion of meaningful work as justice-relevant. It is meaningful work’s unique role in providing persons the opportunity to engage in the kind of social interdependencies that correspond to society as a system of social cooperation that gives it its political value. Only when

persons are able to engage in meaningful work can their self-respect as participating members of society be secured. So, to those readers who are convinced by Chapter 3 or who are less interested in reconciling the defence of meaningful work with the different periods of Rawls' work, feel free to skip this chapter and move on to Chapter 5's discussion of economic policies and political economy.

But this chapter is not just Rawlsian exegesis for the sake of Rawlsian exegesis. By reconstructing an argument about meaningful work's importance that brings in the idea of social unions and shared ends between society's members, this chapter is showing how the kind of mutual interdependencies that correspond to meaningful work are important to justice not just because they correspond to the idea of society as a system of cooperation, and then leaving it at that. What the argument of this chapter does is show how the activity of meaningful work is in the interests of persons generally, *before* any assumptions are made about the 'ideal' of society. Meaningful work isn't valuable just because the ideal of society as a system of cooperation is valuable, what makes meaningful work valuable, and in the interests of persons generally, is the same thing that makes it reasonable to take society as a system of cooperation in the first place.

The chapter proceeds as follows. To prepare the ground for the argument that meaningful work can be linked to self-respect not just because it corresponds to the idea of society as a system of cooperation, but because it is in the interests of persons generally, I first need to unpack the account of self-respect Rawls puts forward in Part III of *A Theory of Justice*. This will be the task of §4.2 and §4.3. The upshot of these sections is that the way Rawls officially links activity within a social union to self-respect ostensibly closes the door to any link between

self-respect and meaningful work understood in the terms defended in this thesis. But this is not as much of a problem as it sounds. This is because the account of ‘self-respect’ that Rawls puts forward in Part III of *A Theory of Justice* is not really an account of self-respect at all but is instead an account of self-esteem. This not only leads to some serious problems for his account (given self-esteem is not a primary good) but also means that, and this is what is important for our purposes here, a link between self-respect (in the terms of Part III of *Theory*) and meaningful work might still be possible. It is in §4.4 that I show this link is more than just a possibility.

In §4.4 I argue that once we reconstruct the importance given in Part III of *Theory* to the link between activities within social unions and persons’ self-respect, in a way that doesn’t just reduce to an account of self-esteem, the relevant activities are those that will correspond to meaningful work. The key is to show that for an activity to be connected to a person’s self-respect, it must not just contribute towards, and be recognized within, small social unions united around adherence to a single way of life or conception of the good, but must contribute to an end that is shared between all members of society, such that it brings them together into a social union of social unions. It is only an activity that satisfies that condition which can relate to general features of personhood, and it is only recognition of activities relating to general features of personhood that can support persons’ self-respect (instead of just their self-esteem). What makes meaningful work linked to self-respect then, is the fact that given it is an activity that contributes to *unassociated* others, it can be an activity that relates to a shared end between society’s members, thereby bringing them together into a social union of social union.

I acknowledge that a substantive activity like meaningful work ever forming the basis of a shared end in society does, at the outset at least, seem almost completely at odds with the emphasis political liberalism places on the fact of reasonable pluralism. But once we take seriously that first, meaningful work is uniquely placed to provide persons an opportunity to engage in contributive activities, and second, that “[i]t is a feature of human sociability that we are by ourselves but parts of what we might be,” then we are forced to acknowledge, albeit somewhat paradoxically, the imperative place of meaningful work in any account that cares about individuals living their lives how they see fit. Political liberalism’s deep insistence on neutrality regarding conceptions of the good does not have to mean there is a similar neutrality between all the different spheres of activity that make up modern life. Work is special not because it links up with some idea of the good, but because without it we would not be able to do the things that make each of our lives our own.

4.2 – The Ambiguity of Self-Respect in Part III of *A Theory of Justice*

What does Rawls’ account of self-respect in Part III of *A Theory of Justice* look like? To begin, in §67 he argues there are two aspects to a person’s self-respect. There is first a person’s “secure conviction that [their] conception of the good, [their] plan of life, is worth carrying out,” and then second there is a person’s “confidence in one’s ability, so far as it is within one’s power, to fulfill one’s intentions” (Rawls 1971, p. 440). Call these the *worthwhile* and *ability* aspects of self-respect respectively. The reason then why self-respect is a primary good, is that “[w]ithout it nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them. All desire becomes empty and vain, and we sink into apathy and cynicism” (Rawls 1971,

p. 440).⁷¹ The importance of self-respect is not so much in terms of it being part of a plan of life, but in its necessity as a precondition for a plan of life to be seen as worthy of pursuit in the first place (see Rawls 1971, p. 178). Such effects from the having (or not) of self-respect coheres then with both Rawls' initial account of primary goods as the things it would be rational for persons to want regardless of whatever else they want, as well as with the later formulation as those things necessary for persons to realize the two moral powers.⁷²

Final preliminary point: given self-respect is a personal attitude, the role of a theory of justice is not to provide or distribute the self-regarding attitude itself, but to provide or distribute the social conditions or bases that are reasonably supportive of the attitude (Rawls 1971, p. 440; 2005, pp. 106, 181, 203; 2001, p. 60). What are these social conditions? Well, in §67 of *Theory*, Rawls takes two circumstances as supporting the *worthwhile* aspect of self-respect (Rawls 1971, p. 440, see also p. 178). The first is having a plan of life that coheres with the Aristotelian Principle, which is that “other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity” (1971, p. 426). The second supporting circumstance is

⁷¹ Similar effects of self-respect's absence are found outside the Rawlsian paradigm (this is important given the effects of having or not having self-respect is used by Rawls as external support for the arguments supporting the principles of justice. See Schemmel 2019), and it's worth giving a few examples. For Robin S. Dillon, self-respect's importance derives from how its possession (or not) “reverberates throughout one's person, affecting the configuration and constitution of one's thoughts, desires, values, emotions, attitudes, dispositions, and actions” (1995, p. 20, see also p. 34; Dillon 1997). The importance of self-respect is also prevalent in recognition theorists' emphasis on how the development of persons' self-respect (itself reliant on recognition from others) is necessary for their identity formation and the development of their life plans (Taylor 1994; Honneth 1995a). And writers on racial injustice criticize racist and oppressive institutions and attitudes because of their effects on persons' self-respect, given reductions of self-respect undermine persons' practical agency and estranges them from their ends (Hay 2011; Basevich 2022).

⁷² See note 1.

then “finding our person and deeds appreciated and confirmed by others,” which is also then taken as a circumstance supporting the *ability* aspect of self-respect (Rawls 1971, p. 441).⁷³

4.2.1 – Three Self-Regarding Attitudes and their Implications for Justice

Before considering in more detail these supporting circumstances of self-respect and any connection they might have to meaningful work, we need to first clarify what self-regarding attitude Rawls’ account in §67 of *Theory* is actually an account of, because it is not clear that §67 actually does provide an account of self-respect. In this section I first outline the difference between three attitudes: *entitlement self-respect*, *standards self-respect*, and *self-esteem*, before then considering the implications for Rawls’ theory depending on which of these attitudes is found in §67. The upshot is that if Rawls’ account of ‘self-respect’ is really an account of either self-esteem, or a kind of standards self-respect that relies on persons making relative comparisons to others, then his account is in trouble. Delineating the difference between these self-regarding attitudes is crucial in outlining an account of self-respect tied to social contribution and meaningful work that can be convincing.

In *Theory*, Rawls uses the terms self-respect and self-esteem interchangeably,⁷⁴ and while he recognizes in later work that he should have differentiated between the two (Rawls 1975, p. 260; 2005, p. 404n), he thinks this is really only a matter of style and makes little of the distinction. But there are important differences between self-respect and self-esteem, so this is a mistake. Informed by these differences, several writers argue Rawls’ account of ‘self-respect’ in §67 is actually an account of self-esteem (Thomas 1978, pp. 259-263; Eyal 2005, pp. 202-204).

⁷³ There is a school of thought that self-respect need not be dependent on recognition from others, but I won’t defend my account against this objection. See Bird 2010; Schemmel 2019.

⁷⁴ For one example where it is obvious, see 1971, p. 440. But this occurs all throughout *A Theory of Justice*.

Others argue Rawls' account is best understood at two interrelated levels (Doppelt 1981, p. 274), or divides into the two attitudes of self-respect and self-esteem (Hasan 2015, p. 489n; Schemmel 2019, note 15), with one expressed and supported by the state while the other is supported in associational life. Just to foreshadow what comes later in §4.4, the account I develop is in the spirit of this latter interpretation, and I will argue that while the way persons' plans and activities are recognized by those within their close-knit associations is supportive of self-esteem, the way they are recognized more broadly (by unassociated others) supports their self-respect.

So, focusing first on the difference between self-respect and self-esteem, what separates these two attitudes? In David Sachs' influential formulation, self-respect is an attitude based on feelings of entitlement to certain treatment ('my wishes can't be completely ignored,' 'my rights can't be flouted'), while self-esteem is an attitude closer to pride, where a person judges themselves to be in some sense superior to others at some task or to have greater attainments or advantages compared to others (1981, pp. 349-355). Two further differences are then noted by Sachs. The first is that self-respect does not rely on relative comparisons to others, but self-esteem does. This point about self-esteem's reliance on relative comparisons is also made by Robert Nozick. The example he gives is someone who thinks they are good at basketball because they can hit fifteen out of one hundred shots, while everyone else in their town can only hit one. Then when a professional basketballer comes along, this person's self-esteem naturally takes quite the hit (Nozick 1974, pp. 240-243).⁷⁵ The second difference noted by Sachs is that while a person's self-esteem might be sensitive to their self-respect (they are proud of their insistence that their rights can't be flouted, and so on), lowering or enhancing self-esteem furnishes no

⁷⁵ Nozick thinks self-esteem's reliance on relative comparisons also means self-respect will be so reliant, given individuals (at least those that don't do well in the comparison) will "feel inferior *as persons*" (1971, p. 242. My emphasis).

ground for any equivalent decrease or increase in self-respect (Sachs 1981, pp. 356-357). Returning to Nozick's example, even though the person's self-esteem is lowered after witnessing the talent of a professional, this (we might think) is no good reason for their self-respect to be diminished.

The point about self-respect not being sensitive to self-esteem will turn on what the attitude of self-respect is taken to be. And at this point we need to bring in the distinction between what I will be calling *entitlement* self-respect and *standards* self-respect. The former is more of a Kantian understanding of self-respect – like the one adopted by Sachs above – which characterizes a ‘self-respecting’ person as someone who is confident in the entitlements they are owed simply in virtue of their dignity as a person and their status as an end in themselves.⁷⁶ But as Stephen Darwall (1977, pp. 47-48) outlines, there is a difference between a person recognizing the entitlements and responsibilities they have simply in virtue of being a person (their entitlement self-respect), and what he calls ‘appraisal self-respect,’ which is a person's regard of themselves as a person against a relevant standard. I will be following several writers in calling this latter form of self-respect *standards* self-respect (Bird 2010, pp. 20-21; Schemmel 2019, p. 632; Stark 2020).

Both entitlement self-respect and standards self-respect are then distinct from self-esteem, which is a person's regard of themselves (or a feature of themselves) against a far wider

⁷⁶ For similar accounts, see also Feinberg 1970; Hill 1973, pp. 97ff.; Boxill 1976; Thomas 1978, pp. 264-265; Eyal 2005, pp. 201ff. Entitlement self-respect is also sometimes called ‘recognition self-respect’ (see the discussion in Dillon 2022). I prefer the former because both entitlement self-respect and standards self-respect depend upon some kind of recognition by others.

array of standards.⁷⁷ For Darwall, the relevant grounds for standards self-respect (and what makes it narrower than self-esteem), are the “excellences of persons which we delimit as constituting character” (1977, p. 48).⁷⁸ What connects the two kinds of self-respect then is their connection to personhood, the “relevant” standard for standards self-respect is something that relates in some way to personhood (note that it doesn’t have to be the same standard Darwall uses). What then connects standards self-respect with self-esteem is both their reliance on assessment against some standard.

While Darwall’s account focuses on the excellences constituting character (like being honest, and so on), other potential standards are available – it depends on the account of personhood employed.⁷⁹ This then is why Sachs’ point about changes to self-esteem not necessarily leading to any changes to self-respect will apply not just to entitlement self-respect but can also apply to standards self-respect, given standards relevant to self-esteem won’t necessarily overlap with standards relevant to self-respect.

However, depending on the nature of the standard taken as relevant, accounts of standards self-respect will not always cohere with Sachs’ point that self-respect need not rely on relative comparisons to others. If the standard in question is continuous (a person can meet it to various extents) and positional (not available to everyone), then standards self-respect *will* rely on relative comparisons. For example, if the standard is a ‘top-tier athlete’ then a person’s standards self-respect will rely to some degree on comparing themselves to others (as we have

⁷⁷ Darwall takes Rawls’ account of self-respect in §67 to divide into appraisal (or standards) self-respect and self-esteem. See Darwall 1977, p. 48n. This will also be my interpretation.

⁷⁸ See also Dillon 1995, pp. 18-19, 31.

⁷⁹ But for accounts of standards self-respect that lean more towards subjective accounts of self-esteem, see Massey 1983, p. 249; McKinnon 2000, pp. 492-494.

seen with Nozick's example) – there is no clear dividing line between ‘top-tier’ and ‘decent-tier,’ and not everyone can be in the top. But no relative comparisons will be necessary when the standard in question is binary (a person either meets it or they don't) and non-positional (everyone can theoretically meet it). For example, if the standard in an account of standards self-respect is ‘being honest’ then standards self-respect would be theoretically open to everyone (a person is either honest or they are not, and there is nothing stopping everyone being honest).

With these three self-regarding attitudes laid out, we can see that what Rawls characterizes as ‘self-respect’ in §67 is distinctly not entitlement self-respect.⁸⁰ This is because a person's “secure conviction that [their] conception of the good, [their] plan of life, is worth carrying out,” and having “confidence in one's ability, so far as it is within one's power, to fulfill one's intentions,” are not feelings of entitlement a person thinks they are owed in virtue of their personhood (at least not directly). Instead, they are assessments of an activity's value against some standard (its worthiness).

This then leads to the question of whether §67 is an account of standards self-respect or self-esteem. Both seem possible. It could be an account of standards self-respect because, at least for Rawls, the assessment a person has towards their plan of life is so tightly tied up to their identity as a person (and hence why a negative judgement is so damaging).⁸¹ On the other hand, it could be an account of self-esteem if the emphasis is put on a person's confidence in the worth of their “intentions” and “plans” in terms of narrower standards unique to those activities

⁸⁰ This despite the fact that at times in *A Theory of Justice* Rawls seems to take the principles of justice to be supportive of self-respect understood in this Kantian sense (e.g., pp. 178-180, 256).

⁸¹ This holds both in the framework of *A Theory of Justice* where it is a person's plan of life that determines what is good for them (1971, pp. 407ff.), and also in *Political Liberalism* given the classification of persons as holders of the two moral powers (one of which is the capacity for a conception of the good with ends and purposes which they will pursue), which are those aspects necessary for a person to be a full participant in a system of cooperation (see Rawls 2005, pp. 18, 104).

(whatever those standards might be). Such standards would vary greatly between individuals and need not connect back up to any general notion of personhood. A further question, then, is if §67 is indeed an account of standards self-respect, whether it (like self-esteem) relies on persons making relative comparisons to others. As we have seen, this will turn on both whether the standard in question is continuous or binary, and whether it is positional.

Answers to both these questions will affect the attractiveness of Rawls' account of 'self-respect' in §67. In relation to the first question, if the account is really an account of self-esteem then it is going to be difficult to maintain any connection between the official account in §67 and the way self-respect is tied to personhood and dignity elsewhere in *A Theory of Justice*, as well as Rawls' later 'political' characterization of self-respect tied to a person's status as a free and equal participating member of society. Furthermore, if this is the case, there will also be a dilemma for treating self-respect (which is really self-esteem) as "perhaps the most important primary good," without which "nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them" (Rawls 1971, p. 440. See also p. 396). On one horn is the point that because the social bases of self-esteem are going to be wider than the social bases of self-respect (given self-esteem is a person's attitude about their relative ability to carry out a much wider array of tasks, not tied to personhood in any way), insisting that the social bases of self-respect (but really self-esteem) must be equal leads to problems. Nir Eyal (2005, pp. 207-210) gives an argument to this effect, claiming, that because §67 is really an account of self-esteem, Rawls' commitment to equality in the social bases of self-respect (but really self-esteem) entails a commitment to equality of income, and thus a consistent Rawls ought to endorse equal levels of income no matter the levelling-down required to get there. Whether Eyal's particular

argument about equality of income is correct aside, the larger point here is that a theory of justice that aims to equalize self-esteem between persons will have implications bordering on absurd, given the number of things that reasonably affect self-esteem. Another (perhaps deeper) problem on this horn relates to Nozick's point (1974, p. 243) about self-esteem fundamentally relying on making relative comparisons to others (nobody has high self-esteem for having opposable thumbs). Equalizing the social bases of self-esteem then would be a futile endeavour, given once one basis is equalized some other factor against which persons differ will come and take its place.

These problems might then lead us to question the characterization of self-respect (which is really self-esteem) as a primary good. As Richard Arneson argues, if a person's confidence in their plans and activities is in terms of self-esteem only, its absence might not be so problematic as Rawls makes out, given anxiety and self-doubt can often spur achievement (Arneson 1987, p. 530; 2013, p. 325). After witnessing the skills of the professional, for example, our amateur basketballer might be inspired to train even harder, or to find another sport more suited to their talents. But even with these potential positive effects of its absence aside, the different nature of self-esteem might simply be enough for us to reject its relevance to justice. Is it really a concern of justice that professional basketballers make amateur players feel inadequate in comparison? Self-respect (which is really self-esteem) might simply not be important enough to be a primary good. Going down this road however impales one on the second horn of the dilemma because given the role of self-respect in arguments for the priority of the basic liberties over the second principle (Rawls 1971, pp. 544ff.), to remove self-respect as a primary good would be to remove

one of the major supports (if not the major support) of the lexical ordering of the principles of justice.⁸²

Even if §67 is an account of standards self-respect and not self-esteem, we can now turn to the second question about whether it will rely on persons making relative comparisons to others. If it does then then this will be problematic as it will make self-respect a positional good (see Thomas 1978, p. 261).⁸³ And this will violate the necessity of the social bases of self-respect being (at least in principle) available to all persons. Indeed, this is a point recognized by Rawls in his argument that income shares cannot be used as a social basis of self-respect as in such a circumstance (at least when distribution satisfies the difference principle):

“not everyone can have the highest status, and to improve one person’s position is to lower that of someone else ... Persons are set at odds with one another in the pursuit of their self-esteem [meaning self-respect]. Given the pre-eminence of this primary good, the parties in the original position surely do not want to find themselves so opposed” (Rawls 1971, p. 545)

As such, for Rawls’ account of ‘self-respect’ in §67 to be convincing and consistent with the rest of his theory it cannot either be an account of self-esteem or an account of standards self-respect that relies on relative comparisons. It must, rather, be an account of standards self-respect where the standard is such that it is possible for all persons to meet it.

In the next section (§4.3) I argue the way Rawls develops the supporting conditions of ‘self-respect’ in §67– a person’s activity realizes the Aristotelian Principle and is recognized and

⁸² Nir Eyal (2005, pp. 197-201) argues that the only valid argument offered by Rawls for the priority of the basic liberties is that such priority is a social basis of self-respect, and that this demonstrates the equal distribution of the social bases of self-respect is actually the ‘covert principle’ that has ultimate lexical priority. A similar argument is given by Doppelt 1981, p. 277.

⁸³ This will also be the case if §67 is an account of self-esteem.

appreciated by like-minded associates in a social union – does indeed make it an account of self-esteem. This means Rawls’ official account has some problems. However, in the section that follows (§4.4) I offer an alternative reading of the way Rawls links a person’s self-respect to their carrying out of activities within a social union and which are appreciated by others. While this reading is loyal to the importance Rawls places on activities displaying skills and talents, it argues that there is a particular kind of activity which requires no relative comparisons to others and which is related to personhood in such a way that having others recognize and appreciate the merits of the activity is necessary for a persons to feel like it is worthwhile. Given the context in which this argument is taking place, it will come as no surprise that I argue meaningful work is this activity. This then makes the opportunity for meaningful work not only a social basis of self-respect, but a social basis of a kind of self-respect that actually matters for a theory of justice.

4.3 – Recognition from within Social Unions

In this section I first argue the way Rawls characterizes complex activity and its contribution to others in Part III of *Theory* is best understood as supporting a person’s self-esteem. I then outline the specific problems that result from this beyond what was mentioned in the previous section, and why an alternative account is needed.

As I mentioned earlier Rawls takes plans of life aligning with the Aristotelian Principle as the first supporting circumstance of the *worthwhile* aspect of self-respect. The Aristotelian Principle is a “basic principle of motivation,” which runs under the assumption persons take greater satisfaction in the doing of activities as they become more skilled at them, and which call

on a larger array of talents and intricate discriminations and decisions (1971, pp. 424-426). Why does Rawls think satisfaction tracks complex activities in this way? His answer is that:

“complex activities are more enjoyable because they satisfy the desire for variety and novelty of experience, and leave room for feats of ingenuity and invention... Moreover, simpler activities exclude the possibility of individual style and personal expression which complex activities permit or even require, for how could everyone do them in the same way?” (1971, p. 427)

An example Rawls gives is someone preferring the playing of chess over checkers, given chess’ greater level of complexity such that it enables agency: “even ... grand masters have their characteristic style of play” (1971, p. 427).

Despite Rawls’ point here being about subjective satisfaction, it is worth pointing out just how much this account of the Aristotelian Principle correlates with the reasoning I argued provides the best grounds for the complexity condition of meaningful work, where what makes work’s complexity relevant to it being meaningful for the worker is how it enables work to be ‘person-engaging’ and ‘theirs’ through the discretion and self-direction it accords (see §2.3). Perhaps then this provides a nice link between the account of self-respect developed in §67 of *Theory* and meaningful work, given meaningful work requires the deployment of skills and talents.⁸⁴ However, this move doesn’t work because the same logic would also apply to a whole range of nonwork activities (like playing chess on weekends). As we saw in examining the shortcomings of the formative thesis (§3.2.1), any convincing connection between meaningful work and self-respect by way of the Aristotelian Principle would need to outline why there is some uniquely inherent connection between meaningful work and the Aristotelian Principle.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ As I outlined in §3.4, an argument along these lines is made by Jeffrey Moriarty (2009) and Rafeeq Hasan (2015).

⁸⁵ As Steven Wall (2014, pp. 423-424) argues, any support of self-respect through state promotion of activities that realize the Aristotelian Principle ought to involve considerations about the sorts of opportunities available to persons

Now, a person having their activities and plan of life accord with the Aristotelian Principle is linked to the second supporting circumstance of the *worthwhile* aspect of self-respect, which is “finding our person and deeds appreciated and confirmed by others” (Rawls 1971, p. 440). This is due to the Aristotelian Principle’s “companion effect,” which is that “activities that display intricate and subtle talents, and manifest discrimination and refinement, are valued by both the person [themselves] and those around [them]” (1971, p. 441). Such statements in §67 are by themselves rather vague on the nature of the recognition affiliated with complex activities. Why ought such activities be valued by others? Is it because the talents expressed are rare? Or because of the amount of work that was required to develop them? Or the beauty that is expressed in them? And who exactly is doing the recognizing? Does everyone appreciate them and see them as valuable? Or only a small set of persons?

Rawls brings in social unions to answer these questions. The appreciation of complex activities comes not from wider society, but from persons’ like-minded members in smaller associations of social unions. It is this recognition which enables persons to regard their activities as worthwhile (1971, especially pp. 544-545, see also p. 527). What counts is that “for each person there is some association (one or more) to which [they] belong and within which the activities that are rational for [them] are publicly affirmed by others” (1971, p. 441). It is then the variety of associations protected by freedom of association which ensures that even with the diversity in aspirations and abilities between persons there is always some group whose internal standards are adjusted to the skills and talents of its members (1971, pp. 441-442).

outside of work. While Wall sees the Aristotelian Principle as grounding ‘state perfectionism’ within the Rawlsian framework (see also Wall 2013), this is an interpretation that is not necessary (or so I will argue).

To answer why complex activity is likely to be appreciated as valuable by others, Rawls turns to a point about the “social nature of mankind” he finds in the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt (from who he gets the term ‘social union’).⁸⁶ This is that same idea of the social interdependencies between persons that has already been raised several times throughout this thesis: first in the introduction where I noted the political value of reciprocal relations was something contemporary liberal theorists ought to do a better job of grappling with (§1.3), then in Chapter 2 in the discussion of the inherent connection between complex work and contribution (§2.5), and also of course in Chapter 3 where I outlined the sort of social interdependencies that underly the characterization of society as a system of cooperation (§3.3). But I am now going to unpack the details of this idea more fully. This will enable me to then in §4.4 show how such interdependencies relate to a liberal notion of personhood, and thus to self-respect.

The crux of the idea is that because no one person can ever carry out the entirety of their latent potentialities, persons must combine their developed skills and talents with the skills and talents developed by others in order to realize their “common or matching nature” (1971, p. 523). Repeating from earlier the relevant passage from Rawls, “[i]t is a feature of human sociability that we are by ourselves but parts of what we might be. We must look to others to attain the excellences that we must leave aside, or lack altogether” (1971, p. 529). Both in cases where persons’ powers are similar, and when they are different and complementary, “persons need one another since it is only in active cooperation with others that one’s powers reach fruition. Only in

⁸⁶ See Von Humboldt 1969, pp. 16-17. J. S. Mill quotes the same passage in *On Liberty*. See Mill 2002, Ch. 3 §2.

a social union is the individual complete” (1971, p. 525n).⁸⁷ An example Rawls gives to explain the point is musicians in an orchestra, who each could have trained themselves to play any instrument in the orchestra just as skillfully as the other members, but who instead each perfect their skills on a single instrument in order to realize the powers of all in their joint performance (1971, p. 524n). What this point about the “social nature of mankind” does, is provide a reason for why persons’ complex activities might be valued by their associates. Such activities enable persons to carry out their own activities and plan of life and achieve outcomes that would otherwise be unavailable to them.⁸⁸

Applying this point back to social unions, the way each person’s activities are appreciated is according to how they contribute towards the social union achieving the shared end of its members (1971, pp. 522, 525-526).⁸⁹ Persons sharing an end, and valuing activities that align or contribute towards it, is what Rawls argues brings persons together into a social union in the first

⁸⁷ The outlines of Rawls’ characterization of social unions, as well as the way he sees society not as a ‘private society’ but as a social union of social unions, can I think be found very early in his thought, going all the way back to his undergraduate thesis. See Rawls 2009, especially pp. 189, 209.

⁸⁸ As a historical aside, I find it peculiar that in light of Rawls’ comments that “I have not been able to find this idea [of social unions based on certain kinds of interdependencies] expressly stated where I would expect to,” he makes no reference to any of the new liberals or the British idealists of the turn of the twentieth century (although he insists it is different to the way Mill places high value on diversity and individuality in Ch. III of *On Liberty*). I say this because there are very strong similarities here to the way many of these theorists turned to human sociability as the way to reconcile individuality with community (for excellent discussion, see Gaus 1983). Just for one example, take the following quote from L. T. Hobhouse: “[t]hey are not complete each in himself, but need a complement, which they find in another individual possessing the same fundamental specific character developed with certain differences. The most obvious and most permanent of this kind is that of sex, but in the highest orders this relationship takes a thousand different shapes” (1915, p. 375). As far as I can tell, it is these new liberals like Hobhouse which carry this particular articulation of the “social nature of mankind” from Von Humboldt and Mill through to Rawls.

⁸⁹ Interestingly, this notion of complementarity of talents within an association towards a shared end is also found in Nozick’s framework of a ‘utopia of utopias,’ as in each of these utopias there will be “a diversity of persons, with a diversity of excellences and talents, each benefitting from living with the others, each being great use or delight to the others, complementing them ... [where] [a]ll admire each other’s individuality, basking in the full development in others of aspects and potentialities of themselves left relatively undeveloped” (Nozick 1974, p. 306). The influence of Rawls discussion of social unions here is obvious.

place (1971, pp. 525, 527).⁹⁰ An example Rawls gives is players of games having the shared desire that there is a “good play of the game” (1971, p. 525). So, for instance, in a basketball league it is against this standard that any recognition and appreciation for deployments of skill is acquired (a person’s skill in making the right read to a defensive scheme, shooting over 80% from the free throw line, setting the pick at just the right angle, or whatever). As other writers on social unions note, their internal relations cannot be zero sum – members must win or lose together (Nozick 1974, p. 325; Schwarzenbach 1991, p. 559).

Through the idea of social unions we have now a link between activities that cohere with the Aristotelian Principle and contribution. This, perhaps, could be what connects meaningful work to the Aristotelian Principle (and therefore to self-respect) more convincingly, given this seemingly coheres with meaningful work as activity that meets the needs and or wants of others. However, by defining the contribution of complex (or what I prefer to call person-engaging) activities only in terms of how they meet ends *internal* to smaller social unions, Rawls is shutting the door to this line of argument. According to Rawls’ account, the contributions affiliated with social unions need not be contributing to *unassociated* others. And as this is the key feature separating work from nonwork activities (§2.4), this will preclude any inherent connection between contributive activities in social unions and meaningful work. Indeed, in addition to orchestras and games, the only other examples of social unions Rawls mentions are groups of friends, families, religious groups, cultural groups, and professional associations like an arts or science association (there is also political society as a whole which is a ‘social union of social unions,’ but I turn to this in §4.4). Not only is any mention of work conspicuously absent, but

⁹⁰ Waheed Hussain (2018a, pp. 571-574) helpfully distinguishes between the prosocial attitudes affiliated with a ‘social union’ and those affiliated with ‘mutual affirmation.’ The key feature of the former is cooperation in a shared activity, while the latter focuses on how persons think and act in ways that give importance to others doing well.

Rawls takes competitive markets and economic activity as the “paradigm description [of] private society,” which is the antithesis of a social union given no ends are shared and the common activity is not appreciated for its own sake (1971, pp. 521-522).⁹¹

This does not however necessarily shut the door to the possibility of connecting meaningful work to self-respect through social unions. This is because the features of Rawls’ account I have just outlined really make it an account of self-esteem, not an account of standards self-respect.

This is because, first, given Rawls characterizes contributions within social unions in terms of the shared end of the group, the standards in question are not necessarily going to relate to personhood, or some shared feature between persons (like any standards affiliated with standards self-respect must be). Rather, these standards will be internally specific to the range of different interests and value systems that make up the plethora of social unions in society (religious groups will have their own standards of piety, art associations will have their own standards of aesthetics, sports clubs will have their own standards of performance and sportsmanship, and so on). And a person’s regard of themselves (or some feature of themselves) against one particular standard from this wider array of standards is only ever going to be supportive of their self-esteem (§4.2.1). The fact such standards are internal to social unions, and so often internal to particular conceptions of the good, is why Rawls insists that from the standard of political justice we must not try to rank them in value (1971, pp. 442, 527).

⁹¹ For critique of Rawls on this point see Doppelt 1981, p. 263; Schwarzenbach 1991, p. 561.

Second, the fact these standards are based on the particular and narrow ends between like-minded associates means both that they will likely be continuous (and so not binary) standards, and that persons' assessments of how they (and others) fare against them will likely rely on making relative comparisons to others. This is simply an outcome from recognizing Nozick's point seen earlier (§4.2.1), that persons can only assess how well they do something by comparing themselves to others. Individuals can only be confident in their piety, or their aesthetic touch, or their physical performance, by comparing their activities to those of their associates. A basketball player, for example, can't regard themselves as performing well (and nor will they be recognized as such) if they are turning the ball over far more than everyone else and always missing shots that are makeable for others.

As the account of contributions to social unions in Part III of *Theory* then ends up being an account of self-esteem and not standards self-respect, the account runs into the problems already outlined (see the end of §4.2.1). Namely, not only is it difficult to see why such self-esteem is important to a theory of justice, but any efforts to include it will be futile given it is not possible (even in principle) to equalize its social bases.

Here I will only elaborate briefly on the latter point, as Rawls attempts to use the recognition persons receive from within social unions to avoid having self-respect (but as we now know what is really self-esteem) be a positional good.⁹² Rawls responds to this problem by emphasizing there will be a plurality of associations out of which persons can choose the one that best aligns with their own skills and talents. It is the "secure internal life" of each of these "noncomparing groups," which reduces any potential inequalities relating to recognition for

⁹² The fact Rawls conflates self-respect and self-esteem means he doesn't recognize the first problem about why feelings of self-esteem should matter from the standpoint of justice given they are not a primary good.

skills and talents (1971, pp. 536-537).⁹³ Applied to one of the examples we have been using, the thought here seems to be that if a basketball player finds the competition in one sports league to be at too high a level for them to receive any recognition for their contribution to the shared end (i.e., they just aren't good enough), then thanks to freedom of association they can just find another league that is more suited to their middling talent. In effect then, Rawls' "noncomparing groups" equalize a sense of worth (but actually self-esteem) only because persons are adjusting their aspirations for what they can accomplish and are somehow ignorant of those who contribute to a relevant shared end in greater degrees.⁹⁴

This is no solution at all, for two reasons. The first is that it is plainly false that different groups in society are (or even could be) noncomparing in this way. Rawls' point is that persons won't care about their inability to meet the ends of groups of which they are not members (1971, p. 444). This seems reasonable enough in scenarios where different groups have such divergent standards of value that any comparison would be impossible (e.g., a committed basketball player will unlikely care that they have no musical ability and cannot contribute to an orchestra). However, first, this ignores that because appreciation partly depends on the deployment of skills and talents others lack, those in short supply will naturally garner more recognition and esteem – think here of the point about nobody having high self-esteem for having opposable thumbs (see also Thomas 1978, p. 261). And furthermore, it unrealistically expects persons to be oblivious to the abilities of persons in associations with comparable ends, and which hence have similar

⁹³ This then is partly why the equal basic liberties are a social basis of self-respect, as they enable persons to find whatever social union whose end allows them to contribute (Rawls 1971, pp. 544-545). Although the basic liberties are also taken by Rawls in *Theory* as supportive of a kind of self-respect closer to entitlement self-respect (pp. 178-180), a theme which of course becomes more prevalent in later writings. Joshua Cohen calls these the 'framework' and 'associational' conditions of self-respect. See Cohen 1989, pp. 737-739.

⁹⁴ This is confirmed in Rawls' discussion of shame (the negative corollary of a sense of worth), where he argues shame is dependent on a person's aspirations (1971, p. 444). Rawls makes reference here to William James' account of self-esteem as the fraction of successes over pretensions. See James 1890.

standards of value (it is not as if there is only one social union relating to each standard of religious piety, or to each kind of aesthetics, and so on). And so while it might be true that individuals will be able to find a social union that aligns with their skills and abilities, it might still be that some persons will have a low opinion of themselves, given what they know others in society can achieve (Thomas 1978, p. 261; see also Schemmel 2019, p. 643), or because they were excluded from other social unions on the basis of having inadequate talent (McKinnon 2000).

The second reason Rawls fails in his attempt to stop self-respect (but actually self-esteem) being a positional good is because persons' conviction their activities and plans of life are worthwhile needs to actually be supported by some kind of reality on the ground, it cannot result from persons downgrading their aspirations as a kind of self-help strategy. Indeed, elsewhere in *A Theory of Justice* Rawls is explicit that such bases of self-respect are deeply flawed and to rely on them would be to completely misunderstand the problem of justice. The example he gives is a caste system where persons' "comparisons are presumably confined to within [their] own estate or caste, these ranks becoming in effect so many noncomparing groups established independently of human control and sanctioned by religion and theology. [Persons] resign themselves to their position should it ever occur to them to question it" (1971, p. 547. See also p. 582). Rawls is undeniably right that this is the wrong way to support self-respect and self-worth. The issue however is that unless he accepts self-respect (but again, really self-esteem) as a positional good, his view is committed to a comparable position – he calls social unions "noncomparing groups"! (see Keat and Miller 1974, p. 24; Zaino 1998, pp. 746-748).

While a well-ordered society's social unions won't of course be based on imposed caste or class systems, in Rawls' formulation it is inevitable they will only support (some) persons' sense of worth through fostering false beliefs. And while a situation where persons harbour false beliefs about their relative place in the distribution of talent in order to protect their self-esteem might seem reasonable enough (everyone inevitably does this to some extent, and self-esteem is not a primary good), this is a serious problem for Rawls' account because it is this recognition received from within social unions that is ostensibly the fundamental supporting condition for persons' self-respect. We are left then with the dilemma of "perhaps the most important primary good" being either positional (and so not available to everyone, at least to the same degree) or based on false and unrealistic beliefs. The second horn seems especially painful, as it implies the official account of recognition within social unions supporting persons' self-respect will fail what Rawls later called the 'full publicity condition,' where a well-ordered society would be free of ideology in the sense that it "will reduce the need [persons] might otherwise have for false beliefs (delusions) about their society in order to assume their role in it, or for its institutions to be effective and stable" (2001, p. 122). The grounds of persons' self-respect must be publicly accessible and knowable to all.

4.4 – Recognition Between and Across Social Unions

To summarize Chapter 4's argument so far: the way Rawls develops the account of self-respect in Part III of *A Theory of Justice* provides no path to connect meaningful work convincingly to self-respect. However, Rawls' official account of self-respect ultimately fails. Not least because it isn't actually an account of self-respect but is an account of self-esteem, but also because it makes the "most important primary good" positional and not publicly accessible.

This means a path connecting meaningful work to self-respect might still be possible to develop out of Part III of *A Theory of Justice*, and the way it connects self-respect to contributing to others. Indeed, in the alternative reading of Part III I argue is available, the emphasis is not on how persons' activities contribute to an end that is shared between co-members of smaller social unions (like sports leagues, religious groups, and so on), but on how their activities can potentially contribute to an end that is shared between *all members of society*, such that they are members in a 'social union of social unions.' Because such activity relates to features that are shared between all persons, recognition and appreciation for this contribution to the social union of social unions will be supportive not of self-esteem but of standards self-respect. This connects meaningful work to self-respect because the wider characterization of contribution coheres with what I have argued is the most attractive account of meaningful work.

4.4.1 – Textual Support for an Alternative Reading

As already mentioned, Rawls' characterization of complex activities as contributive, through the way they enable others to achieve outcomes that otherwise would be unavailable to them, initially seems to correlate quite strongly with meaningful work. This is despite Rawls (by limiting contributions to like-minded associates) not officially taking the idea in this direction. However, there are several times in Part III of *Theory* where Rawls makes comments suggestive of understanding complex activities as contributing to not only like-minded others but *unassociated* others.⁹⁵ One can't help but think these comments are Rawls putting his own spin

⁹⁵ Paul Gomberg (2007, p. 103) interprets Rawls' discussion of a social union of social unions in this way, characterizing it as "where our diversity of developed abilities enriches the lives of *all* and where people doing similar work cooperate to make *all* better." My emphasis. Joshua Cohen also seems to briefly hint at this interpretation, see 1989, p. 748; 1997.

on Marx's classic idea that "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (2000b, p. 262).⁹⁶ It is worth listing the relevant passages here to buttress my account.

First of all, in discussing how lives that accord with the Aristotelian Principle are not only good for their author but also for others, Rawls outlines this is not only because they are "displays of human excellence" but also because, given the context of "social interdependency," they are "promoting the common interest" (1971, p. 429) and contributing to the "common good" (1971, pp. 424-425). And given his definition of the common good as the "conditions that are in an appropriate sense equally to everyone's advantage" (1971, p. 246, see also p. 233), he surely is referring to social contributions that go beyond the confines of small social unions of like-minded associates (in what way is playing in an amateur basketball league contributing to the common good?). Additionally, when talking about why natural abilities and skills are part of the excellences, he claims their contributive nature makes them good "from everyone's point of view" such that it is rational for every person to want everyone else to have them (1971, p. 443). The variety of conceptions of the good, and the subsequent variety of activities and plans of life, is a good thing for Rawls because "[h]uman beings have various talents and abilities the totality of which is unrealizable by any one person or *group of persons*" (1971, p. 448. Emphasis added). This clearly implies the complementarity of skill and talent is not internal to groups of like-minded individuals but extends to individuals from different groups.

⁹⁶ But for how Rawls himself sees the account of social interdependencies in social unions as different to Marx's account of the overcoming of the division of labour in communist society, see Rawls 2007, pp. 369-370. Rawls thinks Marx *underplays* the inevitable dependence between persons. See also 1971, p.524n.

Similar remarks are found in Rawls' explication of social unions, where it is "the *community of humankind* the members of which enjoy one another's excellences and individuality elicited by free institutions, and they recognize the good of each as an element in the complete activity the whole scheme of which is consented to and gives pleasure to all" (1971, p. 523. Emphasis added. See also 1971, p. 582). And if social unions exist across generations given the powers of persons today takes the cooperation of many generations over long periods of time (Rawls 1971, pp. 523-525), then a fortiori they must surely exist between different groups and associations today, given the extent a single person's powers rely on the activities and skills carried out by unassociated others. And despite Rawls characterizing society as a "social union of social unions" only in terms of persons identifying with and undertaking activities that support and regulate the two principles of justice (1971, pp. 527-529), he also claims "the members of a well-ordered society have the common aim of cooperating together to realize their own and another's nature" (1971, p. 527), and that the "[t]he collective activity of society, the many associations and the public life of the largest community that regulates them, sustains our efforts and elicits our contribution" (1971, p. 529). Furthermore, given society as a social union of social unions "realizes to a preeminent degree the various forms of human activity; and given the social nature of humankind," this will "bring to fruition our latent powers" and result in "each enjoy[ing] the greater richness and diversity of the collective activity" such that "[i]ndividual and group accomplishments are no longer seen as just so many separate personal goods" (1971, pp. 571-572). Indeed, it is in characterizing society as a social union of social unions that Rawls (somewhat surprisingly) brings in meaningful work, and claims that in a well-ordered society, even though the worst aspects of the detailed horizontal division of labour can be surmounted, "we cannot overcome, nor should we wish to, our dependence on others ...

the division of labour is overcome not by each becoming complete in [themselves], but by willing and meaningful work within a just social union of social unions in which all can freely participate as they so incline” (1971, p. 529). Rawls here is not talking about dependence between like-minded members of smaller social unions, but a dependence between all members across society.

And this is not all, as Rawls makes similar remarks linking society as a social union of social unions with social interdependencies after his ‘political turn.’ In *Political Liberalism* Rawls uses the way the basic liberties promote society as a social union of social unions in order to defend their priority, where it is “the activities of the many social unions [that] are coordinated and combined into a social union of social unions” (2005, p. 322). If society fails to be a social union of social unions in this way, then “we cannot regard the richness and diversity of society’s public culture as the result of everyone’s cooperative efforts for mutual good” (2005, p. 322), and, repeating a point from *A Theory of Justice*, individual group accomplishments will only be seen as separate personal and associational goods, rather than goods that are shared (2005, p. 323). What society as a social union of social unions shows for Rawls is the potential of a regime that grants basic liberties priority to not only “accommodate a plurality of conceptions of the good but also to coordinate the various activities made possible by human diversity into a more comprehensive good to which everyone can contribute and in which each can participate” (2005, p. 323).⁹⁷ And finally, in *Restatement* Rawls clarifies that to see individual persons’ talents as a common asset is not to say that society owns them in any way, but that “[t]his variety [of talents]

⁹⁷ It is worth pointing out this argument is aimed at grounding the priority of the basic liberties, and so if there are alternative requirements in addition to the basic liberties to bring about such a social union of social unions, they (at least in the Rawlsian framework) will have very strong support. Of course, the connection between the basic liberties and a social union of social unions is not the only ground for the priority of the basic liberties, but it is, according to Rawls, one of “the most important grounds” (2005, p. 324).

can be regarded as a common asset because it makes possible numerous complementarities between talents when organized in appropriate ways to take advantage of these differences” (2001, p. 76). When people develop their different and complementary talents according to a “rightly viewed” idea of the division of labour, then this is “generally beneficial for people” (2001, p. 145).⁹⁸

Despite all of these remarks about both the ability to understand “human sociability” in terms of social interdependencies across all of society, and the importance of such social interdependencies to the idea of society as a social union of social unions (and even the place of meaningful work in such an idea), the puzzling fact is that Rawls never provides a mechanism in his principles of justice to ensure persons have the opportunity to engage in such activities. All the basic liberties do is ensure persons can contribute to smaller social unions, they do not (by themselves) ensure persons have the opportunity to contribute in the relevant way to a social union of social unions, where their activity not only benefits their like-minded associates but also benefits *unassociated* others. It is only through undertaking meaningful work, where one is contributing to others by exercising discretion in the deployment of their skills and talents, that persons are able to partake in this latter contribution.

And this matters because while contribution to smaller social unions is only supportive of self-esteem, it is contribution to a social union of social unions that, as I am about to argue, is supportive of self-respect (and which therefore is what matters from the perspective of justice).

⁹⁸ If one wants, one could even refer here to Rawls’ discussion of what might justify inequalities satisfying the difference principle, and how incentives for certain occupations can be justified given there is a resultant spread of material benefits throughout the “system,” and how he takes chain-connection (where the “contributions of the most favoured ... improve everyone’s situation”) as a “natural assumption” (1971, pp. 78ff. Quote occurs p. 81).

And given the point is that meaningful work is uniquely situated as a means through which persons can contribute to those outside their immediate circle in the relevant sense, my discussion here coheres with other writers' criticisms about Rawls' principles of justice providing no mechanism to recognize the importance between aspects of a person's work and their self-respect (see generally: Barry 1973, pp. 31-32; Miller 1978, p. 18; Doppelt 1981, p. 266; Zaino 1998, pp. 743-744).

As we have seen, in Rawls' account, self-respect is supported only through the recognition and esteem persons receive from smaller social unions (from which work is absent) and the assurance of equality through the public affirmation and protection of the basic liberties. As Rafeeq Hasan aptly puts it, “[i]t is as if Rawls thinks that since the garbage collector and brain surgeon might join a bowling league in which each values the contributions of the other as a bowler, the drastic inequalities in their working lives do not affect their relative self-respect” (2015, p. 489). But once we do what Rawls failed to do and integrate facts about “human sociability” more effectively into the idea of society as a social union of social unions, we will see that such a restriction is no longer feasible. The opportunity persons have to undertake meaningful work becomes essential to their self-respect.

4.4.2 – Meaningful Work as the Shared End of a Social Union of Social Unions

In what way then can meaningful work act as a shared end between society's members, thereby bringing them together into a social union of social unions?

Before answering this question, it is worthwhile to just briefly mention that one different strategy taken up by several writers is to link meaningful work (or something like it) to self-respect by regarding the work association itself as one of the many different *smaller* social unions in society. According to this line of thinking, this results in workplaces becoming forms of “economic community,” often with the further point that this can only be achieved in socialist enterprises that are worker-controlled (Doppelt 1981, pp. 275-276; Schwarzenbach 1987, pp. 149-150, 162-163; 1991, p. 561). A certain kind of work would then need to be available, the argument goes, for persons’ co-workers to appreciate the deployment of their skills which contribute to the end of the enterprise (whatever this is). If meaningful work was the kind of work necessary for this to occur, this could then link meaningful work to self-respect. While rejecting the necessity of democratization, it is this characterization of work as a (potential) social union that Jeffrey Moriarty thinks best accounts for Rawls’ insistence post-political turn that the opportunity for meaningful work is a social basis of self-respect, where the reason Rawls favours work over other associations is something akin to the formative thesis (2009, p. 450).

Ignoring the issues with relying on the formative thesis, the problem with this line of argument is that by seeing work as just one of the smaller social unions in society it will only be linking meaningful work (or something like it) to self-esteem, not self-respect (see §4.3). Additionally, given a person's work activities, by definition, will be connected to and affect not only any like-minded associates but also unassociated others, it would be wrong to characterize the relevant contribution and subsequent recognition here as one only between colleagues or co-workers within a single firm.⁹⁹ The contribution affiliated with meaningful work that ties it to

⁹⁹ This does not deny that some workplaces might still have internal standards analogous to those in smaller social unions, against which persons might derive self-esteem. But in the same way it is coherent for persons to regard

self-respect is qualitatively different than contributions in smaller social unions. Returning to Hasan's example, it is not that the brain surgeon and the garbage collector contribute in their work to others in a way analogous to the contributions between members of a bowling league. What their work does is enable them to contribute to unassociated others. As I have mentioned, my alternative strategy is to argue meaningful work is relevant to self-respect by enabling persons from across *different* social unions to be connected together into a social union of social unions.¹⁰⁰

For Rawls, there are two conditions necessary for the existence of a social union. First, the group must be based around an end that is shared amongst all the members, and second, the activities within the group that aim towards this end must be seen as valuable for their own sake. This is what separates social unions from something like a 'private society,' where persons' own ends are either competing or at least independent to the ends of others, and where their concern only extends to the persons and projects within their own personal lives such that social arrangements and common affairs only matter to the extent they affect their own private world (Rawls 1971, pp. 521-522; see also Hussain 2018b, sec. 3). Now Rawls thinks the activity that brings persons in a well-ordered society together into a social union of social unions is participating in and contributing to just institutions, as this is an end that is shared among all of

their work in terms of being meaningful 'fundamentally' and as being meaningful only as a work activity (§2.6), it is also coherent for persons to derive both self-esteem and self-respect from their work, with different standards being relevant for each. I return to this point at the end of the chapter.

¹⁰⁰ As far as I am aware there are only two writers who have considered this option. Andreas Esheté (1974, pp. 46-47), who hints at seeing the "community of meaningful work" as potentially being a social union of social unions in the basic structure. And Rafeeq Hasan (2015, pp. 489-491), who considers the possibility of applying Rawls' notion of a social union of social unions to not only political institutions but also to institutions of production, where labour is taken as a collective product. Hasan thinks such an account would militate against any guarantee of meaningful work, given "each individual's working life will be less important to her conception of her own well-being than her stance on whether or not labor as a whole is meaningful for society" (p. 490). It is the nature of the contribution that I have argued is linked to meaningful work, along with the features of the shared end affiliated with meaningful work in any social union of social unions, that will prevent such a consequence.

society's members and it is valued for its own sake. I won't deny Rawls' point here. But what I will do is argue that the activity of meaningful work can satisfy the same conditions.¹⁰¹

The end I propose as shared across society is the following:

The desire of persons to *have themselves and others undertake person-engaging activities that contribute to the ability of individuals to carry out their plan of life.*

That is, it is the desire to have themselves and others undertake meaningful work. The argument for why such an end is shared is because meaningful work is in the interests of persons generally, given the social interdependencies between and across persons' skills and talents. The idea here is not that meaningful work is in persons' interests generally because it is connected to self-respect in the way outlined in Chapter 3,¹⁰² but that it is in the interests of persons generally because it is only when both persons themselves and others are undertaking meaningful work, that each person can reasonably expect to be able to carry out their own plan of life. As mentioned earlier, Rawls thinks that because "it is a feature of human sociability that we are by ourselves but parts of what we might be" (1971, p. 529), developed skills and talents are one of those goods that "it is rational for everyone (including ourselves) to want us to have" (1971, p.

¹⁰¹ While they do not speak of 'meaningful work,' and talk only of social unions and not a social union of social unions, it is probably the new liberals that provide the historical account closest to my own. As an example, take the following from Bernard Bosanquet: "He is 'a public worker' by doing the service which society demands of him. And just because the service is in principle something particular, unique, and distinctive, he feels himself in it to be a member of a unity held together by differences. And in this sense the bond of social union is not in similarity, but in the highest degree of individuality or specialisation, the ultimate point of which would be to feel that I am rendering to society a service which is necessary, and which no one but me can render – the closest conceivable tie, and yet one, which in a sense, really exists in every case. Your special powers and functions supply my need, and my special powers and functions supply your need, and each of us recognises this and rejoices in it" (1899, Ch. XI). See also the concluding paragraph of §1.2, where I note how several new liberals give importance to work relations expressing reciprocal relations of interdependence between persons.

¹⁰² This would only be begging the question. The aim here is to provide an independent argument for why meaningful work is supportive of self-respect, and why taking society as a system of cooperation partly based on mutual interdependencies is reasonable.

443).¹⁰³ Meaningful work then is part of the common good, understood as those conditions and features that are in the service of shared interests (Rawls 1971, pp. 246, 233; Hussain, 2018b).

I now need to defend this claim that the desire of persons to have themselves and others undertake meaningful work is shared across a well-ordered society, and that this activity is valued for its own sake. Taking, first, the desire of persons *themselves* to undertake meaningful work, this is in the interests of persons because of the connection between an activity being person-engaging and a person being able to regard it as their ‘own’ (a connection I outlined in Chapter 2). When persons undertake activities which give them space to exercise discretion in deploying their skills and abilities, this ensures persons can regard themselves as authors of their own plans and activities, which differ from those of others and which they can enjoy in the absence of interference from others.¹⁰⁴ Of course, undertaking person-engaging activity is not the same as undertaking person-engaging activity that is contributive (i.e., meaningful work). But what makes it reasonable to claim the shared desire is to undertake person-engaging *contributive* activity, is that because “we are ourselves but parts of what we might be” there is an *inherent* contributive element associated with almost all activities that rely on the deployment of a persons’ skills and talents and which form a central part of their plan of life (see §2.5).

¹⁰³ The point here is not that because meaningful work (or at least the opportunity to undertake it) is in the interests of persons generally that therefore meaningful work is a primary good (Hasan 2015, pp. 483-484), or even that the capacity to undertake meaningful work is a third moral power (Von Platz 2016, pp. 290-295; 2020b). The argument is that given having oneself and others undertake meaningful work is in persons’ interests generally it can act as the standard affiliated with persons’ standards self-respect. But it is only the latter that is a primary good, and it is a primary good because it is necessary for the attainment of the moral power to form and revise a plan of life.

¹⁰⁴ For some expressions of the importance, at least in Rawls’ framework, of persons being able to choose and be in control of their plan of life and the ends they adopt, see 1971, pp. 407ff. (where it is put in terms of deliberative rationality), and 2001, p. 19; 2005, p. 19 (where it is put in terms of the moral power to have and revise a conception of the good). In *A Theory of Justice* one also finds the argument that developed skills and talents “enable us to carry out a more satisfying plan of life enhancing our sense of mastery” (1971, p. 443), but this relies on either a perfectionist account of something like flourishing or a disputable empirical claim about psychology, so I don’t rely on it.

For example, if an individual really saw the activity of fixing engines as central to their plan of life, then working as a professional mechanic is what will enable them to carry out this activity to the best of their abilities. The point here is not that because under contemporary economic conditions persons are required to do some kind of job that takes up most of their time, choosing to become a professional mechanic is how they can maximize their time working on engines. This would obviously fall victim to the same objection I made against accounts relying on the formative thesis (§3.2.1). The point, rather, is that working as a professional enables their best development as a mechanic because it is only by meeting the whole range of other persons' mechanical needs (this person's four-cylinder engine is running too rich, this other person's flat-six is misfiring ...) that their skills and talents can be fully exercised. Even in relation to less socially embedded person-engaging activities, similar comments can be made. Returning to another example given earlier, take a person whose plan of life is to spend their days surfing in some isolated and private cove in Malibu (§3.4). While surfing is not connected to the needs and or wants of others as obviously as fixing engines (a surfer only needs themselves, a board, and some swell), the developed skills and talents deployed do still have a contributive element that is not wholly trivial. This is why, in the real world, when word gets around the cliffs above Malibu coves get populated by spectators. No doubt some of these spectators are like-minded members of the social union of surfers (whatever that involves), but not all of them (for example, there is a whole range of diverse reasons why someone might want access to surfing footage, and so on). The skilled surfer's activity is contributive (in some way) to unassociated others, whether they like it or not. And they could easily directly imbue their activity with a contributive element such that it could potentially become meaningful work without significantly changing how they carry it out (they could strap a camera to their chest and sell the footage, they could test new board

designs, they could offer surfing lessons, and so on).¹⁰⁵ It is the fact of “human sociability” that directly ties person-engaging activity to contribution in this way.

I don’t deny that there are undoubtedly some counterexamples. We might think here of Rawls’ (1971, pp. 432-433) famous case of the person who derives pleasure from counting blades of grass (although to fit the example to our scenario perhaps they perform complex mathematical functions related to the grass instead of merely counting it) or, perhaps more realistically, the activities of persons in communities socially insulated from the outside world, such as traditional Amish and Mennonite communities and the like. Activities and plans of life within these communities might not connect up with unassociated others at all, and so the link between person-engaging activity and contribution beyond like-minded associates won’t then hold. But these sorts of cases are rare enough to count as outliers, and do not present a serious objection to the claim that persons share the desire to be undertake person-engaging activity that contributes to others.

Additionally, I also think it would be unconvincing to object to my claim on the basis that there is often an inherent tension between the ‘personal fit’ and ‘social fit’ of persons’ work (e.g., Barry 1965, pp. 230-232; Muirhead 2004, p. 170; Hasan 2015, pp. 489-491). This is because this point only goes through if social contribution is either understood in an unduly narrow way (such as only market-facing activity), or in terms of what contributive opportunities through work look like today. Of course, in a world where one is often forced to make one’s living in the market, and where some jobs are brutally monotonous or dirty and dangerous, then the personal and

¹⁰⁵ Of course, in order for this to be a feasible option certain social and economic circumstances and economic institutions might need to be in place. What this might involve is addressed in Chapter 5.

social fit of work might well come apart. But that's not the only possible world. As I outline in Chapter 5, even if some socially necessary but monotonous or dangerous jobs are not yet able to be automated, that doesn't mean the personal and social fit of work will always be in tension. This would only be the case if we allow (as we currently do) the same individuals to spend their whole lives doing this kind of work. But what we could do is instead *share* this kind of labour, such that no single individual (or group of individuals) would be subjected to it on a permanent basis, and thus each person would then have the opportunity to engage in socially contributive work that depends on their own developed skills and talents.¹⁰⁶

To show why persons can regard themselves undertaking meaningful work as valuable for its own sake, we need to outline the motivations implied by my account. In my account persons cannot desire to undertake meaningful work only for its instrumental role in promoting their self-interest, in the way say that Adam Smith is traditionally understood to have believed motivated contributive activity in the market ("it is not from the benevolence of the butcher ...").¹⁰⁷ But with this said, it is important to outline that having persons value the activity of meaningful work for its own sake does not require persons to base their desire to undertake meaningful work *only* on the fact it is contributive. An example here might be (the part of) Marx's account of unalienated labour where "[i]n your enjoyment or use of my product I would

¹⁰⁶ Norman S. Care (1984) provides a nuanced account of the tensions and trade-offs between the values of self-realization and service to others in career choice. As I hope is clear in the text, I do not mean to deny that in the unjust circumstances of today there will often be a tension between these two values at the level of individual decision-making. I think it is worth quoting here a passage from J. A. Hobson: "so long as the specialization needed to contribute to social service meant that each person should ply some particular trade or profession, should apply himself exclusively to the production of some single class of commodities as farmer, tailor, doctor, under conditions which required considerable variety of skill and experience, and evoked a corresponding interest in the work, so long as the range of specialisation at least allowed each man to see the end and the utility of the work he did, no net injury to individuality was wrought" (1996, p. 226). The key is organizing economies such that these conditions can be met.

¹⁰⁷ Adam Smith 1968, Bk I, Ch. 2. Rawls (1971, p.525n) saw Smith's account of the attitudes in market relations as the prototypical case of 'private society,' and as we have seen he did not explicitly reject it. For the difference between the work process being an instrumental activity versus a shared activity, see also Dewey 1916, Ch. 2.

have the *direct* enjoyment ... of being conscious of having satisfied a *human* need by my work” (2000e, p. 132. See also Brudney 1997, p. 390), such that this fact of contribution might come to dominate persons’ reasons for doing it.¹⁰⁸ The desire to undertake meaningful work in my account is neither of these extremes. Persons desire to undertake meaningful work because the fact their work is contributive (in the way I have outlined) says something about it expressing and relying on their own agency, while, at the same time, the fact it is person-engaging says something about it being contributive – the ‘self-regarding’ and ‘other-regarding’ motivations are tied together.¹⁰⁹ And so while the contributive aspect of a work activity is seen as important by the person doing it *because* it is contributive (it is not pure self-interest), this does not come to dominate why it is done (it is not pure benevolence), persons don’t desire to contribute through drudgery. Indeed, given the “feature of human sociability” it is *only* person-engaging activity that even can be contributive in the relevant sense (see the discussion in §2.5). This is why persons regard themselves undertaking meaningful work as valuable for its own sake.

With these motivations before us, we can see that insofar as the account of meaningful work can be consistent with market relations (which in §5.4 I argue it can be), these markets cannot be a form of private society where no ends are taken as shared and participants think only of their own self-interest. And so while greater discussion of the point will be saved for Chapter 5, to further explain the account it is worth just briefly noting here how it fits into debates about the consistency of economic incentives with justice. The most famous example is probably G. A.

¹⁰⁸ Another way of putting the point here is that my account is not so demanding that it requires persons to contribute to others out of a sense of solidarity, where persons treat the successes and failures of others as if they were their own. See Hussain 2020, pp. 95-96.

¹⁰⁹ A somewhat similar account where the self-regarding and other-regarding motivations to undertake contributive activity are tied together, although in reference to unalienated labour not meaningful work, can be found in Kandiyali 2020.

Cohen's case against the suitability of relying on incentives to motivate persons through self-interest to undertake socially productive activity (1997; 2000, pp. 134-147).¹¹⁰ My account is less critical of incentives, but insofar as they are permissible it is not because they express the conflict between personal concerns (or at least non-equality related concerns) and those affiliated with justice (e.g., Estlund 1998; Williams 1998; Tan 2004), but instead because they can be consistent with a kind of social ethos in which persons are taking the wider social effects of their work into account. If the economic institutions in society were structured in a certain way, then economic actors might not be using incentives merely to maximally exploit their market position as 'high-flying marketeers' or 'buccaneer capitalists,' but be using them out of a recognition of the ability of market signals to serve as a tool to undertake socially productive activity in an efficient way (Carens 1981; Freeman 2007, pp. 122-124; 2014, pp. 104-106).¹¹¹

Turning now from the desire persons have that they themselves are undertaking meaningful work and moving to persons' desire that others undertake meaningful work. This is I think an end that is more obviously shared across members of society, and so my discussion of it will be comparatively shorter. Everybody wants everybody else to have the opportunity to engage in person-engaging work because it is only then that the full set of possible life options is opened up to them. Of course, because these interdependencies are often a form of indirect reciprocity (I don't necessarily benefit from the work of the person who benefits from mine), each individual's particular skills and talents won't be in the interests of persons generally. But

¹¹⁰ For a similar critique that adds additional economic behaviour, such as hiding taxable income and wealth and using threats of capital flight, see Van Parijs 2002. For accounts arguing for the requirement of persons to take the social effects of their work into account, but which are less esoterically focused on the structure of Rawlsian justice, see Care 1984; McMahon 2013.

¹¹¹ I leave aside Cohen's more specific critique of whether this use of incentives would be consistent with the difference principle.

for the account to be convincing such a feature is not required, we don't need to find connections between radically different plans of life (how are an atheist surfer and a Catholic priest dependent on one another?). All we need to say is that each person desires a range of others to develop skills and talents that are different from their own (which both the surfer and the priest do), we don't need each person to identify the same list of skills and talents that are useful. The fact of generalized reciprocity is in everybody's interest, and it is for the same reason (the skills and talents of others makes it possible for each person to carry out their own plan of life), it is just that the particularities as to how this is the case differs from person to person.

Furthermore, just like with persons' desire to undertake meaningful work themselves, the desire that others undertake meaningful work does not derive from valuing the activities of others in instrumental terms about furthering self-interest. Rather, an individual regards the activities of others, in ensuring the successful carrying out of their own plan of life, positively in and of themselves as forming part of the supporting conditions that make their plan of life possible to carry out in the first place. This is because, insofar as the activity is contributive in the way relevant to "human sociability," then it is contributive *because* it is expressing a person's agency and discretion. If the activity was replaceable in the sense that any other person (or thing) could come in and carry out, then it wouldn't be reflective of human sociability at all.

That then is my argument that meaningful work can meet the two conditions required to bring society's members together into a social union of social unions. First, the desire of persons to have themselves and others undertake meaningful work is an end that is shared across society because such an end is in the interests of persons generally, given the social interdependencies

between them. Second, meaningful work is valued for its own sake not because persons are predisposed to value work or contribution in terms of some conception of the good, but because the person-engaging and contributive aspects of the work process are inextricably tied together. Bringing in a helpful distinction made by Daniel Brudney (2014, p. 54), meaningful work is valued for its own sake because each person does not merely have an *overlapping* interest in themselves and others undertaking meaningful work, such that they need not attain the end through others – in the same way Grant and Lee only had an overlapping interest in holding Richmond, to use Rawls’ example (1971, p. 526). Rather, each person’s interest in the activity of meaningful work is *intertwined* with the interests of others, meaning the nature of the end is such that they inherently require the activities of others. The only way persons can carry out their own activities and plan of life is when others are carrying out their own. Persons fundamentally need each other.

To defend this account I will respond to three objections (§4.4.3). With that done, the discussion can then move to explaining how because meaningful work is an activity that brings persons across society together into a social union of social unions, that it therefore is crucial to the support of persons’ standards self-respect (§4.4.4). But before doing both those things, it is worth considering what idea of community this view points to. After all, Rawls sees a well-ordered society being a social union of social unions as what enables justice as fairness to realize the good of community (1971, 520ff.). This is because once a well-ordered society is a social union of social unions, then it is constituted by certain ties of “affection and friendship” expressed through the recognition of attainments towards an end that is shared (1971, p. 525).¹¹²

¹¹² While the later Rawls rejects the “ideal of political community,” this is only because in *Political Liberalism and Restatement* he sees a political community as being defined as a society united on one comprehensive conception of

It is this emphasis on appreciation against a shared end that separates relations of community from persons merely cooperating together within a system of coordinated activity.¹¹³ And given in my account persons will share an end against which the activities of others can be recognized and appreciated as valuable in themselves, there will be a sense of community around meaningful work.

But it is important to be clear that meaningful work is not going to bring persons together into the ‘thick’ communities of the sort between persons who share a comprehensive conception of the good. The ties of affection and friendship will be stronger in these comprehensive communities, of which smaller social unions are of course the prototypical example.¹¹⁴ What this means is that the community around meaningful work will be a form of *political community* or *civic friendship*, where what counts is not that society’s members share an adherence to a single comprehensive conception of the good, but that they have shared ends that are valued for their own sake when it comes to those political and social institutions that are public, which affect all persons and in which persons participate and contribute.¹¹⁵ And so while accounts of political community agree with G. A. Cohen’s requirement that in communities “people care about, and, where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one

the good. He still sees political society as having the two features taken as the requisite conditions for community in *Theory* – viz., shared final ends that are valued for their own sake. See Rawls 2005, pp. 146, 201-202; 2001, pp. 20-21. See also Rawls’ comments about cooperation and purposive associations (2005, p. 42n).

¹¹³ See especially the argument of Salomone-Sehr 2022. But cf. Bratman 1992; Brennan and Sayre-McCord 2018.

¹¹⁴ But for a conception of liberal community across political society more akin to a comprehensive community, see Ronald Dworkin 1989. Dworkin thinks liberalism can make sense of the idea that “the lives of individual people and that of their [political] community are integrated, and that the critical success of any one of their lives is an aspect of, and so is dependent on, the goodness of the community as a whole” (1989, p. 491). This notion of community is similar to what was the focus of many of the so-called communitarian critics of liberalism, where community “penetrates the self” and is the foundation for a person’s identity. See e.g., Sandel 1998, pp. 147-154. See also André Gorz’s (1999, pp. 117-126) distinction between a ‘cooperative’ community and a ‘constitutive’ community.

¹¹⁵ For the notion of political community or civic friendship, and how it differs from private community or community within a particular conception of the good, see: Mason 1993; Schwarzenbach 1996; McCabe 1998, pp. 564-569; Brudney 2013, p. 730; Lister 2013; Leland 2019, p. 79.

another” (2009, pp. 34-35), they limit the scope of such caring relations. In nonpublic realms of life, no ties of affection and friendship need obtain. Now, accounts of political community mostly focus on the most obviously public institutions and relations (like systems of law or processes of public deliberation). Yet the same logic applies to any institution or relation that connects and brings together society’s members under a shared end.¹¹⁶ And so because I have been arguing the activity of meaningful work is public in the sense that it is activity that connects persons from across different and competing conceptions of the good, then it can be supportive of a form of political community.

And while nothing in my argument directly hinges on this outcome, having meaningful work be supportive of political community is a positive result. This is because, as Waheed Hussain argues, there is something of an awkward tension in Rawls’ framework insofar as its political relations, while having demanding implications for how persons must behave towards one another in some realms of life (e.g., the requirement of public justification in public reason), have no equivalent implications for how persons relate to each other in economic life. And I think this criticism can also be applied to contemporary liberal theories more generally, insofar as they treat work relations just like any other form of association that makes up civil society. But “if we are civic friends, then we are civic friends, whether in economic life or political life” (Hussain 2020, p. 109). Demonstrating that the activity of meaningful work can bring the members of society together into a social union of social unions, shows that liberal theory *can* extend relations of civic friendship into the economic sphere. While no liberal account could ever require that persons care about how their fellow citizens fare in all realms of life (the fact of

¹¹⁶ For accounts of political community based on social and economic interdependencies, see Brudney 2013, pp. 733ff.; Schwarzenbach 1996, pp. 117ff.

reasonable pluralism seems to preclude that possibility), what I hope my account has shown is that a liberal theory can be offered in which persons do care how their fellow citizens fare in the world of work. This is because work, by being the only activity that is uniquely positioned to express those social interdependencies constitutive of human sociability, is deeply related to persons' shared interests. Engaging in meaningful work is no private activity; persons are in it together.

4.4.3 – Objections to Meaningful Work as a Shared End

Now to the three objections. Each objection relates to the account's consistency with the justificatory constraints of political liberalism.

Objection 1: The shared end is dominating

One might be concerned that if society's members have a shared end based on their desire to have themselves and others undertake meaningful work, then this will come to dominate the way in which persons carry out their lives and plans. Put more strongly, the concern is that the account is effectively subsuming the interests of individuals (to do whatever they want) to the interest of society as a whole (that what people do is productive and contributive).

The concern is not only that an end might be coercively imposed in order to be 'shared,' but that it is only shared as a result of the promotion of some kind of 'contributive ethos' pervading society. Or alternatively, because there is some updated secular version of the Protestant work ethic at play, where persons internalize duties to carry out social roles without

complaint (see generally Muirhead 2004, pp. 95-113; Svendsen 2008, pp. 21ff.;).¹¹⁷ What drives the objection here is how a contributive ethos or secular work ethic will modify the activities persons are interested in, and the reasons for why they are motivated to do them. If persons' desire that themselves and others undertake meaningful work is from either of these sources, then the legitimate concern is that such an end is only ideological and violates liberal theory's insistence that persons' aims and plans of life are freely chosen. As Richard Arneson says in relation to how modern capitalist society makes work the be-all and end-all, "perhaps an egalitarian norm ought to reject this way of thinking" (1990, p. 1133).

I think my account quite easily avoids the objection insofar as it is based on a claim about any work ethic or desire to undertake work being based on and fostered by the major institutions of contemporary capitalism. This is because, first, my account has argued contribution ought to be understood as far more than participation in the market. And so, this means that persons desiring to undertake meaningful work is not simply going to result in obedient workers lining up to get exploited by the nearest capitalist. (Also, as we will see in Chapter 5 the economic institutions required to promote meaningful work are anti-capitalist). And second, I have argued that the existence of meaningful work can never just be read directly off subjective feelings of meaningfulness, but that the work also needs to have certain features (complex enough to be person-engaging, and democratic involvement when located in a large complex firm). And so even if capitalist institutions fostered feelings of meaningfulness in persons towards low quality, degrading, and exploitative work, or if those with power manipulated such feelings in persons,

¹¹⁷ One influential historical critic of the work ethic was Bertrand Russell, who criticized the hyper valuing of the work activity as a leftover from pre-industrial society, given that "the morality of work is the morality of slaves" (1983, p. 26).

this is no situation where persons are desiring themselves and others to be undertaking ‘meaningful work.’¹¹⁸

What about the form of the objection based not on some secularized Protestant work ethic fostered by capitalist institutions, but on the account relying on the promotion of a contributive ethos? Even if the account doesn’t require persons to become participants in capitalist relations, is the fact it requires persons to want to contribute not enough to make it problematic? Why should surfers in the coves of Malibu desire to modify the way they surf in order to make their activity contributive? Ought they not be able to choose to live a non-contributive life?¹¹⁹

I do think this objection has force against some accounts in liberal theory that put special importance on work activity. Take for instance Joseph Carens’ intriguing argument in *Equality, Moral Incentives, and the Market*. While Carens’ aim is to argue maximum efficiency and equality of income can be made consistent without limiting freedom (1981, p. 3), the argument relies on widespread social norms about the importance of maximizing the contributive work that one does, and hence why persons are motivated to maximize their pre-tax income (pp. 97ff.). And similarly, even though the whole point of Philippe Van Parijs’ argument for a basic income is to free people from having to engage in work if they don’t want to, because a basic income’s feasibility relies on a significant proportion of persons continuing to work, Van Parijs is forced to argue that it can be legitimate to design “institutions that foster an ethos of solidarity, of work,

¹¹⁸ It is of course true that something like ‘meaningful work,’ given its effects on organizational goals like productivity, gets co-opted by persons whose sole interest in the concept is self-interest. But that’s no more an argument against the promotion of meaningful work than the fact some persons exploit those who are truthful for their own advantage is an argument against being truthful. See the points made by Keith Breen (2019, p. 67) in response to a similar kind of objection.

¹¹⁹ Chapter 3’s argument based on reciprocity provides an answer here of course (see §3.4). But see note 102 for why we cannot rely on that here.

indeed of patriotism” (2002, p. 231). The obvious issue with both these accounts is that the concern with freedom only kicks in after some pre-existing contributive ethos that might modify what persons value is already taken for granted. For example, Carens claims persons “would not regard the good to others and the good to themselves as distinct and independent motives” (1981, p. 123), but this is only because the social norms he takes for granted mean that answering the question of what is good for others will automatically answer the question of what is good for oneself (even if the work is dirty or is drudgery).¹²⁰

But my account is less problematic because while it does indeed tie the self-regarding and other-regarding reasons for doing a contributive activity together, this does not rely on the latter coming to dominate or determine the former. Rather, it relies on facts about the *nature* of activity that is person-engaging and in persons’ interests, and how it has an inherent contributive element. When a person carries out their plan of life in a way that relies upon the deployment of their skills and talents, then this will be (other than in some rare cases) contributive to others in the relevant sense. And, furthermore, it is through contributing to others that persons can carry out their plan of life most effectively. (To give an example from §4.4.2, it is only by fixing other persons’ cars that a person becomes a more skilled mechanic.) My account then does not have persons desiring to engage in contributive activity because of some background norm or ethos that is modifying what persons take as good for themselves. Instead, persons desire to contribute to others because, at least in the relevant sense, what is in their own interest and what is interest of others coalesce.¹²¹

¹²⁰ To be fair to Carens, he is considering only the empirical prerequisites of an egalitarian society (of which the social norm is one example). He is not arguing such prerequisites are normatively justified (e.g., see 1981, p. 97).

¹²¹ Of course, one could object to this claim about the inherent contributive element to person-engaging activities. But that would be a different objection, and I have done my best throughout this thesis to defend it.

Objection 2: The shared end relies on contested values

The next objection might be that invoking a shared end across society related to work will inevitably rely on contested ideas of value. By having meaningful work relate to a shared end, perhaps the account commits to a controversial position about what the ‘true’ purpose of society is, or could be used as a standard against which the worthiness of individuals’ activities could be judged. Such outcomes would obviously make the account inconsistent with nonperfectionism.

This kind of concern seems to partly explain why Rawls limits the end of society as a social union of social unions to the successful maintenance and contribution to just institutions, as “this larger plan does not establish a dominant end, such as that of religious unity or the greatest excellence of culture, much less national power and prestige, to which the aims of all individuals and associations are subordinate” (Rawls 1971, p. 528. See also Rawls 2005, pp. 201-204). And this overlaps with Rawls’ more general concern with perfectionist theories and their subsuming of justice to concerns about maximizing the good (Rawls 1971, pp. 22-33), and how the adoption of some perfectionist standard of excellence to appraise the activities of individuals (e.g., to develop certain kinds of powers and skills) will inevitably lead – given the reasonable pluralism that obtains about values – to persons’ basic liberty to live in accordance with their own standards being violated (Rawls 1971, pp. 325-329; pp. 559-560).

My reply to this objection begins by turning to another distinction made by Daniel Brudney between different kinds of ends, this time between ends that are *internally* oriented to society, and ends that are *externally* oriented *from* it. As Brudney explains, when society’s

members share an internally oriented end, they share a goal to live in a society that is structured in a certain way, or which is constituted by certain kinds of relations. Contrast this to members sharing an externally oriented end, which is when persons desire that society reaches or obtains some state of affairs that lies outside society itself (Brudney 1997, pp. 397-398; Brudney 2014, pp. 454-455). Clearly, if the shared end of society is an *externally* oriented end, then it is going to fall victim to the objection that it will be necessarily bringing in certain contested ideas of value and thereby fail the test of nonperfectionism. The whole premise of the political liberalism framework is the recognition that society's members reasonably disagree about these kind of questions – there will never be agreement about an external state of affairs towards which the progress of society can be judged. The “dominant ends” Rawls gives – religious unity, excellence of culture, national power and prestige – are all externally oriented in this way, in contrast to the self-orientating nature of a shared end around supporting and maintaining justice (1971, p. 565-566).

But the shared end I have proposed is not externally oriented from society in this way at all. The desire of persons to have themselves and others undertake meaningful work is not a desire that society reaches a certain external endpoint. It is merely derived from the desire that themselves and others are able to develop the skills and talents necessary for their activities and plans of life to be person-engaging, given such a state of affairs is in their general interests in carrying out a plan of life they can regard as ‘their’ own (and in which they can support whatever ethical values and priorities the plan of life entails). It is of course possible to see how the emphasis meaningful work puts on developed skills and talents *could* be used in certain accounts of external ends. One example that comes to mind might be the end that society reaches a

maximal level of human flourishing or human excellence.¹²² But nothing like this is required in my account.

However, this does not suffice as a response to the objection because while all externally oriented ends will necessarily be perfectionist, not all internally oriented ends will necessarily be nonperfectionist. Therefore, even if the shared end between society's members is only in terms of society being structured in a certain way, or there being certain kinds of relations between individuals, whether such an end is perfectionist will turn on the nature of the structure or relations taken as important. So, does the shared end around meaningful work rely on contested values? To motivate the idea that it might, we could refer to Rawls' comments in *A Theory of Justice* about the feasibility (just not when it comes to justice) of using a perfectionist standard to comparatively assess and appraise persons' "creative efforts." In the fields of science and the arts, thinks Rawls, "[v]ery often it is beyond question that the work of one person is superior to that of another. Indeed, the freedom and well-being of individuals, when measured by the excellence of their activities and works, is vastly different in value" (1971, p. 328).

But nothing like this is implied by what I have argued in this thesis is the most attractive account of meaningful work. I have argued that when it comes to thinking about what makes a work process meaningful as a work activity, and not in terms of 'fundamental meaning,' all we need to rely on is contribution in terms of usefulness to others – there is no need to fall back on

¹²² For a perfectionist account that would see activities as good (in the value theory sense) insofar as they contribute to the ability of persons to exercise and develop their skills and abilities, see Kraut 2009, pp. 131-204. For what I take to be a Marxian-inspired account of the good life that involves contributing developed abilities to the good of others and earning esteem for those contributions, see Gomberg 2007, pp. 66ff. See also the accounts of unalienated labour that emphasize the importance of social contribution in completing both the worker and others: e.g., Brudney 2014; Kandiyali 2020.

the kind of thinking used by Rawls in the preceding paragraph. Meaningful work is activity that is useful not just to an individual's like-minded associates but to unassociated persons, who may well have very different ideas about the good or what is ethically valuable in life. And so while it is of course true that the contributions affiliated with meaningful work are useful to persons and their plans of life because they help them carry out a life that aligns with the conception of the good they endorse, we do not actually need to fall back on any particular conception of the good in order to say that the activity was contributive. And person-engaging activities are useful for others not because there is some special ethical importance tied up with the deployment of skills and talents, it is simply a reflection of the potentialities of each person exceeding what is possible in a single life.

Objection 3: The shared end relies on contribution to 'society':

The final objection is that putting forward such an end – an end that all of society's members share and according to which they can appreciate the activities of others – commits the account to regard persons' contributive activities as contributions to 'society,' where this is understood as some single monolithic entity. Indeed, there is a passage in *Political Liberalism* where Rawls is quite clear that there can be "no foundation" to assess the contributions persons make in terms of contributions to society, as "[c]ontributions can only be defined as contributions to this or that association in this or that situation. Such contributions reflect an individual's marginal usefulness to some particular group. These contributions are not to be mistaken for contributions to society itself, or for the worth to society of its members as citizens" (2005, p. 279). This passage is probably the place in all of Rawls' writing where he sounds the furthest away from the position I am aiming to reconstruct from his thought.

While part of Rawls' concern here might be because such contribution will rely on contested ideas about value (objection 2), his mention of "marginal usefulness" does I think signal the distinct concern about having a monolithic 'state' or 'society' be the recipient of contributive activity. But this objection won't stick because what is contribution to society, at least in my account, other than marginal usefulness to particular persons and groups? The doctor, the garbage collector, the surfer, the carer, the mechanic, the parent: none of these persons are contributing because they are directly contributing to the monolithic thing of the state or society, they are contributing because they are being useful to identifiable persons. Of course, for such contribution to occur the state might need to offer nonmarket forms of contributive activity, or interfere in the market, or do something else. But this does not mean the activity should be understood as contributing to the 'state' any more than activity that is market-facing should be understood as contributing to 'free market capitalism.' My account could never classify an activity as a social contribution *unless* some set of persons who find the activity useful can be identified. As I outlined in §4.4.1, there are many places in Rawls' thought where he acknowledges contribution in this kind of way, where there is a general interdependence between persons across society such that the skills and talents of persons are seen as promoting the common interests and the common good. Rawls recognizes all this without falling back on some monolithic notion of 'society.' Why then should the shared end affiliated with these contributions require such a notion?

That then concludes my defence of why it is reasonable to take meaningful work as an activity that can bring persons together into a social union of social unions. It is because persons

undertaking meaningful work (in the terms defended in this thesis) is in the interests of persons generally that it can relate to an end that is shared and which is seen as valuable for its own sake. We are now then in a position to show how this outcome means meaningful work is supportive of persons' self-respect. The basic idea is that because activities within a social union of social unions relate to features that are shared between persons (cf. activities within a smaller social unions of like-minded associates), it is having the opportunity to do these activities and having them recognized by others that is supportive of persons standards self-respect.

4.4.4 – Meaningful Work and Standards Self-Respect

Brief refresher: Recall that Rawls brings in the idea of social unions in part to explain the kind of recognition and appreciation of others that is supportive of persons' self-respect. As we have seen, much of this discussion is in terms of the recognition persons receive from like-minded associates within smaller social unions united arounds ends that are comprehensive, which means it is not actually going to be supportive of persons' self-respect, but instead their self-esteem (§4.3).

However, Rawls does also see a role for recognition and appraisal of persons' skills and talents within a social union of social unions, as the "companion effect" of the Aristotelian Principle applies here as well. Rawls thinks "[persons will] appreciate and enjoy these attributes [skills and talents] in one another as they are manifested in cooperating to affirm just institutions" (1971, p. 529). These activities are "displayed in the *public life* of a well-ordered society" (1971, p. 528, my emphasis), and given we are talking not just about one social union but a social union of social unions, these activities must be the subject of recognition from

unassociated others, against a standard that is shared between and across groups. Whether Rawls is right in tying skills and talents to justice in this way aside, the important point here is that because meaningful work is an activity that brings persons together into a social union of social unions in the same way (§4.4.2 and §4.4.3), then recognition and appreciation in relation to meaningful work is going to be just as important. It is the recognition from persons' fellow members in society as a social union of social unions, that supports their standards self-respect.

Before outlining why this recognition and appreciation relating to meaningful work relates to standards self-respect (and not just self-esteem), it will be helpful I think to first explore how such recognition might occur. What is required is recognition *from those persons towards which the work is contributive*. The recognition must be from the work's beneficiaries, those persons who find the activity useful in carrying out their own activities and plan of life. So how might that occur?

The relevant recognition is in terms of how a person's skills and activities actually end up being useful to unassociated others successfully carrying out their plan of life, and it is not in terms of a person admiring someone else's skills just in virtue of them being skills.¹²³ Now, to help think through how this recognition can be brought about we can refer back to the argument in Chapter 2 about how work can only be meaningful when persons are in some way involved in the contributive aspect of their work, whereby the way in which their work is useful for others is

¹²³ If it was the latter then it would be dependent on a perfectionist and disputable end, perhaps where "mastery" is seen as good in itself. There are times where Rawls seems to talk of recognition within social unions in these terms. For example, see the passage in *Theory* (p. 441) that suggests it is the mere fact that an activity displays subtle talents and manifests discrimination and refinement which is what makes it pleasurable for others. Similarly, Paul Gomberg (2007, p. 71), in talking about the recognition of skills and talents puts it in terms of the "awe" felt towards "mastery of complexity" by itself. This also seems to be the kind of appreciation Nozick think will apply in his 'utopia of utopias' where "[a]ll admire each other's individuality, basking in the full development in others of aspects and potentialities of themselves left relatively undeveloped" (Nozick 1974, p. 306).

made palpable (§2.4.1). To recap that point: while some kinds of work will have aspects affiliated with contribution front and center, other kinds of work (especially work that occurs within large and complex firms) will need to democratically involve persons in the external decisions of the firm. What is relevant for our purposes here is that those features and details affiliated with the ‘contributive aspect’ of the work process will enable persons to receive the requisite recognition of their activity as socially contributive. By actually being involved with and aware of the persons who benefit from their work, they are receiving a whole array of inputs that bring this about. These range from the specific to the more general. Just to take a simple example, from ‘this particular person brought in their shoes to be resoled,’ to ‘the demand for this shoe is high among this age group in society.’ When persons are involved in the contributive aspect a work process, then this recognition is secured.

What makes it a form of recognition and appraisal for an activity that is a *social* contribution (and so different from the kind of recognition within smaller social unions that Rawls emphasizes), is that it is received from unassociated persons all with diverse priorities and values pursuing different plans of life. This results from the nature of what constitutes a work activity in the first place (§2.4). And so, this recognition from the benefactors of their work is then what can give persons confidence that they are indeed contributing to the end I argued can be shared across society’s members, that persons are undertaking person-engaging activity that contributes to the ability of individuals to carry out their own plan of life (§4.4.2). When persons, by being involved in the contributive aspect of their person-engaging work, receive recognition from those whom it benefits, they can be confident that they are a participating member of society understood as a social union of social unions. In contrast, when the organization of their

work is such that they “don’t see where nothing goes,” no such confidence can be secured. While the end towards which they are contributing is a general end that is shared among everyone, the recognition needs to be from those particular persons whom their activity benefits. This ensures them that their work is indeed contributive (for someone, somewhere, that it is not ‘bullshit’), and that it does help another person carry out their plan of life. To borrow a phrase from Carens, the recognition then is not just the generalized approval of society as a whole but is “the concrete approval of specific actors whose judgements the individual regards as significant,” such that the benefactors of the work activity “act, consciously or unconsciously, as the agents of society” (1981, p. 125).¹²⁴

Furthermore, it is also worth pointing out that a person’s confidence in their participation through meaningful work in the social union of social unions, can be strengthened by the ability of institutional arrangements to act as powerful expressions of social attitudes. And while I won’t here discuss the particular institutional provisions of meaningful work (this is a task left for Chapter 5), the point here is that policies aiming to promote the provision and opportunity for meaningful work can be institutional expressions of public attitudes and beliefs regarding the contributive activities that persons are undertaking. This is especially so when such policies meet the criterion of political justification. Just to take one example, if a basic income was implemented with the expressed rationale that it was a means to compensate persons for the non-market forms of social contribution they undertake, then the existence of the institution itself

¹²⁴ I note in passing the similarities here with the emphasis Axel Honneth places on the recognition persons achieve relating to the standards of achievement in work and the social contributions that they make (Honneth 2010; see also Smith 2012, pp. 201-203).

would support persons' confidence that they are participating, giving it communicates a public recognition of what they do.¹²⁵

That then I hope answers the *how* question regarding the recognition persons can receive for their meaningful work within a social union of social unions. I will now argue the self-regarding attitude this recognition supports is not self-esteem (cf. the recognition persons receive from within smaller social unions of like-minded associates), but instead standards self-respect. And additionally, that the standard in question makes the social bases of self-respect related to meaningful work available to all. As we have seen, given the importance of self-respect as a primary good, this is a key requirement for any convincing account of self-respect within a theory of justice.

Recall that the major differences between the three self-regarding attitudes is that while a person's entitlement self-respect is based on their insistence of the entitlements and responsibilities they have simply in virtue of being a person, a person's standards self-respect is based on their appraisal or regard of features of themselves which are tied up to an account of personhood. And so, while standards self-respect and self-esteem are both different from entitlement self-respect because they focus on the appraisal of particular features or activities, it is standards self-respect's connection to personhood that makes self-esteem a much wider notion, with far more standards potentially relevant (see §4.2.1).

¹²⁵ For how the features of the basic structure and the principles that govern it can give certain ideals or beliefs a kind of institutional expression more generally, and how this can be supportive of persons' self-respect, see Cohen 1989, pp. 738-739; Gutmann 2002; Rawls 2005, pp. 318-320; Freeman 2007, pp. 96-98.

We only need to repeat certain features of the shared end affiliated with meaningful work to explain why the recognition of activity that contributes to such an end is supportive of a person's standards self-respect. First, given recognition is aimed at an activity, it obviously will not be supportive of entitlement self-respect.¹²⁶ But as we have seen, the activity of meaningful work, and so the standards relevant for recognition, are connected to personhood given meaningful work corresponds to how it is a "feature of human sociability that we are by ourselves but parts of what we might be." It is this connection that allowed us to say that meaningful work is in the interests of persons generally, and therefore relates to an end that is shared between society's members. Each person requires the skills and talents of others in order to carry out their own plan of life, which is itself a requirement for the successful carrying out of the plans of life of others. Consequently, the recognition persons receive for undertaking meaningful work is not only a recognition tied to activities or features unique to one or another smaller group or association. It is a recognition tied to a feature that is part of what defines the nature of the relations that obtains between persons.

This is why the recognition affiliated with meaningful work is supportive of persons' standards self-respect and not (only) their self-esteem. By having others confirm and appreciate their person-engaging contributive activity, persons can be confident their activity is useful to others, and that therefore they are contributing to the shared end across society. If part of what it means to be a person is to be dependent on the skills and talents of others, then it is only when a person has their contribution to reciprocal relations of interdependence recognized, where they receive positive appraisal that makes them aware of how their activities contribute to the needs

¹²⁶ This is no problem because while any full account of the social bases of self-respect will need to incorporate entitlement self-respect, my argument is not that the opportunity to undertake meaningful work is sufficient for persons' self-respect being secured, only that it is necessary.

and or wants of others, that they can have the “secure conviction that [their] conception of the good, [their] plan of life, is worth carrying out,” to use Rawls’ language (1971, p. 440). Without such recognition, they cannot be confident their activities cohere with this feature of persons at all, and their sense of worth will be threatened.¹²⁷ That’s the rationale behind meaningful work’s position as a social basis of self-respect. Without such an opportunity, persons will not be able to have features of their life that correspond (in part) to what it means to be a person recognized.

I will consider here an objection to taking social interdependencies as constitutive of personhood. The objection goes that doing so is inequalitarian as it results in certain agents being excluded from the status of personhood. Namely, those agents unable to contribute in the relevant sense, such as (perhaps) those with disabilities or those who were less fortunate in the talent jackpot. If this is an implication for the account, the thought goes, then it ought to move us away from incorporating such aspects into the idea of personhood and perhaps even move us away from seeing society as a system of cooperation based on reciprocal interdependencies (e.g., Nussbaum 2006, pp. 96-154).

Two points can be made in reply. First, the edge of much of the objection is blunted because my account is not limiting the range of socially contributive activities to only productive activities traditionally understood as market activity. Rather, it captures a much wider set of

¹²⁷ It is worth outlining here the difference between my and Paul Gomberg’s account of the recognition persons can receive from work. Gomberg’s account might appear rather similar to mine through the way he distinguishes two kinds of recognition relating to two different standards. The first of these is recognition for how a person carries out work against the norms of that activity, and the second is recognition relating to the social prestige attached to the work role. Gomberg argues that while both forms of recognition are supportive of self-esteem, the latter is a positional good (a job can only have high prestige if others have low prestige) but the former is not because “there is no limit to the number who can be esteemed for doing what they do well” (2007, p. 59. See also p. 90). The difference then is my denial that being recognized as “doing well” at one’s job in a way related to self-esteem can be non-positional. While Gomberg wants to avoid tying recognition from work to self-respect (2007, p. 101), this is necessary if the recognition is going to be (in principle) available to all.

contributive activities and focuses on how persons can contribute to others in a whole host of ways (including things like care, volunteering, and other parts of the so-called ‘wider economy’). As Martha Nussbaum notes herself: “their [persons with disabilities] relative lack of productivity under current conditions is not ‘natural’; it is the product of discriminatory social arrangements” (2006, p. 113; see also Shiffrin 2004, pp. 1663-1664). And similar points can be made in terms of persons who might be taken in the here and now as ‘untalented.’ What gets counted as talent, and the ability of a person to contribute to others, is not an abstract and pre-existing feature of persons, but significantly depends on what kind of institutions and opportunities are available (Smith 2001). And so, because the social interdependencies understood as a feature of personhood are in terms of a wide account of contribution, where a whole host of different skills and talents are relevant, much of this concern about excluding certain persons can be avoided. Relations of reciprocal interdependencies are not the same as relations of mutual advantage (e.g., Gauthier 1986).

Second, and this is the deeper reply, my account is not using existing features of persons affiliated with contribution as a precondition for their being entitled to considerations of justice.¹²⁸ Instead, it is arguing that certain (somewhat idealized) features are latent in persons generally, to then argue that society’s members have certain entitlements related to their opportunity to exercise and develop these features. My account provides the tools to outline why it is an injustice that certain persons (such as those with disabilities and the ‘untalented’) have any opportunity for person-engaging contribution occluded from them (say because contribution is only understood in terms of productive market-facing activity, or whatever). The account

¹²⁸ This is how it avoids the sort of objection raised by Allen Buchanan (1990) against accounts of justice as reciprocity.

offers reasons then why it is a matter of justice that such arrangements are overcome, and that opportunities for meaningful work are made available for persons generally.

As Rawls notes, even though persons' natural properties and features differ, this does not mean the use of natural properties or features as a basis of personhood is inappropriate or somehow inegalitarian. This is because what counts is that whatever properties counted as relevant are able to be expressed by what Rawls calls a 'range property,' where they all equally meet some condition to the same degree as all the rest (Rawls 1971, p. 508).¹²⁹ Now Rawls of course takes the features necessary for having the two moral powers (the capacity of having a conception of the good and a sense of justice) as meeting such a range property (Rawls 1971, pp. 19, 329, 505-507; 2005, pp. 19, 79-81, 103-104, 109; 2001, 18-20). While there are inevitably inequalities between persons' capacity for the two moral powers (e.g., some persons will have superior judicial virtues), this doesn't undermine equality because persons "are all regarded as having to the essential minimum degree the moral powers" (Rawls 2001, p. 20. See also 1971, p. 506). What counts is not strict equality between capacities but only that persons' capacities lie within what Rawls calls in *Restatement* "the normal range" (2001, p. 171).

And I don't see why the same kind of point cannot also apply to the capacities affiliated with meaningful work. It is plainly true that there exists, and will always exist, inequalities between persons when it comes to their capacity to use their skills and talents to contribute to others (the point above using the social model of talent and disability could never deny *that*). But this does not mean we cannot say that all persons share in having "to the essential minimum

¹²⁹ Rawls' example is how each point in the unit circle, while obviously having different coordinates, shares with all the rest the property of being interior of the unit circle.

degree” the capacities affiliated with contribution – especially when such capacities are understood as a potentiality. What the relevant “range property” is in relation to social interdependencies, is whether persons have the capacity to contribute to the end that I argued is shared across society: to undertake person-engaging activities that contribute to the ability of other individuals to carry out their plan of life. And to answer this question we do not need to consider *how much* or to *what degree* a person’s talents enable them to contribute, we only need to consider whether they have the capacity to contribute at all. If a person wasn’t carrying out their plan of life, would other persons’ ability to have their needs and wants met be reduced?¹³⁰

This point about the range property affiliated with social interdependencies allows us to now turn to the final point of this chapter: that the bases of self-respect affiliated with meaningful work are in principle available to all. The discussion in §4.3 of Rawls’ account of self-respect (but really self-esteem) in Part III of *A Theory of Justice* showed the importance of an account of self-respect meeting such a condition, and why, given it is a primary good, it cannot be a positional good.

The standard affiliated with meaningful work is that a person, through undertaking person-engaging activity, increases the ability of an unassociated person to carry out their plan of life. It is by meeting such a standard that a person contributes to the end that is shared across society. This standard is binary, not continuous. As we have seen in discussion of the range

¹³⁰ I believe it is this emphasis on a range property of contributive capacities that allows my account to cohere with Rawls’ appropriate insistence that we cannot tie a person’s moral worth or status to how much they marginally contribute to others (1971, p. 311). The standard and capacities in question are sufficiently general and reflect a basic fact about the social interdependency between persons, they do not presuppose persons hold particular and identifiable ‘roles’ that define their moral worth or subject their status to the whims of the market and supply and demand (see Rawls 1971, pp. 437-438).

property, what counts is only that a person's activities are contributive, that they do in fact enable another person or persons to carry out their own plan of life. The degree or extent of the contribution relative to the activities of others is irrelevant to the standard in question. When persons receive recognition from those unassociated others who benefit from their work, it is not that this gives them confidence that they are contributing more than others, it is merely that it gives them confidence that their activity is indeed increasing another person's ability to carry out their plan of life. This is why such a standard can in principle be met by everyone, and hence why the standards self-respect connected to it is no positional good. When it comes to standards self-respect, how much persons contribute relative to others won't matter (although this might matter for self-esteem).

We can demonstrate this by using an example. Let's return to Nozick's scenario that was introduced earlier, of a basketballer being confident in their abilities until a professional comes along (§4.2.1). To make the point, I'll modify the example to be two professional players – a star player and a player who comes off the bench. From the perspective of the bench player, the star player's superior skill naturally puts downward pressure on their self-esteem as a talented basketballer. This is simply Nozick's point about self-esteem relying on relative comparisons. Now, let's imagine this team wins the national championship, thereby contributing to unassociated others (many members of the local community take pride in their team, or fill in the contributive details how you like). When the bench player receives recognition for their involvement in the winning effort (say, at the championship parade, at summer camps, and so on), what kind of standards will be involved?

Some standards will undoubtedly relate to the sort of relative comparisons that form the basis of self-esteem – who’s the best shooter, how often each player was on the floor in crunch time, and so on. But there is also a much simpler binary standard – did they contribute to the team winning the championship? Did their skills and talents play a part in the team’s success? And when it comes that standard, the star player and the bench player fare the same. Even if the bench player (along with everyone else) is aware that they contributed less to the championship effort than the star player, they still can be confident that their efforts were necessary. Their skills were part of something (the team’s championship run) that instilled pride, fostered joy, and offered entertainment in the lives of others.

What I hope the example shows is that when it comes to the standard affiliated with persons meeting the end I have argued is shared amongst society’s members – that their person-engaging activity increases the ability of others to carry out their plan of life – this standard can be equally met by persons who nonetheless differ in skills and talents. And while these differences in talent will likely lead to different levels of self-esteem amongst persons (‘I’m inferior as a basketball player compared to the stars on my team’), self-esteem is not tied to personhood in any way such that these differences are of concern from the standpoint of justice. What is important is that each person can meet the standard that I have argued *is* tied to personhood. (‘My activity as a basketball player enables diverse others to carry out their own plan of life. In regard to that fact I’m no different from the star players.’)

And so, generalizing out from basketball players to consider members of a well-ordered society, the point is that because the shared end in society relates only to a range property among

persons, then the standard will be binary and open for all to meet it. Across all the multitude of ways in which individuals' person-engaging activity enables unassociated others to successfully carry out their plan of life, the standard is the same. It relates to personhood and the "feature of human sociability that we are by ourselves but parts of what we might be." While Nozick might be right that nobody takes pride in certain traits that are shared (such as having opposable thumbs), this is only the case when those traits are irrelevant to personhood. Returning to Darwall's example from §4.2.1, traits like being honest are necessary for a person's sense of worth and self-respect because they are related to moral character and personhood. And this necessity will not be undermined in a world where everyone is honest. For a sense of worth, the standard persons measure themselves against is not what others do and how they fare, but a standard based on the ideal of the person and its features. And this is why, no matter what others do and how they fare, undertaking activity that coheres with the feature of persons as inherently dependent on the skills and talents of others, and having this recognized by others, will be necessary for a person's self-respect. It is only meaningful work that can give persons such an opportunity. And so it is only when opportunities for meaningful work are available to all that persons' self-respect can be secured.

4.5 – Conclusion

This has been a long chapter. The key takeaway is that meaningful work can be a basis of persons' self-respect because of its connection to a feature of personhood. This feature is the inherent social interdependencies between persons, and that for an individual to carry out their own plan of life, they fundamentally rely on the skills and talents of others. While the extent of skills and talents inevitably differs between individuals, what secures persons' self-respect is

receiving recognition from those whom their work benefits. This ensures them that their activity is indeed contributive, and that without it, the ability of others to undertake their plan of life would be diminished.

To make this argument I turned to the characterization of self-respect Rawls develops in Part III of *A Theory of Justice*, and how it grounds self-respect in the recognition persons receive from within a social union. I argued the official account in Part III, where self-respect is based on recognition from smaller social unions of like-minded associates, provides no way to connect self-respect to meaningful work, given meaningful work goes beyond the connections between like-minded persons and involves unassociated others. But Rawls' official account in Part III is no account of self-respect at all, but is instead an account of self-esteem. For Part III to provide a more attractive account of self-respect as a primary good, it needs to tie self-respect more closely to personhood and explain how it can be available to all. I then offered a reconstruction of Part III such that these conditions could be met. This occurs when the recognition of activities comes not from a smaller social union of like-minded associates, but instead from the social union of social unions that makes up a well-ordered society. It is only recognition for activity that goes toward the end of a social union of social unions that will be based on features relating to personhood and be in principle available to all. And because meaningful work can provide such an end, it is recognition for meaningful work that supports persons' self-respect.

Now, it's worth pointing out that while there are some hints Rawls saw meaningful work as connected to the smaller social unions in society, he never explicitly linked meaningful work to the idea of society as a social union of social unions. What I have aimed to do here is show

that not only is this possible, but it is actually necessary in order to provide an account of self-respect tied to recognition from social unions that is attractive. The later Rawls never gave up on meaningful work being tied to self-respect, but he did base this connection on the more ‘political’ characterization of self-respect we saw in Chapter 3, which relies on persons’ political status relative to the idea of society as a system of social cooperation between free and equals. This chapter has shown that this is not the only move available, and that an argument can be made that meaningful work is supportive of self-respect in a way that does not give up on the valuable and rich ideas associated with self-respect in Part III of *A Theory of Justice* – such as social unions, shared ends, and recognition for contributive activity – and which is also consistent with political liberalism.

Furthermore, by focusing on the role of social interdependencies in an account of personhood, I hope in this chapter to have shown that a defence of meaningful work’s importance to a theory of justice can be made that does not just fall back on the ideal of society as a system of cooperation as some moral datum. Indeed, by showing the connection between relations of interdependence and features of personhood, I hope to have provided an argument that shows why it is reasonable to take society as a system of cooperation in the first place.

Chapter 5 – Meaningful Work and Economic Institutions

5.1 – Introduction

The argument so far in this thesis has been the following: In Chapter 2 I argued that for an account of meaningful work to be convincing it needs to capture more than what is traditionally emphasized by the orthodox views of meaningful work: which is either that the work is subjectively meaningful for the person doing it, or that it is complex enough to be person-engaging such that it can be seen as the worker's 'own.' While these features tell part of the story, what an account of meaningful work needs to additionally capture is the importance of social contribution. This is because the conditions of meaningful work need to be tied to what makes something work in the first place, and work corresponds to activities that contribute towards meeting the needs and or wants of unassociated others. In the 'contributive view' of meaningful work that I put forward, social contribution is captured by the condition that the worker is involved in the contributive aspect of the work process.

I then considered how the contributive view of meaningful work (complex enough to be person-engaging, and democratic involvement when located in firms that are large and complex) fares in considerations about meaningful work's justice-relevance. Specifically, I argued across Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 that the promotion of meaningful work can be consistent with liberal theory's emphasis on nonperfectionism, because meaningful work is a social basis of persons' self-respect. I supported this claim in Chapter 3 through meaningful work's connection to the political value of reciprocity, and hence to persons' political status as a participating member of society as a system of cooperation. In Chapter 4 the argument was based on meaningful work's

connection to the feature of personhood relating to social interdependencies, and how this makes meaningful work an end that is shared amongst members of society and brings them together into a social union of social unions.

The arguments of Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 were both built on the fact that it is a “feature of human sociability that we are by ourselves but parts of what we might be.” This fact – that each person relies on the skills and talents of others to carry out their own plan of life – along with the normative implications that flow from it, is something that I think receives short shrift in contemporary liberal theory. What I have argued is that meaningful work’s necessity to justice follows from recognizing the unique way meaningful work corresponds to these social interdependencies.

If this argument goes through and meaningful work is a social basis of self-respect, then concerns of meaningful work will have significant weight in any liberal conception of justice. This is because the social bases of self-respect are one of the most important resources within any account of distributive justice (be this in the language of primary goods or some other framework), given the self-regarding attitude of self-respect is a prerequisite for persons’ ability to develop and care about a plan of life in the first place (see note 71). As I said in the introduction (§1.2), I will not in this thesis try to put forward a developed account of how the promotion of meaningful work could be balanced against all the other requirements of justice. This is because, while I have used the thought of Rawls as a way to build up the argument, the conclusion – that meaningful work is supportive of persons’ self-respect – is applicable across a variety of different liberal conceptions of justice. And the exact way the promotion of

meaningful work gets integrated into any one wider theory of justice will depend upon how that theory in particular treats the bases of self-respect.

But what I will turn to now are the institutional implications of the argument. If there are strong justice-based reasons that justify the promotion of meaningful work, what institutional changes are necessary to bring this about? If persons are entitled to enjoy a real opportunity for meaningful work, what economic conditions need to be in place for this to occur? What implications does the account have for the organization of firms and corporations in society, and for the nature of work that is undertaken within them? While I have suggested that the widespread promotion of meaningful work would require the overcoming of both the detailed horizontal division of labour and (some parts of) the vertical division of labour, how exactly might this be achieved? And does the argument have implications for questions of economic organization more widely, such as the patterns of ownership and control over productive capital in society? These are the questions I focus on in this chapter.

The editors of the recent *Oxford Handbook of Meaningful Work* state that:

“There is considerable untapped potential to explore meaningful work beyond the level of the organization, including institutions, large-scale economic and social entities, and public policy formation. The absence of research on the links between meaningful work and the level of political economy, policymaking, and state regulation, including, political, economic, and normative institutions, would suggest new avenues for research” (Yeoman et al. 2019, p. 7)

I hope the discussion in this chapter can go some way in beginning to fill this gap.

But first a note on scope. My aim in this chapter is not to provide a complete account of the institutions necessary to achieve economic justice. While my argument is that meaningful work will be a crucial component of economic justice, questions about other aspects of work and production are obviously important as well. Examples might be questions about income and compensation, or power inequalities in the workplace. The argument in this chapter is best understood only in terms of the institutional requirements necessary to achieve what justice requires when it comes to the *nature* and *distribution* of work opportunities that are available to persons.

This ought to make clear that any prescriptions or suggestions made in this chapter will not be the result of all things considered reasoning about the requirements of social justice. The aim of the chapter is to explore, given the inextricable connection between meaningful work and self-respect, what the fair and effective promotion of the former might look like institutionally. However, with this said, when the most obvious alternative or competing considerations present themselves then I will indeed address them. So just to take two examples, when I argue that promoting the fair provision of meaningful work might require a universal basic income (because meaningful work involves more than market-facing work), I outline why this need not violate a reciprocal-based duty to contribute, and when I argue that meaningful work could be more fairly promoted by the sharing of labour, I respond to the concern that this would violate persons' right to free choice of occupation. But, a full account of all the relevant considerations for the variety of institutional implications I consider in this chapter is well outside the scope of this thesis and its emphasis on meaningful work's normative value. The strongest claim I can

advance is that because meaningful work is linked to self-respect, the institutions necessary for the promotion of meaningful work are prima facie requirements in a full theory of social justice.

The chapter proceeds like so. I begin in §5.2 by arguing that merely expanding the scope of the principle of fair equality of opportunity will not suffice as an effective means to promote meaningful work. This is because ensuring fair competition for positions of meaningful work by itself has no influence on their prevalence, and so it will unfairly limit opportunities for meaningful work to the winners of market competition. In §5.3 I then turn to outline several economic policies that I argue could increase the amount of meaningful work in society. The first set of these aim to use the levers available to the state to promote meaningful work in the market by way of overcoming, or at least blurring, both the detailed horizontal division of labour and (some parts of) the vertical division of labour. I argue this could be brought about by policies such as job quality or democratic involvement clauses in public procurement contracts (and the inverse, negative points schemes for drudgery and no worker involvement), the incentivizing of investment in technologies able to automate drudgery or, if this is not possible schemes of sharing socially necessary but mundane drudgery through either job rotation or mandatory work requirements, and legislation that mandates firms of a certain size enact worker co-determination. I then argue that the promotion of meaningful work outside the market could be brought about by both a state job program and a basic income.

The rest of Chapter 5 then transitions to analyze larger questions of political economy. In §5.4 I consider the question of whether the widespread provision of meaningful work can occur within a system of markets. I outline and respond to two potential reasons why it might be unable

to, and argue that while the promotion of meaningful work might not be compatible with markets as they are, it is compatible with markets as they could be. I then in §5.5 examine how the promotion of meaningful work might fare within economic systems with different patterns of ownership over and control of society's productive assets. I argue that while welfare-state capitalism could never provide an economic context in which meaningful work is widely available, meaningful work could be securely promoted in either a system of a property-owning democracy (where there is private but widespread ownership and control of productive assets), or a system of market socialism (where there is social ownership and control of productive assets).

5.2 – Why Fair Equality of Opportunity is Not Enough

One way to capture meaningful work's normative importance institutionally could be to insist that economic and societal institutions are arranged such that there is equality of opportunity when it comes to competitions for those meaningful work opportunities that exist in society. In other words – fair equality of opportunity could be modified such that it was fair equality of opportunity *for meaningful work*.¹³¹ In this section I first lay out the logic of this option, before explaining why it comes up short.

The thinking here is that because meaningful work is tied to self-respect, it would be inequalitarian and inconsistent with justice for meaningful work to only be realistically available to those who were raised in fortunate or privileged social circumstances. As Rawls notes, what fair equality of opportunity aims at is that “there should be roughly equal prospects of culture and achievement for everyone similarly motivated and endowed. The expectations of those with

¹³¹ It should be clear here that discussion of ‘equality of opportunity’ is only in terms of the opportunities persons have for certain positions in society. I am not discussing equality of opportunity as the term is sometimes used to describe certain theories of distributive justice as a whole, like luck egalitarianism. See Arneson 2015, §7.

the same abilities and aspirations should not be affected by their social class” (1971, p. 73). This means that achieving fair equality of opportunity requires substantive policies, such as increased funding for public schools, limiting income inequality, reducing the transfer of generational wealth, and perhaps even changes to the organization of the family (2001, pp. 43-44; 1971, p. 511).

Now, Rawls takes fair equality of opportunity as helping ensure the system of social cooperation is a case of pure procedural justice.¹³² When fair equality of opportunity does not exist, then “distributive justice could not be left to take care of itself, even within a restricted range” (Rawls 1971, p. 87). As Rawls notes, in systems of pure procedural justice “[t]he allotment of the items produced takes place in accordance with the public system of rules, and this system determines *what is produced, how much is produced, and by what means*” (Rawls 1971, p. 88. My emphasis. See also 2001, p. 50). But as we have seen, these questions about production are no trivial thing, but are key components to the support of persons’ self-respect. The issue then is that by leaving questions about the nature of the work off the table, fair equality of opportunity is not necessarily going to provide persons with the important good of self-respect, given self-respect is only linked to work of a certain sort.

And so, we are naturally led to the idea that what is required is not just fair equality of opportunity for whatever work is available, but fair equality of opportunity for the meaningful work options that are available. That is, what is needed is an increase (or modification) to the scope of fair equality of opportunity. Samuel Freeman, for instance, takes the most reasonable

¹³² Pure procedural justice is when a situation is fair solely in virtue of the procedure being properly followed and regardless of the outcome. See Rawls 1971, pp. 85-86.

interpretation of fair equality of opportunity to be when considerations of fair competition are understood in relation to work with good conditions (2007, pp. 134-135).

Indeed, in light of the arguments of Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, the justifications Rawls gives for why fair equality of opportunity is a principle of justice might motivate its extension to fair equality of opportunity for meaningful work. For example, Rawls argues that in the absence of fair equality of opportunity persons “would be justified in their complaint not only because they were excluded from certain external rewards of office such as wealth and privilege, but because they were debarred from experiencing the realization of self which comes from a skillful and devoted exercise of social duties. They would be deprived of one of the main forms of human good” (1971, p. 84). And in talking about how fair equality of opportunity might be realized, Rawls notes the importance of “education in enabling a person to enjoy the culture of [their] society and to take part in its affairs, and in this way to provide for each individual a secure sense of [their] own worth” (1971, p. 101). What these passages make clear is that Rawls’ defence of fair equality of opportunity fits into the broad picture I’ve been constructing, that the work process itself (and not just its pecuniary effects) is important to justice in part due to its connection to persons’ sense of worth and self-respect (see also Shiffrin 2004, pp. 1666ff.).¹³³ If fair equality of opportunity was extended to be fair equality of opportunity for meaningful work, there would likely be some additional institutional implications than the ones mentioned above. For example, it might require significant public resources to fund the (re)training and

¹³³ It is worth noting that it is these passages that ground Robert S. Taylor’s argument to explain the lexical priority of fair equality of opportunity over the difference principle (as Rawls never really does this). Taylor (2004) argues that fair equality of opportunity takes priority because fair access to work positions is the most important way to help citizens achieve the excellences and achieve self-realization. While there are some similarities to Taylor’s account and my own (e.g., he makes reference to social unions), he doesn’t connect work to social contribution like I do, and the privileging of the work process is only justified by way of accepting the formative thesis.

development of persons' skills, or redistributive efforts in any cases where certain demographics enjoy better access to meaningful work opportunities.

But while this modification will be an improvement, as a support of self-respect it still won't suffice. This is because it is persons' ability to *actually undertake* meaningful work that is linked to their self-respect, and having fair equality of opportunity to meaningful work is not going to provide everybody with such an ability. If a secure sense of worth is based on a person's participation in reciprocal social interdependencies, then merely competing for opportunities to participate in this way will not be enough because some persons will still lose. If the opportunities in society for meaningful work are scarce (which the implementation of fair equality for meaningful work could never rule out), then even if the competition for these positions is fair there will still only be some persons (the winners) who end up able to undertake meaningful work.

As Rawls himself notes (and this is partly why he supplements it with the difference principle), fair equality of opportunity "still permits the distribution of wealth and income to be determined by the natural distribution of abilities and talents ... and this outcome is arbitrary from a moral perspective" (1971, p. 74). But the obvious reply here is that by itself fair equality of opportunity permits not just income and wealth to track natural talent, for there are also the nonpecuniary benefits affiliated with certain kinds of work (such as self-respect), and so by itself fair equality of opportunity allows these goods to track natural talent too. This is why it has to be more than considerations of income (e.g., the difference principle) that are needed to supplement fair equality of opportunity (even if extended to be fair equality of opportunity for meaningful

work). What is also needed is concern for what the opportunity set is in the first place. That is, what is needed is the promotion of meaningful work itself.¹³⁴

This argument overlaps with similar points made by other writers who, once recognizing the importance of the work process itself from the standpoint of justice, reject that focusing on fair procedures of competition will be enough.¹³⁵ Take how Richard Arneson considers the issue from the perspective of parties in the original position:

“[i]f I know I shall care immensely more for meaningful work as a vehicle for self-realization than for money as a vehicle for consumption, then I should give priority to bringing it about that I actually engage in meaningful work or perhaps seek to maximize my prospects of getting meaningful work ... we should strive actually to get self-realization, not choose principles that guarantee fair procedures in competitions that give meaningful work to some and not others” (2013, p. 321).

Replace ‘vehicle for self-realization’ with ‘vehicle for self-respect’ and our points are the same.¹³⁶ And the point is also made by those working outside the Rawlsian paradigm. Iris Marion Young for instance criticizes the way fair equality of opportunity takes for granted the nature of positions available, and thinks a better approach is to ask whether a division of labour

¹³⁴ If we are staying within the Rawlsian framework, one possible way of doing this could be by way of the difference principle, given it technically covers more than just income but also the powers and prerogatives of office and the social bases of self-respect. I won’t consider here how far such a strategy would be successful, but for an argument concerned with economic justice along these lines, see Arnold 2012.

¹³⁵ For the same form of argument but made as a general point against the emphasis on opportunity for valuable activities as opposed to an emphasis on the valuable activities themselves, see Sypnowich 2020.

¹³⁶ Arneson is not actually endorsing this argument for promotion of meaningful work but is using it as one way to argue against the primacy of equality of opportunity.

with scarce desirable positions and more plentiful undesirable positions is itself just (1990, pp. 200-225). Paul Gomberg meanwhile argues that it is impossible for the nonpecuniary goods of fulfilling work to be available to all and in “unlimited supply” when they are available only through equal access to pre-existing competitions (2007, pp. 18ff.).¹³⁷

We can (at the risk of a cliché) make an analogy to a race to complete the point. Removing all the obstacles for persons in a race, such that there is fair equality of opportunity to win, is not all there is to say about the fairness of the situation. What is also important to consider are questions about the importance of the prize, and its scarcity and availability. Putting people into competition with one another (even when it is fair) as the only way to achieve a good that is tied to their self-respect, is inconsistent with justice (at least when other options are available). It doesn't allow the social bases of self-respect to be available to all.

I should note here that nothing in the argument implies that it would be wrong for certain positions to go to people with certain talents, and that the best way to bring this about is often fair and open competition. It is a good thing that occupations go to those with the skills most suited. Indeed, in §5.4 I outline that market competition for some forms of employment can (so long as certain conditions are in place and alternatives are available) be consistent with the widespread provision of meaningful work. But the problem is seeing this fair equality of opportunity as sufficient. There needs to be effort made by the state to increase meaningful work in society, ensuring that alternative forms of meaningful work are available, such that no matter a person's place in the distribution of natural talent, meaningful work is available to them.

¹³⁷ Gomberg's solution is to share routine labour, which is something I consider in §5.3

5.3 – Meaningful Work and the Divisions of Labour

In this section I will outline a range of policies that could be effective in promoting meaningful work. How well a set of policies promotes meaningful work is measured by how well they do in at least blurring, if not overcoming, the detailed horizontal division of labour and some forms of the vertical division of labour. I will not repeat here the reasoning behind why this is the case. In Chapter 2 I explained how this results from the conditions I argued constitute the contributive view of meaningful work – complex enough to be person-engaging, and democratic involvement when located in a large complex firm (to revisit those arguments, see especially §2.3 and §2.4.1).

The focus in this section is on policies that are economically feasible in contemporary economies. While there would of course remain great political obstacles to their implementation, things like a basic income, or giving tax advantages to worker cooperatives (just to give two examples I consider), do not exactly require fundamental shifts in the organization of economies or how we think about them. These are schemes that have been implemented and tested, and successful examples exist in the here and now. This means this section's discussion ought not be mere theoretical speculation, but can be applicable to contemporary political debates surrounding the sort of policies available to modify economic conditions. Furthermore, while I am using the term 'economic policy,' as the scope of contributive activities and market activities is not coextensive (§2.4), I will consider policies that promote meaningful work both inside and outside the market. Consideration of these smaller scale changes to economic institutions does not of course exhaust the institutional implications of the argument, and I discuss the promotion of meaningful work in relation to larger questions of political economy in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

I will first consider policies that take aim at the detailed horizontal division of labour. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, while talk of scientific management and Taylorism might first recall working conditions from the past, the design of work in significant sectors of today's economies intentionally removes any complexity or space for discretion out of the role. In Chapter 2 I gave the job of the Amazon 'picker' as the prototypical example, but there is a whole host of jobs defined by drudgery: fast food workers, assembly line work, call centre workers, cleaners, data entry workers, food pickers, Uber drivers, and so on.

One way to institutionalize the widespread promotion of meaningful work would be to reduce or even remove work of this sort. This is because the defence of meaningful work in this thesis is built on the normative importance resulting from the "feature of human sociability that we are by ourselves but parts of what we might be," and the relations of social interdependence between skills and talents that go along with this. And so, because work that is drudgery gives those doing it no space for discretion in the deployment of any skills, then work that is drudgery provides no avenue for persons to partake in these social relations, and hence no avenue to support their self-respect (not to mention all the additional harm this kind of work causes).

We find this drudgery elimination strategy in William Morris' criticism of work under industrial capitalism. As Morris argues "if there be any work which cannot be but a torment to the worker, what then? Well, then, let us see if the heavens will fall on us if we leave it undone, for it were better that they should. The produce of such work cannot be worth the price of it" (1983, p. 52). I think this is plausibly the right move to make when it comes to certain jobs

defined by drudgery. Some of the benefits this drudgery brings about – receiving goods from Amazon in one day as opposed to three, waiting for a burger for one minute as opposed to five – are not essential to the successful carrying out of persons’ plans. Self-respect is too important a good to sacrifice its social bases for any and all consumer-side benefits.

One way to achieve this would be to exploit the levers – both positive and negative – available to the state. An example of a positive lever could be inserting job quality clauses into public procurement contracts (e.g., see Findlay et al. 2017). If this was implemented then for any private company to be contracted for public services and public works, it must pass some threshold where the work it provides its employees enables the work to be complex enough to be person-engaging. Given the increasing contracting out of public services to private companies, this would be no trivial change to the availability of meaningful work in society. Moving to negative levers, Brian Barry suggests that justice might require some kind of negative points scheme that tracks the work being offered in society’s firms (1973, p. 165). In addition to the financial and safety audits that presently exist, perhaps there could also be ‘drudgery audits,’ where firms that do poorly then have to pay high penalties.

It is the interests of individual workers (in this case their interest in securing self-respect) that justifies the economic intervention involved in these kinds of actions. This is no different to the whole multitude of other interventions that are warranted out of protecting persons’ interests (e.g., minimum wage laws or safety regulations protecting workers’ well-being, or environmental regulation protecting persons’ health). Like I said, my focus here is merely on considering the range of options available to promote meaningful work, and I will not here

engage in all things considered reasoning about the justification of this or that policy. But, for what it's worth studies have found job quality interventions of this sort do not have deleterious effects on the overall health of an economy as there are correlations between job quality and the amount of work in society, as well as economic performance (e.g., see Davoine et al. 2008, pp. 184-185).

But elimination will not be appropriate for all cases of drudgery. Namely, those jobs whose nature makes them inherently monotonous, yet which are socially necessary. Food pickers might be one job that would fall into this scenario (this work is socially necessary in a way that same day delivery never could be, and it seems hard to imagine how this could be done in a way that wasn't drudgery). If out of considerations of meaningful work society just decided to stop producing all the food that required manual labour to be harvested, then this really would result in the heavens falling on us.

Does the necessity of this work mean those individuals who do it can never have meaningful work? No. For two reasons. The first is that this is the exact kind of labour that a society that cared about meaningful work should be actively trying to automate. Having machines do the drudgery for us means society could still reap the benefit of the work (having enough food for sale in the store), without subjecting any individual person to the cost of the drudgery. State investment, or the incentivizing of private investment, in relevant new technologies might then be another way meaningful work could be promoted (although this

would need to be carried out in tandem with efforts to offer other meaningful work options to those the technology replaces).¹³⁸

The second reason is the possibility of sharing socially necessary drudgery. It is one thing to say it is necessary that some forms of drudgery are done, it is quite another to say it is reasonable to expect specific individuals to undertake this work on a full-time and permanent basis. The first way to share drudgery would be by having instances of drudgery within a specific enterprise shared between its employees, either by a system of job rotation (Young 1990, p. 225; Hasan 2015, p. 283), or by imbuing in each work role both complex and routine aspects (skilled professionals would still have to clean up, etc.) (Gomberg 2007, pp. 75-91; Kandiyali 2020, pp. 579-581). The second way could be to implement some kind of work requirement more generally, where persons would have to undertake socially necessary drudgery for a certain period of time – one week a year, for two years after high school, or whatever (Barry 1973, pp. 162-165; Kandiyali 2023).¹³⁹

On my account, a regime of sharing socially necessary drudgery would not, at least not primarily, be based on extending the duties affiliated with citizenship (such that it would be analogous to things like military service or jury duty).¹⁴⁰ Rather, it would be based only on

¹³⁸ The threat of complex work that is person-engaging being automated is something I consider in the conclusion.

¹³⁹ I am not going to consider which of these two options would be preferable, other than noting that a general work requirement seems to avoid some of the efficiency-based concerns with job sharing (Schweickart 2006) – a doctor doesn't have to close their surgery early each day as they have fulfilled their drudgery requirement already. For argument in defence of a similar kind of 'civilian service,' but one that does not take the bads of drudgery as its starting point, see Fabre 2006, pp. 55-71.

¹⁴⁰ Lucas Stanczyk (2012) defends compulsory service along these lines. For Stanczyk, in certain circumstances free choice of occupation can be justifiably curtailed in order to ensure work that meets socially urgent needs is carried out.

ensuring the actual opportunity to undertake meaningful work, and hence the social bases of self-respect, are available to all.

What about the importance of free choice of occupation? Doesn't a system of sharing drudgery violate that liberty? No. At least not so long as we care about free choice of occupation in more than just a formal sense, but in terms of persons having a real range of career options open to them from which they can choose. Free choice of occupation protects persons' entitlement to the most extensive range of choice compatible with the free choice of others. This means that some limits to persons' ability to work how they want and in what way they want (such as a two-year work requirement before they can enter a profession) could be justified when these limits are necessary to ensure others can freely choose their own career. Having certain individuals do all the drudgery, means free choice of occupation is not shared between persons equally. The point here is no different than what applies to other liberties. Protecting an equal distribution of the right to freedom of speech sometimes requires limits to specific persons' speech, through things like rules of order and so on.

Turning to the vertical division of labour. While policies aiming at overcoming the detailed horizontal division of labour are aiming to increase the occurrence of work that is person-engaging, policies aiming to overcome, or at least blur, the vertical division of labour are aiming to ensure more persons in society are able to be involved in the contributive aspects of the work. This, alongside some combination of the policies above, promotes meaningful work as it ensures more work processes are such that individuals can understand and appreciate the wider social effects of their work, and that they better correspond to the characterization of work as a

form of social contribution. As I outlined in Chapter 2 (§2.4.1), the emphasis here is not just epistemic to ensure persons in their work understand how it ends up contributing to others, but on ensuring persons are actively involved in the contributive aspects of their work. And as we saw there, while the nature of many jobs is such that contributive details are front and center, for work that occurs in firms that are large and complex, then involvement in the contributive aspect of the work process requires organizational changes to ensure workers are democratically involved in the externally oriented strategic decisions of the enterprise.

Examples of these changes include organizational practices that require management to actively consult and partner with workers to come to decisions, work councils to represent the views of workers to management, or systems of co-determination where workers have permanent representation on boards (for overview see Grant 2007; Wilkinson et al. 2020). And just as with the detailed horizontal division of labour, the levers of the state could be put to use to promote these sorts of practices that go some way in blurring the vertical division of labour. Democratic involvement clauses could be inserted into public procurement contracts, a negative points scheme could be implemented that tracks the extent workers are democratically involved in externally oriented decisions in firms, or legislation could be introduced that mandates worker representation on the boards of firms once they reach a certain size. Or perhaps policies could be implemented that aim to overcome some of the competitive disadvantages faced by companies that implement larger levels of democratic involvement, such as tax reductions and so forth (Jacob and Neuhäuser 2018, p. 941). Policies such as these would be promoting meaningful work as they would be connecting persons more directly to the wider social effects of their work, and involving them in those decisions surrounding the details their social contribution takes.

Of course democratic involvement, and therefore meaningful work, could also be promoted by way of more ambitious efforts aiming to fundamentally alter the organization and control of firms. For example, we might think persons would be much more involved in the contributive aspects of their work within a system of economic democracy where the larger firms in a society are owned by society as a whole and controlled democratically by those who work there (Schweickart 2012). However, I leave consideration of these more radical kind of changes aside until later in this chapter (§5.5), as this is less an answer to the question of the sort of policy options available to be implemented that might promote meaningful work, and more an answer to the question of what economic system might best promote meaningful work.

I have so far considered policies that would affect the nature and availability of market-facing work. But as we have seen, socially contributive activities and market activities are not coextensive, and so consideration of the institutional implications of the argument must also consider ways to ensure meaningful work is available outside the market. I will consider two potential ways to promote meaningful work outside of market activity.

The first is some sort of state job program or job guarantee which, so long as the jobs have the requisite features, could provide persons the opportunity to engage in person-engaging social contributions. As we have seen, this seems to be the conclusion Rawls eventually comes to, in arguing for the necessity of society acting as the employer of last resort to provide persons the opportunity for meaningful work (2005, p. lvii; 1999, p. 50). Some writers claim job programs are self-defeating as a means to support persons' self-worth by giving them a benefit they were unable to attain for themselves (Moon 1988, pp. 47-48; Plant 1993), or because they,

in combination with social safety nets more generally, remove the experience of risk (of destitution?) that is a precondition for self-respect in the first place (Tomasi 2012, pp. 79-80).¹⁴¹ But this argument is unconvincing once we recognize contributive activity does not perfectly track market demand, as there are certain wants and or needs that the market is not best placed to meet (such as the provision of nonexcludable public goods, among others). Therefore, a job program would not be giving persons the opportunity to do make-work, but to genuinely meet the needs and or wants of others not captured in market mechanisms. And it is contribution itself (understood more broadly than only market activity) that is relevant to self-respect, not contributing only in order to earn one's own keep. Expecting a person's self-respect to be tied to their ability as a successful market actor, with all the contingencies that go into this, is surely at odds with basic egalitarian tenets of equality (see Arneson 1990, p. 1133. And see also the concluding discussion in §5.4.2).

The second possibility is a basic income which, by removing the necessity of paid work, could promote meaningful work by enabling persons to undertake person-engaging contributive activity that occurs outside the market (it might also promote meaningful work in the market as it would give workers more bargaining power against employers which could improve job quality).¹⁴² However, there is an important stipulation that needs to be made here if a basic income is to promote meaningful work in a way supportive of persons' self-respect. This relates to how persons' self-respect is not only a function of the freedoms and opportunities available to

¹⁴¹ For some evidence that this kind of risk tends to undermine rather than support self-respect, see Baderin and Barnes 2020.

¹⁴² For an alternative defence of a basic income alongside a duty to contribute out of the value of reciprocity, see Jenkins 2020, pp. 844-848. Jenkins grounds such a policy in its ability to provide the means for persons to undertake socially contributive work that does not undermine or run against their conception of the good. This differs from my defence of a basic income as Jenkins makes no mention of a particular kind of contribution being uniquely relevant to a political conception of justice.

them, but also of what the provision of these freedoms and opportunities expresses (Cohen 1989, pp. 738-739; Rawls 2005, pp. 318-320). And so, a basic income will only serve as a social basis of self-respect insofar as its implementation is explicitly connected to the aim of promoting meaningful work. It is only then that it can publicly express each person's involvement in relations of social interdependence and mutual reciprocity. To achieve this, it would need to be clearly framed as granting persons the opportunity to undertake person-engaging nonmarket participation, or as public recognition of the unpaid contributions persons already make (e.g. see Gorz 1999, pp. 83ff.).¹⁴³ The benefit of a job guarantee (as well as modifying the conditions of market-facing work) is because of the more formalized structure of this kind of work, as well as widespread acknowledgement of the connection between paid work and social contribution, then it can more naturally serve this recognitional function.

I will consider two objections to implementing a basic income in order to promote meaningful work. The first is that a basic income cannot be a requirement of justice because, as I have acknowledged (see the end of §3.3), the value of reciprocity can also ground an obligation to contribute, and a basic income opens up the potential for persons free-riding by not contributing in any way at all (this cannot be equated to working in a job, given there are contributive activities outside the market and also market activities like rent-seeking that aren't contributive at all). Three points can be made in response. First, even if at a principled level we acknowledge that something like a 'participation income' might be preferable to universal income in promoting meaningful work (White 2003, pp. 167-172), pragmatic considerations

¹⁴³ Interestingly, L. T. Hobhouse (with heavily gendered assumptions about who ought to do domestic work) makes a point of this recognitional function of income for activities that meet the needs of others: "[w]e no longer consider it desirable to drive the mother out to her charing work if we possibly can, nor do we consider her degraded by receiving public money. We cease, in fact, to regard the public money as a dole, we treat it as a payment for a civic service" (1927, pp. 179-180).

about efficiency might make a basic income preferable all things considered (think of the bureaucratic structure necessary to assess persons' social contributions, especially when these encapsulate more than market activity) (McKinnon 2003, pp. 155-156). Second, it is not obvious that reciprocity-based arguments related to obligations will necessarily outweigh or invalidate reciprocity-based arguments related to entitlements. This is even if the former are weighty, given that a basic income (insofar as it increases the opportunity to engage in meaningful work) is tied to a weighty reason of its own, the social bases of persons' self-respect. And third, recall that the argument here, by being situated in ideal theory, is applicable to persons who not only are regarded as free and equal participating members of a system of cooperation, but who *want* to be regarded as such. And so while I won't suggest this makes the concern with free-riding moot, it is fair to assume that citizens will have the requisite motivations to use part of their newly found time and resources in socially contributive ways – scroungers ought to be few and far between.

The second objection grants a basic income might be required to promote meaningful work, but claims that given this gives persons sufficient opportunity to move in and out of formal employment and to engage in meaningful work outside of the market, then any efforts to promote meaningful work in the market (like those considered above) become unnecessary. If this objection goes through, then the justification of promoting meaningful work in market-facing firms might only apply in non-ideal conditions where a basic income doesn't exist. This would be a problem as it would mean the argument here faces the same issue faced by those arguments relying on the formative thesis. The reply here is to deny that providing opportunities to engage in meaningful work outside the market suffices for a fair provision of meaningful work. The reason for this is the following. Due to both economies of scale and inefficiencies

associated with certain market transactions, in many economic sectors the meeting of needs and wants is best achieved when the social division of labour between different occupational roles (this is different from the detailed horizontal division of labour) is internal to individual firms. As Joseph Heath outlines, we shouldn't prioritize benefits from trade (through the market) as the only way mutually beneficial social cooperation occurs, as there are also benefits to be had through forms of cooperation that exploit economies of scale, and the organizational structure of corporations is such that they are invaluable in bringing about this benefit (2006a, pp. 315-316, 331, 336). In the words of Elizabeth Anderson, "in the great contest between individualism and collectivism regarding the mode of production, collectivism won, decisively. Now nearly all production is undertaken by teams of workers using large, indivisible forms of capital equipment held in common" (2017, p. 65; see also Singer 2018, pp. 52-72). It is wrong to characterize modern economies – even in ideal theory – in terms analogous to Adam Smith's butcher, brewer, and baker (Deranty 2012, pp. 155-156). What this means is that even if a basic income is implemented, some persons, given the nature of the skills and talents they happen to possess, will only be able to undertake meaningful work in the context of a firm. Therefore, efforts focusing on the quality and organization of work within firms will always be imperative to the fair provision of meaningful work.

Those then are some possible ways to bring about the promotion of meaningful work, either by way of overcoming the detailed horizontal division of labour and some forms of the vertical division of labour within the market, or by promoting opportunities for meaningful work outside the market. Again, the discussion here has been merely gestural and indicative of the kind of economic policies a theory of social justice committed to the promotion of meaningful

work must consider. Far more work would be needed to examine all the empirical questions affiliated with the efficacy of this or that policy. And because my aim has not been to provide a full account of economic justice, I have only considered some and not all the potential competing considerations when it comes to reconciling, from the standpoint of justice, the promotion of meaningful work to secure persons' self-respect and other entitlements and rights owed to persons.

5.4 – Meaningful Work and Markets

The discussion of policies to promote meaningful work has so far been in terms of smaller scale reforms. By that I mean the policies could be introduced as part of some kind of improved welfare state aiming to improve the situation of workers (understood broadly), but they stop short of any larger structural change to the underlying organization of the economic system. And so, while these kind of policies are useful in thinking about what could be done in the here and now to bring about a fairer distribution of the opportunity for meaningful work, leaving the account there would be to ignore larger questions of political economy. But given the philosophical methodology that I have employed – where I am predominantly asking questions about economic justice at the level of ideal theory – these larger questions, concerning economic organization, the pattern of ownership, and the means through which production is allocated, are certainly still live. It is to these that I now turn. In this section I will consider the appropriateness of promoting, at least partly, the opportunity for meaningful work within a system of markets.¹⁴⁴ I will argue that the promotion of meaningful work can be consistent with market systems. In the next section I then consider questions of ownership and control over the means of production.

¹⁴⁴ I say partly because as we have seen the scope of socially contributive activities and market-facing activities are not coextensive.

In Chapter 4's discussion of the kind of motivations underpinning individuals' desire to undertake meaningful work, I briefly discussed the compatibility of the account with market incentives (§4.4.2). I argued that while meaningful work could not be promoted and maintained in a system of market relations which are a 'private society' where participants are motivated only out of their own self-interest, I suggested that this need not result in the incompatibility of promoting meaningful work alongside market incentives per se, given incentives and price signals can serve as a tool to help persons efficiently undertake socially productive activity. I will now defend this claim in more detail. The crux of the argument is that it is possible to recharacterize market mechanisms (like competition, prices, and incentives) in a way consistent with what the account of meaningful work requires, where market actors care about the wider social effects of their productive activity, not just for their own self-interest but because this is seen as important in itself. Such a characterization is possible once it is recognized that one need not equate markets with 'capitalism' or a variety thereof. Markets are a system of voluntary exchange that coordinate behaviour through price signals to allow certain productive and contributive activities to be allocated and distributed in an efficient (in the wide sense of non-wasteful) and effective manner (Satz 2010, pp. 15-21; Brennan and Jaworski 2015; Herzog 2021; Zwolinski 2022, pp. 206-207). Therefore, while markets are not the only means through which persons can contribute to others, and in some contexts can be detrimental to social contribution, there are economic sectors in which persons who care about contributing to others will want to leverage the mechanisms markets provide.

The primary concern in this section is not with those arguments about what might justify markets more generally, be they claims about markets respecting individuals' antecedent rights over their personal private property, or claims about the consequences that result from the proliferation of markets (on the distinction, see Sen 1985). The claim is only that markets (of a certain type) can be consistent with the promotion of meaningful work. This then sets up the discussion in the subsequent section, where different forms of ownership and organization within a market will be considered.

5.4.1 – Markets as They Are

Despite my argument that the promotion of meaningful work can be consistent with markets, I am not in disagreement with those views that there ought not be markets in certain goods or relationships, or that markets have ill effects when they are employed in certain ways or fail to be regulated in a sufficient manner.

For instance, my position is consistent with claims that there should not be markets in certain goods insofar as this leads to additional harms (e.g., markets in handguns), or results in vulnerable persons being exploited (e.g., markets in organs, or pregnancy, or sex).¹⁴⁵ Debra Satz (2010, especially pp. 91-113) puts forward probably the most philosophically sophisticated recent account of this position, arguing that certain markets are “noxious” insofar as they undermine the equal standing of persons, be this because they exploit vulnerability or participants' lack of information, or have harmful effects for individuals and society. The reason my account is consistent with this view is due to its insistence that meaningful work can only be

¹⁴⁵ These claims are not just the trivial point that because certain things cause harm or are exploitative that therefore there should not be a market in them. Instead, the point is that markets in certain things have their own additional negative effects. See Brennan and Jaworski 2015, pp. 1053-1054.

activity which is indeed advancing the interests of unassociated others by meeting their needs. As I outlined in §2.4, if an exchange results in harm, or manipulates another, or exploits a vulnerable group, it is not actually a contributive work activity as I understand it at all. The account thus could never promote meaningful work in markets with features such as these. And it is for the same reason that my account is also consistent with those objections to markets which emphasize negative externalities or moral hazards, like objections to unregulated markets that lead to environmental pollution, or to markets in positional goods that are definitionally zero-sum, or to market environments which encourage socially risky behaviour like subprime mortgage trading.¹⁴⁶ These are examples of market failures, where the market is not serving as a means through which the needs and or wants of others can be effectively met. If meaningful work is contributive activity that enables others to carry out their plan of life, then my account will require non-market solutions in these sorts of sectors.¹⁴⁷

Additionally, my position is not in tension with objections about how the proliferation of markets is problematically engendering market attitudes and behaviours in a wider set of social relations, such as intimate and private relationships, or the political relation between citizens. This objection has only become more acute since the economic restructurings of the 1980s, where government expenditure and social spending were first rolled back and then replaced with market mechanisms as the preferred method for the allocation of more and more social resources (Harvey 1989; Peck et al. 2009). As Michael Sandel puts the point, there is “the growing reach of

¹⁴⁶ On externalities in the strict economic sense, see Mas-Colell et al. 1995, Ch. 11. For a laxer account of externalities in terms of wider effects, see Gauthier 1986, pp. 87-88; Heath 2006a, p. 318. For externalities relating to markets of positional goods, see Hirsch 1976; Frank 2005.

¹⁴⁷ An example of a somewhat difference response to market failure is to use a publicly accessible points system to assess how well companies do against a standard of the common good, part of which would include whether companies exploit negative externalities when they are available to them (like environmental harms). The points system would then, in theory, disincentivize socially harmful behaviour. For one example, see the Economy for the Common Good association: <https://www.ecogood.org/what-is-ecg/>.

money and markets into spheres of life once governed by nonmarket norms,” and this is a problem (2012, p. 28; see also Walzer 1983, p. 109; Radin 1987, pp. 1859ff.; Satz 2010, pp. 102-105). Arguments like these are saying that while the market economy might have a justified place, such a place is limited and ought not result in a wider market society (to borrow the terminology of Karl Polanyi 1944; see also Cunningham 2005). But while my account is emphasizing the political importance of contributive activity (in the sense of being relevant to a political conception of justice), it by no means is arguing that social contribution – let alone market activity – should come to dominate all aspects of persons’ lives, or has some fundamental priority over other aspects of justice. It is also a matter of justice, for instance, that persons have sufficient free time to do what they please, and to organize parts of their lives according to values and priorities very different to the sorts of values affiliated with social contribution and meaningful work (see Rose 2016). Insofar as the account of meaningful work is consistent with market relations, this will require a regulatory environment that puts clear limits on where markets can operate, and furthermore, which checks the social and political power yielded by large economic agents.¹⁴⁸ And furthermore, given the account is defending the opportunity for meaningful work as an entitlement of justice, it is important to keep in mind markets are just one of the ways such an opportunity is provided.¹⁴⁹ Even if the market was suitably regulated and controlled, this could never guarantee everyone an opportunity for meaningful work.

¹⁴⁸ For nuanced discussions on various aspects of corporations’ power, see Barry 2002; Bennett and Claassen 2022; Herzog 2022. For details of how this power operates in the context of competition for urban economic investment, see Peterson 1981; Lindblom 1982, pp. 325-332; Savitch and Kantor 2002.

¹⁴⁹ On social justice being independent to some degree from market outcomes, see Satz 2010, p. 6. On how institutional design affecting the extent economies promote competition relates to the distributive outcomes that occur (especially in terms of income), see Dietsch 2010.

So, in claiming meaningful work can be consistent with markets I am not claiming meaningful work can be consistent with markets as they are. The nature of market relations under contemporary capitalism leads to “grave injustices” (to use Rawls’ term, 1971, p. 274) – be this in terms of harm, political corruption, unaccountability, power inequalities, exploitation, wastefulness, and so on – for some of reasons I have just briefly outlined. The claim, rather, is that meaningful work can be consistent with markets as they *could be*.

This means the position I must respond to is not that there are problems with markets in certain goods and services, or when markets escape their appropriate limits, but instead the position that markets, as a form of allocation and exchange, are problematic in and of themselves. Such an argument is necessary to respond to those defenders of economic systems that use something other than markets to allocate goods, services, and productive activity (e.g., the participatory planning or ‘parecon’ model, see Albert 2003; McNally 1993, pp. 170-217), or to those who see the market and the full realization of productive justice as inimical to one another (Gomberg 2018, pp. 527-528). After all, the argument might go, meaningful work might be inconsistent with market relations because markets fail to properly express relations of reciprocity and interdependence: maybe it’s wrong to dissolve “human sociability” – even partly – into the liquid of the market?

5.4.2 – Markets as They Could Be

I will consider what I take to be the two most plausible reasons for thinking the promotion of meaningful work might be in tension with market exchange generally. The first is that the commodification on which market exchange is based results in workers being disconnected from

the wider social effects of their work, and hence restricts their work being meaningful. The second is that the self-interested attitudes and motivations fostered by market activity are inimical to the way meaningful work requires persons to care about meeting the needs of others for its own sake, especially if it is to be supportive of persons' self-respect. I will outline and then respond to each of these views in turn.

Taking commodification and disconnection first. Recall that the contributive aspect of meaningful work requires a person to be actively involved in the contributive details affiliated with the work process, such that their social contribution is palpable and reflects the inextricable connection between work and meeting needs. As we have seen, this means certain forms of economic organization are incompatible with work being meaningful, viz. the extremely detailed horizontal division of labour, and vertical divisions of labour that offer workers no democratic involvement in the external decisions of an enterprise (§2.4.1). The concern I am considering here is that placing work processes within market relations might be having the same kind of effect.

The classic articulation of this kind of view is by Karl Marx. What markets do for Marx is cloak the work process under a "mystical veil," where the real social relations imbued in and through work end up hidden from workers (2000d, pp. 477-479; see also McNally 1993, pp. 159-169; Ollman 1998, pp. 85-99). Put into terms relevant to my account, the argument is that because markets turn the products of labour into commodities, people end up regarding work activities only in terms of monetary relations between products and services, and not in terms of interpersonal relations based on mutual interdependencies and generalized reciprocity. By

disconnecting persons from how their activity is a social contribution, market-facing work will not then be meaningful work, and hence will not be supportive of persons' self-respect. The thought here is found outside the Marxist tradition too. For instance, J. A. Hobson, while not arguing that markets as a whole need to be abolished, did think that in certain industries the disconnect between individuals and the social effects of their work brought about by markets justifies some kind of state-controlled economy, such that labour is responding to a "human standard of value" in place of a monetary standard. This enables workers to no longer be "aloof" from the "human consequences that follow from their conduct" (see especially 1914, pp. 56, 159ff., 250; 1996, pp. 39ff.).

My response here is not to deny that commodification through the price signal brings in some distance between individuals and the social effects of their work. Rather, my response is to deny that the degree of this distance is enough to preclude their work being meaningful. What the fetishism of commodities does, at least for Marx, is hide the social relations of productive activity – social relations that are constituted by the particular mode of production in which that activity takes place. But, acceptance of Marx's argument in full relies on taking several contentious assumptions for granted, not the least of which are characterizing social relations of production in terms of the labour theory of value, and seeing commodification's alienating and disconnecting effects in relation to humans' species-being (see especially Marx 2000e, pp. 127-131; 2000d, pp. 475-477). Perhaps it is true that markets do bring about a distance between workers and the products of their labour that precludes the possibility of work being unalienated in the Marxist sense. But for our account of meaningful work, this claim is neither here nor there. For the kind of social connection taken as necessary in an account of Marxian unalienated labour

is far more demanding (due to its perfectionist commitments) than what is necessary in an account of meaningful work.

And once we strip the perfectionist aspects from Marx's account, i.e., those parts where a particular kind of contribution is intrinsic to a claim about a particular kind of human essence, the argument about commodification bringing in a distance between workers and the social effects of their labour becomes less convincing. For the social effects of productive activity that are relevant to an account of meaningful work are only those relating to the *usefulness* of an activity insofar as it enables others to carry out their plan of life. And so even if markets' commodification requires some level of distance between workers and the social effects of their labour, it is unlikely this will necessarily preclude persons' involvement in and understanding of how it is useful to others (in the same way that smiles, without communicating all the details, don't disconnect individuals from the fact that others enjoy their company). For example, a musician might not understand in intricate detail the exact ways in which their songs enable others to carry out their plans of life, but the mere fact they can sell it in the market can give them confidence that it is indeed useful, and so too with all the other examples that can be given. While Marx might be right that selling products or services on the market could preclude persons "objectif[ying] the human essence" or being "the mediator between you and the species and this been acknowledged and felt by you as a completion of your own essence," is he really right that market-facing activities (in and of themselves) are inconsistent with the fact that "in your enjoyment or use of my product I would have had the direct enjoyment of realizing that I had satisfied a human need by my work" (2000e, p. 132)?¹⁵⁰ Of course, as we have seen, the

¹⁵⁰ See Miller 2014, pp. 131-133, for interesting discussion on whether a non-market form of socialism could retain the sort of individuality in production required in a Marxian account of self-realization.

contemporary divisions of labour (both horizontal and vertical) in modern markets are such that many persons are often disconnected from the social effects of their work, but that only shows that markets need to be organized and regulated in a particular kind of way in order for their participants to be connected to how their activity meets the needs of others.

Indeed, given the contributions affiliated with work are those between unassociated others, and so often between those with different conceptions of the good, in many instances some level of distance between a worker and the particular need in which their activity meets is inevitable (from within a musician's own conception of the good they might find certain appreciations of their music confusing or even misplaced). When contribution is understood as activity that enables others to carry out their plan of life, and when persons have divergent and different aims and ends affiliated with their plans, then persons *by definition* cannot be intimately connected to all the details and particulars of social contribution. And this fact suggests that the emphasis perhaps should not be on how prices and commodification bring in a distance between persons and those who benefit from their work activity, but on how prices and commodification actually allow social contribution to occur between persons who have divergent aims and ends. As Jules Coleman puts the point, “[i]n markets, individuals act on their own conception of the good ... [y]ou need not approve of my preferences, the way in which I order them, nor I of yours, in order for us to relate to one another for mutual advantage over a very large domain” (1987, p. 87. See also Brown 2022, pp. 232-233).

Such a feature might be a source of grievance for a perfectionist account like Marx's,¹⁵¹ but for my account it is simply a result of taking the fact of reasonable pluralism seriously. Meaningful work does not bring persons together into a social union where a single conception of the good is shared amongst like-minded members, but into a social union of social unions with a shared end based only on persons accepting how person-engaging activities enable themselves and others to carry out their plan of life. This end is not internal to a comprehensive conception but is a political claim about what is in the interests of persons generally. What markets and the price signal can do (so long as several conditions are met), is help persons recognize how their own unique skills and talents are contributive, even to those with very different aims and ends to their own. What the Marxist gets wrong is they forget this political community is defined by reasonable pluralism.¹⁵²

Turning now to the view markets might be inconsistent with meaningful work due to their fostering of self-interested attitudes and motivations. For work to be meaningful persons need to care how their activity meets the needs of others in a way that goes beyond thinking only about what benefits them (despite it not having to be based on pure altruism), be it because it

¹⁵¹ We saw in §4.4.2 that insulated communities which are organized around a shared acceptance of a comprehensive conception can be seen as outliers to my claim that work must be activity that contributes to unassociated others. Perhaps a Marxist account of justice would want to argue communist society would be analogous to these outliers, in that each participant would have the same idea of the good life and the place of productive activity within it. But here we are just running into fundamental disagreements about the suitability of perfectionism to justice. See also Arneson's (1993, pp. 291-292) comments against what he calls the millenarian strains in Marx.

¹⁵² Another objection based on the market bringing about some distance between the worker and the outcome of their labour relates to persons necessarily having to follow the 'laws' of the market (each person, or firm, must produce what will sell at a profit, they cannot control the ultimate destination of their products, and so on). For interesting interpretation of Marx on this score, see Roberts 2017, pp. 56-103. See also Arnold 2022, pp. 283-284. But once again, the reply here is just that the reasonable pluralism that obtains in society makes some distance of this kind of sort inevitable. As David Miller puts the point, even in nonmarket communist society the receiver of a person's product might use it in a way that frustrates the intentions that went into production: "paintings might be used as ironing boards" (1977, p. 484). I suppose one could reply that the reasonable pluralism that obtains in society is merely a by-product of capitalism and market relations. I think here the burden of proof lies with those who want to make that claim.

expresses one's participation in society understood as a system of cooperation, or because it contributes towards a shared end that is regarded as being in the interests of persons generally (according to the arguments of Chapters 3 and 4, respectively).

But this, the argument goes, is completely at odds with the sort of logic and motivations that underpin market transactions governed by competition, where persons (to borrow another phrase from Marx) contribute to others only “out of egoistic need and necessity” to maximize their own profit and self-advantage (Marx 2000e, p. 128). As G. A. Cohen characterizes them, market relations are motivated by greed and fear, where persons see their opposite numbers only as sources of enrichment and as threats to their own success, and “[t]hese are horrible ways of seeing other people,” especially in contrast to the “antimarket principle according to which I serve you not because of what I can get in return by doing so but because you need or want my service, and you, for the same reason, serve me” (2009, pp. 39-40; see also Cohen 1994, pp. 9-11). If this is the case, then even if markets do not bring about a disconnect between the worker and their social contribution, the way they affect individuals' motivations for caring about contributing to others will still result in their being inconsistent with promoting meaningful work as a social basis of self-respect.

This point derives from the underlying fact that, despite what mainstream economists sometimes claim, market actors' attitudes and values are not pre-existing features of persons that are independent from markets, but are instead endogenous to markets' features and effects, as well to the larger social and economic institutions in which markets operate.¹⁵³ As Samuel

¹⁵³ The broad point here is of course a central tenet to various strands of Marxism, be it put in terms of ‘base’ and ‘superstructure,’ or ‘cultural hegemony.’

Bowles nicely puts it, “how we regulate our exchanges and coordinate our disparate economic activities influences what kind of people we become,” and modern markets tend to foster greed, opportunism, and indifference (1991, quote occurs at pp. 12-13). I think it is undeniable that the nature and structural context of markets in contemporary capitalism results in attitudes of this sort. For instance, there is a rich literature on how markets and competition in contemporary capitalism can ‘crowd-out’ participants’ other-regarding attitudes. Classic examples include how markets in blood actually reduce levels of donation as they erode the correlation between giving blood and civic duty (Titmuss 1971; Lepper and Greene 1978), and how the introduction of fines for being late to pick children up from childcare actually incentivizes late pickups as it is seen not as a fine but as a price for a service (Gneezy and Rustichini 2000; Sandel 2012, pp. 64-65; Satz 2019, pp.164-165). I am not going to dispute this evidence, and I think studies such as these do demonstrate that attempting to promote meaningful work without changing the existing structures in which markets operate is likely to be futile.

However, it would be a mistake to move directly from these kind of studies to a general claim about any inherent effects of markets on persons’ attitudes and values. After all, there is also evidence that in certain circumstances market mechanisms and prices can ‘crowd-in’ other-regarding motivations, where what seems to count is that prices are seen by agents not as external controls that reduce their agency, but as means which enable and help them undertake the contributive activity they regard as important (e.g., see Khanna and Sandler 2000; Bolle and Otto 2010; Bönke et al. 2013). A similar point is made by Jason Brennan and Peter Martin Jaworski in their argument against those “semiotic” objections to markets that take issue with what markets *express* (in contrast to their effects), and which claim that “to engage in a market in

some good or service X is a form of symbolic expression that communicates the wrong motive, or the wrong attitude towards X” (2015, p. 1055; cf. Booth 2018). We can take a generalized form of this semiotic objection and apply it to the point here about attitudes fostered by markets: markets express self-interest and greed, which is the wrong kind of attitude towards the social interdependencies relevant to meaningful work. But as Brennan and Jaworski outline, there is a whole amplitude of sociological and anthropological evidence demonstrating that what markets and prices mean to those who use them is sensitive to the cultural context in which they occur, and in some contexts markets and money are in no way affiliated with these kind of self-interested attitudes (2015, pp. 1062-1066, and the references there). While price signals in the here and now might express opportunities for self-advancement and greed in the context of fear and ruthless competition, perhaps there is an alternative arrangement where prices within markets are taken as signals for what others need or, in the words of Joseph Carens that we saw earlier in §2.4, as “merely sources of information about what the community wants done” (1981, p. 195). In this latter world, any market demand for a person’s skills and talents would not result in them viewing others solely as sources of enrichment to be exploited in order to get ahead, but in them seeing their activity as an opportunity to contribute and do their part as a participating member of society.

Of course, none of this experimental and sociological evidence on the differing meanings of markets and prices is perfectly testing any potential compatibility between markets and meaningful work. But what it does show is that it is wrong to take certain kinds of attitudes as necessarily resulting from markets and price signals, what determines the kind of attitudes markets foster is their design and regulation, the political and social contexts in which they

operate, the way persons are educated about them, and so on. As such, we ought to be cautious of following G. A. Cohen in contradistinguishing markets relations, by definition, against relations of reciprocity and community.¹⁵⁴ And this is especially so if we are thinking about the compatibility of meaningful work (or something else) not just with the nature of markets under contemporary capitalism, but with an economic system that, while exploiting market mechanisms, might be organized and structured very differently than the economies of today in order to achieve the ends and promote the relations constitutive of social justice.

And I want to emphasize here that this is not just some wishful thinking based on a claim about markets meaning whatever we want them to mean (and so therefore they can express reciprocity and interdependence if we want them to).¹⁵⁵ Saying the meaning of markets could be different is very different from saying, given the historical and social circumstances in which we find ourselves, the meaning of markets can be different (see Moriarty 2017, p. 644; Brown 2022, pp. 229-230). Rather, it is a claim about one particular interpretation of markets and price signals (i.e., based on and encourages self-interest and greed) not being guaranteed, and the potential for it to be replaced by another (i.e., a tool to send information about what persons need in order to carry out their plan of life). Neither of these accounts are assigning some meaning to markets arbitrarily from the outside as it were. The former is built up from the way the market uses competition between participants, and the undeniable fact that market actors are concerned with acting in a way that rationally advances their own position. Whereas the latter focuses on the

¹⁵⁴ Cohen also claims markets conflict with community because their logic contradicts the distribution of resources according to need, and instead encourage distribution according to how much one puts in or how good one is at producing (see especially 1994, p. 11). But this misses that to accept the allocative function of a market need not imply any acceptance of their distributive effects. See Rawls 1971, pp. 273-274.

¹⁵⁵ I read this as potentially being Brennan and Jawarowski's position. See especially their discussion of having reasons to modify our culture's semiotics when it has bad consequences (2015, pp. 1066-1071).

ability of markets to allocate socially contributive activities in an effective and non-wasteful manner. To emphasize the latter interpretation is to emphasize that markets are inherently linked with interdependency and reciprocal exchange. Such a feature is a fact of markets, and so the latter interpretation doesn't require some foreign account of motivations or symbolic meanings to be imposed down onto them.

Indeed, the point I have been developing is supported by the recent trajectory in normative business ethics and political theory that uses the intermediary position of economic activity – it is neither purely private nor purely public – to develop normative assessment of market activity. An influential example here would be Joseph Heath's (2014, see also 2006b) 'market failures approach' to business ethics, the starting point of which is that what justifies market activity is that it produces efficient outcomes which do the best job of meeting needs and wants – so long as there exists (close to) perfect competition.¹⁵⁶ This then provides a framework for how markets and economic organization ought to be organized as well as putting limits on the kind of actions permissible for market actors, as exploiting positions of power in the market is antithetical to what makes it legitimate in the first place. For Heath, actions like price gouging are unethical not in reference to some external ethical theory applied down to market relations, but in reference to the axioms that govern market activity itself, and hence why for the same reasons structural changes to the market that prevent monopolies would also be legitimate. The point here is neither to endorse one particular normative account of markets and economic activity nor to claim that an account like Heath's is able to integrate the normative value of

¹⁵⁶ For other accounts assessing the ethics of market activity in part by characterizing markets not solely as private forms of organization but as relations of exchange fundamentally related to social contribution and the meeting of needs, see Ciepley 2013; Claassen 2017; Singer 2018; Bennett and Claassen 2022. For accounts focusing less on structure and institutional design and more on the behaviour of economic agents, see McMahon 1981; Christiano 2010; McMahon 2013.

meaningful work. The point rather is to show that any account which characterizes the logic of market relations only in terms of self-interested private activities that aim to maximize one's position and competitive advantage is too simplistic and one-dimensional.

A likely response from someone like G. A. Cohen here is to remind us that the market only results in desirable ends (efficient and non-wasteful allocation of resources and so on), because of its recruitment of low-grade motives in the first place. Cohen insists we cannot forget Bernard Mandeville was on to something with the subtitle of *The Fable of the Bees* – it is private vices that lead to public benefits. The attitudes of selfishness and greed, and socially beneficial outcomes, are two sides of the same market coin (2009, pp. 78-79). But the reply here is to first emphasize that what leads to the social benefits of the market is competition. For example, it is the competition between producers which forces prices to be driven down and for the market to clear (see e.g., Coleman 1987; Heath 2006b, pp. 541-542; Dietsch 2010, pp. 224-225),¹⁵⁷ and many forms of market regulation are taken as justified insofar as they are necessary to protect this competitive environment (e.g., antitrust law, regulation of advertising, and so on).¹⁵⁸ And then second, emphasize that this sort of competition need not necessarily foster or rely on low-grade motives.

¹⁵⁷ In economics speak, this is the first basic theorem of welfare economics. One helpful discussion is in Roemer 2012, p. 286.

¹⁵⁸ Rawls' discussion of advertising in *Political Liberalism* (pp. 364-365) is instructive here, and demonstrates how he sees the market's value mostly in terms of its allocative power. 'Market-strategic' advertising (slogans, catchy photographs, etc.) "is socially wasteful, and a well-ordered society that tries to preserve competition and remove market imperfections would seek reasonable ways to limit it" (p. 365). On the historical shift in liberal political philosophy from valuing markets in terms of private property to valuing them in terms of social equality, see Clark and Gintis 1978, pp. 304-309. See also Waldron 1987, pp. 148-149.

What G. A. Cohen brushes over are the *stakes* involved in market competition.¹⁵⁹ And it is often the stakes that determine whether market competition puts persons into problematic relations with one another – as Waheed Hussain puts it, “a friendly competition is one thing; a life or death struggle is another” (2018a, p. 571).¹⁶⁰ If market-facing activity is the one means through which persons can secure their livelihood, or their dignity, or healthcare for themselves and their loved ones, then the development of low-grade motives is of course likely. As the consequences of losing a competition worsen, the more a person’s opposite number becomes a threat, an adversary, an opponent who needs to be defeated.¹⁶¹ In contrast, when the stakes of a competition are low, it becomes consistent with more prosocial attitudes. The competitors in a \$5 stakes poker game are not enemies.

An implication of this is of course something we already know, that markets can only be consistent with requirements of social justice when they are situated within a political and social environment that regulates their nature and scope, as well as protecting persons from their worst distributive effects. To this we can add (at least according to the argument of this thesis), the

¹⁵⁹ An alternative line of argument might be to emphasize, following Agmon 2022, that market competition is a form of ‘parallel competition,’ which is competition only aiming to foster independent pathways for each competitor to do their best (picture a 100m race), and not a form of ‘friction competition,’ which is competition aiming to facilitate a clash between competitors (picture a basketball game). And then resultantly argue that this difference results in the competition between market actors being nonrivalrous (see pp. 11-12, 27n). Even if market competition is a form of parallel and not friction competition, to show the insufficiency of this approach as a reply to Cohen we need only imagine what happens to the relations between competitors of parallel competition when the stakes get very high. If winning the 100m race is the only way to obtain the means of subsistence then one’s competitors quickly become adversaries of the very worst sort. J. S. Mill uses the same analogy to criticize the stakes of market competition: “If some Nero or Domitian were to require a hundred persons to run a race for their lives, on condition that the fifty or twenty whom come in hindmost should be put to death, it would not be any diminution of the injustice that the strongest or nimblest would, except through some untoward accident, be certain to escape” (1994, p. 382).

¹⁶⁰ The political relation Hussain thinks is normatively significant, and which can be undermined by harsh competition, is one of solidarity, understood as each person being mutually affirming where they share in the success and failures of others as if they were their own (2018a, pp. 575-577, 581-583; see also 2020). My account here has been influenced by Hussain’s position but has some differences. One, it advances different social relations and two, it is not claiming these relations are constitutive of a political morality but only arguing that they are important to justice by way of being necessary to a fair provision of meaningful work.

¹⁶¹ Somewhat interestingly, Rawls also notes that “hostile” attitudes of envy are likely to be more severe in response to competition and rivalry the worse a person’s defeat. See Rawls 1971, pp. 530-537.

requirement that alternative opportunities are made available outside the market for persons to undertake person-engaging contributive activity. This is not only because the scope of market-facing activities and socially contributive activities are not coextensive, but also because if it is indeed a feature of economies to have some natural rate of unemployment (or if you prefer, a reserve army of labour), then this means that if opportunities for meaningful work were only available in the market, then the opportunity for meaningful work would be a positional good. Any one person's success in the market – their acquisition of a job, or of a new customer – necessarily requires the failure of somebody else. And what is relevant to the discussion here is not so much how this would preclude a social basis of self-respect being available to all (although this is important, see §4.2.1 and §4.3), but instead the kind of relations and attitudes that would be fostered by placing society's members into competition against each other for a resource that is a social basis of self-respect. Such an outcome would be ratcheting up the stakes of the competition, likely leading to the kind of self-interested attitudes inimical not only to what the account of meaningful work requires, but to relational equality more generally. In making a similar kind of argument Waheed Hussain puts the point thus: “[a] social order could incorporate a market system to coordinate production and consumption in society, as long as an appropriate ‘ceiling’ and ‘floor’ are in place to limit the stakes for citizens” (2020, p. 106).

Of course, the natural reply here for Cohen is to repeat the point about self-interest and greed being what allows the market to result in socially beneficial outcomes. While lowering the stakes of market competition might make it more consistent with prosocial attitudes, won't doing so take the life out of the invisible hand? To make such a claim however is to commit to the position that it is only severe consequences of failure that can act as a source of motivation for

persons to undertake competitive activity in response to the price signal. But once we emphasize that first, undertaking contributive activity (at least of a certain sort) is in the interests of persons generally, and second, that price signals in a competitive market are (in some circumstances) the most effective means to meet the needs of others (especially once the fact of reasonable pluralism is accepted), then we can see why such an assumption is incorrect. It is possible for persons to take the social effects of persons acting in competition with one another against a market's price signal, as their very *source* of motivation to engage in that competition in the first place.¹⁶² There is a significant difference between prices being used to direct producers and consumers where to go and what to do (a tool of coordination) and using prices to induce behaviour by making persons an offer they cannot refuse (an incentive). As John E. Roemer nicely puts it: “there would be no incentive problem in this society [where persons are motivated to undertake contributive activity for its own sake] that the market would have to address; there still would be, however, a massive coordination problem. Where should I work, what should I train for, what needs of others should I seek to satisfy? Prices could still serve their coordination function, although material incentives would be unnecessary” (Roemer 2012, pp. 288-289, but see pp. 286ff.; see also Zwolinski 2022, pp. 209).

We have already seen (in §4.4.3) that this was something like the position Joseph Carens (1981) argued was possible, where persons would be motivated to maximize their pre-tax income

¹⁶² David Miller (2014, pp. 133-134) recognizes this possibility: “couldn’t someone engage in market activity instrumentally whilst fully conscious that she was participating in a practice whose value lay in its overall contribution to social welfare – she may be thinking less about the benefits that might accrue directly to her partners in exchange and more about the advantages that the system confers on a much wider constituency.” See also Rawls 1971, p. 281: “[a] democratic society may choose to rely on prices in view of the advantages of doing so, and then to maintain the background institutions which justice requires.” This is a different position to what Miller earlier argued, that because intending positive consequences is inconsistent with competitive market activity, societies containing markets (including forms of market socialism) can only promote the value of community in nonmarket institutions, such as the state and worker cooperatives. See 1977, pp. 486-489.

not because they wanted to maximize their personal profit, but because they cared about the esteem garnered from social contribution. And a similar kind of position can be found in Jules Coleman's argument that "[i]f what we really want to do is cooperate broadly over persons and time [then] we will do better by setting up institutions that are, broadly speaking, competitive" (1987, p. 90).¹⁶³ In my account, given it is in their interests, persons want to undertake meaningful work where they are able to use their skills and talents to contribute to meeting the needs and or wants of others. And so given competitive market activity in response to the price signal is one of the ways to effectively meet the needs and or wants of others, then persons will want to engage in market competition. Not because contributing to others in such a manner is the only way that they can personally gain, but because contributing to others in this manner is one way that they can contribute to others such that their self-respect can be secured. Market competition then would become an example of what Shai Agmon calls an 'intentional competition,' which is when "the competitors do not (or at least not only) compete just in the pursuit of their self-interests, but they directly intend to achieve and foresee the social goal" (2022, p. 34).

One consequence of this point is that even if the stakes of market competition are lowered, because persons still care deeply about market competition's social effects, they will still take this competition very seriously. This means then that even though market participants are motivated by prosocial attitudes (they care about meeting the needs of others for its own sake), they won't 'take it easy' on others by engaging in uncompetitive behaviour (like giving their products away for free, and so on), but will be trying their hardest to win, where winning is

¹⁶³ Coleman's view is less demanding than mine in that the desire for cooperation relates only to the stability this generates, not to any shared political end based on carrying out contributive activity.

understood not in relation to how one personally fares but to how well one responds to price signals. These price signals still operate, just like in the high stakes competitive market, as a behavioural ‘control,’ making some options more attractive than others, and thereby retaining the socially beneficial outcomes of the invisible hand affiliated with traditional market competition. But by intentionally employing these behavioural mechanisms in order to bring about a socially beneficial result, the invisible hand, while still being decentralized, becomes more visible (see Brennan and Pettit 1993, pp. 192-205).¹⁶⁴ If this was not the case then the market would be no real competition at all, and its public benefits would never materialize.

While the analogy would undoubtedly break if pushed too far, this point about low stakes market competition still being a serious competition makes it similar to competitive games.¹⁶⁵ Take the fact that in games, there is often the shared desire amongst participants for there to be a ‘good play of the game.’ I take this idea from Rawls, who mentions several necessary features to bring this about: the game must be played fairly according to the rules, the sides must be evenly matched, and the players must sense they are playing well (1971, pp. 525-526). But to this I think we can add that the competition within the game is taken seriously, whereby each participant is trying their hardest, within the rules defining the game, to win (a game of poker is

¹⁶⁴ To elaborate, Brennan and Pettit argue that the social order of the invisible hand is defined by utilizing behavioural controls that are decentralized but only contingently unintentional. By this they mean market actors could, at least theoretically, employ those same behavioural controls intentionally to achieve the same social outcomes. As they put it: “people produce an overall Pareto-improvement by rewarding one another’s bargaining activities through entering into such bargains. This mutual rewarding and reinforcement is a decentralized form of sanctioning. And it is also a contingently non-intentional sanctioning exercise. The parties do not reward one another in order to produce the Pareto improvement, only in order to better their own individual fortunes. And this is a contingent fact about them, for, however unlikely, *it is abstractly possible that they might have rewarded one another out of a desire for such an overall improvement.*” (pp. 200-201. My emphasis). The account here of the motivations of market actors can be seen as exploring this possibility.

¹⁶⁵ Two reasons why the analogy is not perfect is that first, the value of competitive relations in certain games can be seen as intrinsic (e.g., see Hurka 2006), whereas in markets the value of competitive relations is only instrumental to the effective and nonwasteful allocation of resources. See Miller 1999, p. 27; Suttle 2022, pp. 195-196. And second, following the influential argument of Bernard Suits, games have an inherently inefficient element about them: “playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (1978, p. 41).

diminished if participants don't exploit good hands when they get them, a game of basketball is diminished if the opposing team is allowed to score just to keep up) (see Hurka 2015, pp. 319-321; Nguyen 2019, especially pp. 437, 441-442; Suttle 2022, pp. 203-204). While then "[a] good play of the game is ... a collective achievement requiring the cooperation of all" (Rawls 1971, p. 526), part of this cooperation requires persons to act competitively. Indeed, from an outside perspective, and other things being equal, a very high stakes game and a friendly but serious game are likely to end up looking identical. This despite the participants in each game having very different attitudes behind their motivation to take the competition seriously (in the low stakes game of poker it is out of a desire for there to be a good play of the game, in the high stakes game it is to avoid the lifetime of debt if one loses).

Applied back to our case, persons' shared desire to take market competition seriously derives from their shared desire to achieve the socially beneficial outcomes affiliated with the competition. Such outcomes can only occur when participants try their hardest according to the rules that are laid out (i.e., by responding to price signals in a competitive manner).¹⁶⁶ And just like in the poker example, this low stakes but serious market competition will likely end up looking, from the outside, identical to market competition when the stakes are high. Each participant will be employing the same kind of 'strategy' and making the same kind of 'moves.' It is this intentional buying in to the competitive spirit which is what then allows the socially beneficial outcomes of market activity to be retained. But, and this is what is key, the attitudes motivating the activity and the social relations between the participants would be very different.

¹⁶⁶ One aim of this analogy with competitive games is to respond to Nicholas Vrousalis' (2012, pp. 158-160) argument that something like Carensian socialism (where persons voluntarily submit themselves to the market for the social benefits that result) results in a kind of "schizophrenia," where capitalists and workers only join hands in the afternoon after being at each others' throats in the morning. Something similar is argued by Ollman 1998, pp. 104-105.

In the low stakes market the competitive activity is not motivated by fear and greed, but by the common desire to meet the needs of others. As a result then, we can say that the attitudes motivating the competitive behaviour of market participants can be consistent with the prosocial attitudes the account of meaningful work requires.¹⁶⁷

That then completes my replies to what I take to be the two most plausible reasons for thinking markets are inconsistent with the promotion of meaningful work. While work within the markets of today might disconnect persons from the wider social effects of their labour, and high stakes competition might foster self-interested attitudes inimical to work being meaningful, neither of these effects are inherent to markets.

Two points by way of conclusion. First, because market actors themselves are deciding to engage in market competition partly because of the positive social benefits that result, the account avoids being charged with the objection that it is exploitative towards those who engage in it. If market competition was seen as valuable *only* from the perspective of society at large then this would, at least according to Jonathan Wolff, be exploitative “not as a situation where the winners [of the competition] exploit the losers, but as a situation in which both winners and losers in competition are exploited by those encouraging them to take part in potentially damaging competitive behaviour” (1998, p. 93). To put the point in the language used by Wolff, the way my account encourages competitive markets is not exploitative because they are being

¹⁶⁷ It is important to remind ourselves here that the prosocial attitudes required by the account are less demanding than attitudes constitutive of a ‘thick’ community united behind a single conception of the good. Meaningful work brings persons together into a social union of social unions – but persons are civic friends not close friends. As such, even if markets are incompatible with the thick community in things like a camping trip (Vrousalis 2012; Arnold 2020), this is no knock against my account because that sort of community is not necessary for persons’ work to be meaningful. Whether such community is constitutive of social justice, and consistent with political liberalism’s political justification requirement, is something I unfortunately have to leave aside.

valued not only for their side effects but because they “enhance an activity already thought valuable in itself” (1998, p. 90).¹⁶⁸

Second, we cannot forget that markets are merely one of the ways that persons are able to undertake person-engaging contribution. In instances of market failure (the biggest example probably being the provision of public goods), market competition will not be the most effective means through which persons are able to contribute to the needs of others. And so while there will still be winners and losers in the competition to be able to undertake *market-facing* forms of meaningful work (this is unavoidable due to the very nature of competition itself), those who lose out in the market will not lose out on *all opportunity* to undertake meaningful work, given the fair provision of the opportunity for meaningful work requires non-market options, like, for example, opportunities through a state job program or through a basic income.¹⁶⁹

Furthermore, nothing I have said denies that winning and losing in market competition might be affiliated with high and low self-esteem, respectively. After all, individuals who do very well in market competition are likely going to be proud of whatever features or activities bring this about – while those who do poorly, not so much (just like individuals who do very well in low stakes games are also proud of whatever features or activities bring this about). But as we saw in §4.2.1, self-esteem, by not being tied to a person’s sense of worth as a person, is not an attitude that is important enough to take as a matter of justice. What matters for a person’s

¹⁶⁸ This point of course only holds when the nature of production in markets is such that it can be regarded as in the interests of persons generally. In the framework of the argument of this thesis, if market opportunities are not opportunities for meaningful work, then the point about consumers exploiting producers would stand.

¹⁶⁹ For an interesting account that ties the provision of employment opportunities to the ‘stakes fairness’ of market competition, and how market competition for jobs cannot have a winner-takes-all prize structure, see Brown 2015, pp. 178-179. See also Hussain’s discussion of the circumstances in which ‘rivalry-defining arrangements’ (like a high stakes labour market), might be morally defective, especially when they govern the distribution of primary social goods: 2020, pp. 93-94, 99-100, 102ff.

standards self-respect is only that they meet the binary standard of contributing to meeting the needs of others. How well a person does compared to others is not affiliated with their standards self-respect, and so even if their self-esteem is negatively affected by the fact they were unable to ‘win’ in the game of market competition, other opportunities to contribute to others in a person-engaging way are available. And these other opportunities are not second-best alternatives, but mechanisms which enable persons to meet those needs that cannot be met through the mechanisms of market competition. So, while the stakes of market competition are not reduced to nothing (persons are not indifferent to protecting their self-esteem), the stakes no longer involve their sense of self-worth.

5.5 – Ownership and Control of Productive Assets

I will now turn to the question of whether the promotion of meaningful requires either private or public ownership in the means of production,¹⁷⁰ or at least whether it makes one form of ownership and control preferable to the other. Because the question of private versus public ownership of the means of production provides probably the most common way to differentiate capitalist and socialist economic systems (capitalism having private ownership rights with socialism having public and shared ownership rights, e.g., Clark and Gintis 1978, pp. 314-315; Gilabert and O’Neill 2019; Edmundson 2020, p. 435; Arnold 2022), then another way of putting the aim of this section is to examine whether the justice-relevance of meaningful work gives us a reason to prefer either an order of capitalism or socialism.

¹⁷⁰ I am following William A. Edmundson (2020) in regarding the means of production as those aspects of productive activity that are “impossible to be severally owned” (p. 430). Several ownership is when an item can be exclusively used and enjoyed by persons individually. Hence, it is their possibility to be severally owned which is what puts a miner’s shovel, a tailor’s scissors, a developer’s computer, and so on, outside the means of production. Contrast this to things like highways, the currency, parks, telecommunication systems, railways, utilities, and Google. While it is possible to imagine persons having a share in the revenue generated by these things, or having a say in their management and direction, it is not possible for them to be divided into separate and exclusive parcels. A stretch of railway where individual persons each own and have exclusive control of different portions of it, is no railway system (p. 423). See also Edmundson 2017, p. 134.

Just like in the previous sections of this chapter, the aim here is not to provide an all things considered argument that one kind of economic system is what social justice requires. That undertaking would require far more considerations than just those relating to meaningful work, but would also require consideration of a whole host of additional features affiliated with different forms of ownership.¹⁷¹ Rather, the aim is merely to consider whether the promotion of meaningful work is best undertaken within one system over another. If it is, then given meaningful work's importance to social justice out of its connection to self-respect, this would then give us good (but not infeasible) reasons to prefer such a system.

In this section I argue that widely promoting meaningful work on a stable and secure basis is only possible in either a property-owning democracy or a system of market socialism. The basic difference between these two systems is that while both (at least according to Rawls) are compatible with justice,¹⁷² a property-owning democracy has private (but widespread) ownership of the means of production while market socialism has public or social ownership.¹⁷³ As such, concerns with meaningful work can't by themselves advance us beyond Rawls'

¹⁷¹ Examples might be how different economic systems rate against the normative standard of non-domination (Arnold 2017; Thomas 2017; Vrousalis 2019; Wilesmith 2021; Raekstad 2022), or their ability to ensure major decisions regarding economic investment are democratically accountable (Malleon 2014b; Arnold 2022, p. 279), plus many others.

¹⁷² Given their ability to secure the basic liberties including the fair value of the political liberties, fair equality of opportunity, and a system of income distribution that at least resembles the reciprocity behind the difference principle. See Rawls 2001, p. 138; 1971, p. 280. This is why Rawls does not take rights regarding ownership and control of productive assets and economic enterprises as basic, and hence not something to be determined by the principles of justice, but only instead at the legislative stage. See 2001, pp. 114-115.

¹⁷³ The term 'property-owning democracy' comes from the economist James E. Meade (1964). For Rawls' articulation of a property-owning democracy, see 2001, pp. 138-140, 148-152, 158-162, 176-179; 1971, pp. 274-284. For other summaries, see O'Neill and Williamson 2012, pp. 4-8; Malleon 2014b, pp. 230-231; Edmundson 2017, pp. 42-51. For the history of the idea see Jackson 2012. For good summaries of the basic institutional form of market socialism, see Miller 1977, pp. 475-476; Schweickart 2011, pp. 58ff.

indifference between private and social ownership of productive assets, and hence his indifference between capitalism (at least in the strict technical sense) and socialism.

However, while I do not think they are decisive, I also argue there are two reasons to think market socialism might possibly be better suited to promote meaningful work. First, regarding control of the means of production, market socialism's institutional provision of workplace democracy makes it more naturally suited than a property-owning democracy to overcome those parts of the vertical division of labour that occlude persons being involved in the contributive aspect of the work process. Second, regarding ownership of the means of production, the system of social ownership within market socialism makes it correspond better than any system of private ownership to the reciprocal relations and economic interdependencies that I have been arguing ground the normative importance of meaningful work.

Why is the secure provision of meaningful work only compatible with either a property-owning democracy or market socialism? The first point to make here is that considering how meaningful work might be promoted in systems that are otherwise plainly inconsistent with requirements of social justice would be a moot point, and so we can rule out some other economic structures from the get-go. For example, I am not here going to consider whether meaningful work could be promoted in either a system of state socialism or, at the completely opposite end of the political spectrum, laissez-faire capitalism. This is because such systems have significant shortcomings – e.g., state socialism's violation of personal freedoms, and laissez-faire capitalism's complete indifference to persons' basic needs being met – that no

concern with meaningful work could ever overcome. The promotion of meaningful work is only one aspect of justice, and other important considerations must always be kept in view.

What then about those economic systems other than either a property-owning democracy or market socialism but which appear (at least initially) less at odds with the basic requirements of justice? Examples that come to mind include systems of welfare-state capitalism that have a generous social safety net, or systems of socialism that rely on some kind of democratically derived economic plan. Here it is considerations of meaningful work by themselves that exclude such systems. Regarding democratically planned socialism first, what precludes its inclusion is its rejection of markets. As I argued in §5.4, the effective promotion of meaningful work is not only consistent with markets (so long as they take an appropriate form), but likely requires them given their allocative power and how they enable persons to meet the needs and or wants of others in an efficient and non-wasteful manner. The most sophisticated version of democratically planned socialism is probably Michael Albert's (2003) 'Parecon' (for 'participatory economics'), which replaces market mechanisms with a system where after each individual inputs what they want and how hard they are willing to work, some kind of negotiation takes place that brings supply and demand into balance. I don't deny that within such a system work could have the requisite features that make it meaningful. The issue however is how such a system would reduce the actual extent of meaningful work options available, given the effects the eradication of the market would have on the economy as a whole. In such a system persons' ability to undertake activity that meets the needs of others would be reduced.

Turning to welfare-state capitalism, what precludes this system from promoting meaningful work in a stable manner is how its overarching focus is limited to ensuring there is a social minimum or social safety net such that each persons' basic needs are met, and there is no direct concern with questions about the nature of production or the distribution of productive capital.¹⁷⁴ As Rawls puts it in articulating why justice as fairness is incompatible with welfare-state capitalism, the aim of the latter is only “that none should fall below a decent minimum standard of life, one in which their basic needs are met,” and no concern is given to “put[ting] in the hands of citizens generally, and not only of a few, sufficient productive means for them to be fully cooperating members of society on a footing of equality” (2001, p. 140).¹⁷⁵ Resultantly, a system of welfare-state capitalism leaves the nature and availability of work (beyond a relatively nondemanding baseline) up to the whims of the market, and little to no concern is given to setting up structural mechanisms that might affect things such as the quality of work on offer, or the extent to which opportunities for work outside traditional market-facing jobs are available. It is this that discounts welfare-state capitalism from any serious consideration as a system that could bring about the widespread promotion of meaningful work as I have been understanding it – such promotion would be inimical to its overarching aim. That then is why I am limiting discussion to the disjunction between a property-owning democracy and market socialism; these are the only live options.

¹⁷⁴ For defence of the social minimum provided by the welfare-state, see Waldron 1986; King and Waldron 1988. For an argument that institutions of welfare-state capitalism could provide guarantees related to work and involvement in contributive activity that meet the requirements of justice as fairness in particular and democratic equality in general, see von Platz 2020a. Von Platz thinks this includes a right to “socially meaningful work,” which is work that “contributes to the production of truly desirable goods” (2020a, p. 22). Here I am unable to engage in a full discussion of von Platz’s argument, other than noting that, as he also recognizes, socially meaningful work will not necessarily be personally meaningful work, and so the kind of work he argues welfare-state capitalism could provide might still fall short of what I argue makes work meaningful, and hence, fall short as a social basis of self-respect. Answers here will turn on exactly what constitutes the “truly desirable goods” against which socially meaningful work is defined, as von Platz leaves this unspecified. See also note 35 and the accompanying main body text.

¹⁷⁵ But for an argument that ties Rawls and his thought much closer to welfare-state capitalism and the economic conditions of post-war liberalism, see Forrester 2019.

Part of what Rawls finds problematic about contemporary systems of capitalism is that they permit “very large inequalities in the ownership of real property (productive assets and natural resources) so that the control of the economy and much of political life rest in few hands” (2001, p. 138). What a property-owning democracy and market socialism do is ensure, each in their own way, that society is not organized in terms of a division between a capitalist property class and a labouring propertyless class, where the latter is forced to sell their labour power to the former (Rawls 2001, pp. 135-136, 139-140. See also Freeman 2007, pp. 219-220; Thomas 2020, p. 112). But as William A. Edmundson has noted, almost all of Rawls’ discussion of political economy is about a property-owning democracy and how it compares to welfare-state capitalism, and much more attention needs to be put on how a property-owning democracy and market socialism themselves compare (2017, pp. 28-29).¹⁷⁶ I am undertaking this aim by contrasting how these two systems fare when it comes to the promotion of meaningful work, in light of meaningful work’s status as a social basis of self-respect.

5.5.1 – Meaningful Work in a Property-Owning Democracy

The core feature of a property-owning democracy is its emphasis on dispersing the ownership of wealth and assets across society’s members. But Rawls is clear that this not to be understood in terms of redistributing income to those with less at “the end of each period,” but instead in terms of ensuring widespread ownership of productive assets and human capital (such as education and trained skills) “at the beginning of each period” (2001, p. 139). And while it is the later Rawls that places most explicit emphasis on how a property-owning democracy aims at the widespread

¹⁷⁶ As an aside, Edmundson thinks that considerations based on the fair value of the political liberties, as well as the importance of publicity, reciprocity, and stability, taken together require the common ownership of the means of production to be constitutionally guaranteed.

ownership of capital, the same point also occurs in *A Theory of Justice* given Rawls takes “the aim of the branches of government is to establish a democratic regime in which land and capital are widely though not presumably equally held. Society is not so divided that one fairly small sector controls the preponderance of productive resources” (1971, p. 280, but see pp. 274ff.).¹⁷⁷

However, when it comes to how any such widespread dispersal of ownership might actually be brought about, Rawls’ account is rather thin, and it has been up to other writers to theorize the kind of institutions that might achieve it. Thad Williamson for instance argues that the aim of widespread ownership of productive assets can only be stable in a property-owning democracy if there are rules maintaining broad dispersal of not only cash assets, but also residential holding and stocks (2009, pp. 440-444), while several other writers argue that when it comes to corporate property, what a property-owning democracy would require is an economy in which large firms have their ownership shares divided up amongst society’s members (Schweickart 2012, pp. 205-206; Malleson 2014b, p. 230). The most developed account of such a system is probably John Roemer’s ‘coupon’ model. This system – in which shares in large firms would be continuously allocated to new generations of adults, could only be publicly traded for one another and not sold for cash, and returned to the state upon their holder’s death – would ensure no small sector of society could come to own a majority stake in society’s productive assets and have inordinate economic and political power, as they cannot buy up all the coupons (Roemer 1994, pp. 49-50; 1995, pp. 29ff.).¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ It is also worth noting that in addition to efforts to widely disperse capital, a property-owning democracy also aims to minimize and block the intergenerational transmission of advantages (say through an inheritance tax, see 2001, pp. 160-161), and to insulate politics from the corrupting influence of money (say by having publicly funded political parties and elections, see 2001, pp. 149-150).

¹⁷⁸ It must be said however that Roemer characterizes his model as a form of socialism and not as an articulation of a property-owning democracy. This is partly explained by semantic differences in differentiating capitalist and socialist systems, see Roemer 1994, p. 20.

So far so good, but how might a property-owning democracy effectively promote and sustain widespread opportunities for meaningful work? What seems particularly crucial here is not just how it requires institutional mechanisms, like the ones outlined above, aiming to bring about the widespread ownership of physical capital (although this is also important as it would increase work quality by massively improving the bargaining position of workers), but also how it requires the widespread ownership of *human capital* – in the specific sense of those human capacities, skills, and talents that are crucial in the performance of activities that meet the needs and or wants of others.

Indeed, if a property-owning democracy's requirement of the widespread ownership of human capital is understood specifically in terms of the kind of social contribution I have been arguing underpins the idea of society as a system of social cooperation (where persons contribute through the deployment of their skills and talents), then this could justify institutions that not only aim to bring about the development of persons' skills and talents, but which also aim to ensure they can be deployed in contributive ways. In other words, there seems to be a strong rationale here to ensure person-engaging work opportunities – and so work opportunities that at least satisfy the complexity condition of meaningful work – are widely available. This is because the emphasis is on the widespread ownership of human *capital*, and so it is directly tied to a concern with how these skills and talents can be put to use in enabling others to carry out their own plan of life.

One of the few institutions Rawls does explicitly argue a property-owning democracy requires is “fair equality of opportunity in education and training of various kinds” (2001, p. 176), and this would surely form part of any institutional scheme aiming to promote person-engaging work within a property-owning democracy, given its implementation could ensure persons have the necessary set of skills and talents to undertake the requisite work. To ensure person-engaging work opportunities outside the market are also available, to this we could add the sorts of policies I argued for in §5.3, such as a scheme where the state acts as an employer of last resort (which elsewhere Rawls takes as required, see 2005, p. lvii),¹⁷⁹ or perhaps a basic income.

One possible interpretation of why Rawls says little in terms of specific economic policies and institutions within a property-owning democracy relates to his concern that a just society must be an instance of pure procedural justice.¹⁸⁰ As such, the thought could go, a property-owning democracy ought to only be moderately interventionist in the market, where any concern it might have with quality of work is cashed out not through state regulation but only through the way its insistence on widespread ownership gives workers more power over their work terms by preventing capitalists from exploiting a reserve labour army. Be that as it may I see no reasons why, even accepting the point about the importance of procedural justice, further mechanisms to encourage the availability of person-engaging work could not also be implemented if required.¹⁸¹ For example, the policies outlined in §5.3 which aimed to overcome the detailed horizontal division of labour, such as job quality clauses or audits, and the sharing of

¹⁷⁹ Schweickart also thinks both a job guarantee and the state acting as employer of last resort are compatible with a property-owning democracy, see 2012, p. 210.

¹⁸⁰ See note 132 and also Rawls 2001, pp. 54-55.

¹⁸¹ Relatedly, see the discussion of a moderate versus robust interventionist property-owning democracy in Malleson 2014b, p. 244, and a ‘POD+’ in Schweickart 2012, pp. 215ff.

socially necessary drudgery, would not be aiming to govern this or that particular transaction between identifiable persons, but instead could part of the institutional structure and rules within which markets and their mechanisms are then left to operate.

With this before us then, it does not seem entirely unwarranted for Rawls to claim that in a property-owning democracy “the narrowing and demeaning features of the [detailed horizontal division of labour] should be largely overcome” (2001, p. 177).¹⁸² What the institutions of a property-owning democracy aim to bring about is a society in which there is no class of unskilled workers with nothing to sell but their labour power, but instead only persons who, as a result of the widespread ownership of not only physical productive assets but also human productive assets, can participate as equals in the economic system where it is their developed skills and talents that are required.¹⁸³ In other words, it is plausible to characterize a property-owning democracy as aiming to bring about a society where person-engaging work, and so work that meets the complexity condition of meaningful work, is widely available. This means that especially when it comes to work that occurs *outside* large and complex firms, a property-owning democracy will provide an institutional context in which the provision of meaningful work is stable and secure.

However, a property-owning democracy’s institutions fare less well in relation to overcoming, or at least blurring, the vertical division of labour. And this is relevant to its ability to promote meaningful work, given as we have seen (in §2.4.1), there is a particular instance of

¹⁸²Interestingly Rawls here refers to §79 in *A Theory of Justice*, which is the section in which he mentions the role of meaningful work in a social union of social unions.

¹⁸³ As we have seen, the ability to undertake such an activity is a crucial support to persons’ self-respect. For similar comments on how the widespread dispersal of ownership in a property-owning democracy can support persons’ self-respect, but with an emphasis on overcoming power inequalities, see O’Neill 2009, pp. 384-385.

work – work that occurs in firms that are large and complex – where the vertical division of labour can preclude it being meaningful. This is when workers are not democratically involved in the externally oriented and strategic decisions of the enterprise. Indeed, on this point Rawls is well aware that a property-owning democracy seems to have no direct implications for the managerial structures of workplaces, as he states that the fact his account of a property-owning democracy has not considered the importance of workplace democracy to be “a major difficulty” (2001, p. 178). And so while he does not rule out the consistency of workplace democracy within a property-owning democracy, he merely gestures that the relevant consideration will be whether worker-managed firms and any policies to help bring them about (such as special subsidies) could be justified in terms of a political conception of justice (2001, p. 178).

Of course, the argument of this thesis implies the promotion of workplace democracy in large firms could be justified on political grounds insofar as it was a means to promote meaningful work, itself grounded in a nonperfectionist concern with the social bases of persons’ self-respect. In addition to the sorts of policies outlined in §5.3 – such as legislating worker codetermination within firms of a certain size, or negative points schemes that track democratic involvement in large firms – one way this concern with democratization could be brought about in a property-owning democracy would be to focus on ‘unbundling’ the ownership and control rights affiliated with productive assets (see O’Neill 2008, p. 40 and the references there). If this was institutionalized it would mean, at least in principle, that even if workers within large firms are not technically the owners of its physical capital,¹⁸⁴ control over its use could still ultimately

¹⁸⁴ Not owners qua workers. They might be, alongside everyone else, owners qua shareholders if a property-owning democracy institutionalized something like Roemer’s coupon model.

lie in their hands. If this was the case, workers within large firms would have the opportunity to be involved in the managerial and strategic decisions related to their work being meaningful.¹⁸⁵

But while this institutionalization of democratic involvement is possible within a property-owning democracy, it must be said that it coheres rather awkwardly with its overarching aim of widespread, but still private, ownership of productive assets.¹⁸⁶ This is because such an aim implies a kind of separability or exclusivity in ownership and control, but such separability does not seem applicable when it comes to considerations about the indivisible capital that makes up large firms and corporations. For workers to have an effective say in how the capital of their firm is put to use, it cannot just be separated into discrete parcels over which each individual can then be the master. What democratic involvement implies is individual members of the firm deciding collectively about capital use.

My point here is an instance of larger criticism that has been made against property-owning democracy, which is that its insistence on widespread but private ownership of productive assets results in it having something of a romanticized ideal of economic society being constituted solely by self-employed independent market actors. As Thad Williamson puts it, “[t]he very phrase ‘property-owning democracy’ invites an attractive mental image of a society of small-holding entrepreneurs, in which each individual or household either personally operates an independent enterprise, holds a substantial stake in such an enterprise, or has a

¹⁸⁵ It is important to keep in mind here the difference between arguments in support of overcoming the vertical division of labour within large firms, which is what my account of meaningful work requires, and arguments in support of increasing the prevalence of worker cooperatives in a property-owning democracy regardless of their size. For an example of the latter, see Malleson 2014b, p. 239.

¹⁸⁶ I think this is reflected by those arguments that when it comes to workplace hierarchy, the principles supporting a property-owning democracy require only checks on managerial power that guarantee workers protection from basic interference in the workplace. See Hsieh 2005.

reasonable hope of some day coming to own such an enterprise” (2009, pp. 444-445). Of course to some degree, and the reason Williamson calls such an ideal attractive, this emphasis on ensuring, through the right regulatory conditions, that independent market actors are equally-situated in relation to one another is one important way to protect individuals’ freedom from domination in economic relations (e.g., see Pettit 2006; Lovett 2009; Taylor 2013; 2017. But cf. Klein 2017).

But, as a model of economic society as a whole this ideal is drastically inadequate. This is because it ends up being blind to questions of economic interdependence and reciprocity, as well as to difficulties surrounding the organization and management of production in firms (given the internal relations within firms are a suspension of markets, and their existence implies the indivisibility of capital to some degree).¹⁸⁷ And the existence of such larger business units cannot be regarded as just some unfortunate occurrence that ought to be removed, given their prevalence is explained by the advantages of large-scale production – the efficiency gains that result from the economies of scale, the internal coordination and technological processes available to large corporations, and so on (Williamson 2009, p. 445; Deranty 2012, pp. 155-156; Anderson 2015, pp. 60-61; 2017, pp. 64-65; Singer 2018, pp. 52-72). This means that the provision of meaningful work in society is impossible unless it is available in the firm. And so, this difficulty, or at least

¹⁸⁷ For example, Stuart White (2012) argues relations of reciprocity and interdependence will be difficult to maintain in a property-owning democracy as it will tend towards and foster individualistic attitudes of self-sufficiency in production, while David Schweickart (2012, p. 205) thinks Rawls’ articulation of a property-owning democracy is best interpreted as a backwards-looking idealization of society constituted by the decentralization of small businesses and independent market actors. One is reminded here of Elizabeth Anderson’s comments about how characterizing the free market as bringing about and protecting individuals’ independence is misplaced in the contemporary institutional reality of collective association within firms. See Anderson 2017, pp. 57ff. One is also reminded of Marx’s comments that a focus on maintaining ‘petty industry’ is “compatible only with a system of production, and a society, moving with narrow and more or less primitive bounds.” See Marx 2000d, p. 524. For an interesting account of how nineteenth century republicans argued economic independence requires not a return to artisan and independent proprietorship, but worker cooperatives, see Gourevitch 2013

awkwardness, between the underlying logic of democratic involvement in large firms and a property-owning democracy's aim of widespread but private ownership, is a significant concern when it comes to the ability we might think a property-owning democracy will have to promote meaningful work in a widespread and stable manner.

5.5.2 – Meaningful Work in Market Socialism

How then might market socialism go as an economic system in providing the widespread and secure provision of meaningful work? In contrast to a property-owning democracy's aim to bring about widespread but private ownership of productive assets, in market socialism, at least in Rawls' formulation, "economic power is dispersed among firms, as when, for example, a firm's direction and management is elected by, if not directly in the hands of, its own workforce" (2001, p. 138). This gets at the defining feature of market socialism: the means of production are socially owned (by the state) but leased out to groups of workers in the form of worker cooperatives.

It will be helpful to very briefly outline the other basic features of a system of market socialism. Worker cooperatives are self-managed, where it is mutual agreement among workers through democratic involvement that decides things such as the nature and volume of production and the how the cooperative's profit will be split amongst the workers. While cooperatives operate within a competitive market economy for goods and services (and so an efficient connection between production and demand can be maintained), the hiring of wage labour is not permitted. Furthermore capital investment flows are not private, but instead socially controlled though democratically accountable public investment banks, the revenues of which are provided

by a capital assets tax paid by cooperatives as a condition of being leased their productive assets. This capital assets tax may also go towards funding additional services, such as public goods, the state acting as an employer of last resort, welfare provisions, and so on (the exact details as to what would be funded differs between market socialists).¹⁸⁸

Obviously, each of these aspects of market socialism could be unpacked in a whole multitude of ways, but it lies well outside the scope of this thesis to do that here. Our focus is only on how a system with these bare features might fare in promoting work with the features constitutive of meaningful work – sufficient complexity to be person-engaging for the worker, and democratic involvement when it occurs in firms that are large and complex.

Starting first with work that has democratic involvement, market socialism provides a deeply secure basis for this given the system is itself defined in terms of its institutional guarantee of self-managed worker cooperatives. Within the large firms in a system of market socialism, workers will be involved – either directly or through management directly accountable to them – in all the sorts of externally oriented and strategic decisions that I have argued are relevant to work being meaningful. Market socialism will enable workers in large firms to be familiar with details surrounding things such as why one product or service is produced over another, which sectors of society benefit most from their activity, and how their activity enables others to carry out their plan of life. Such involvement is necessary for their work to be meaningful because it is this that ensures the social contribution they make through their work is palpable for them (§2.4.1). And while similar forms of democratic involvement are certainly

¹⁸⁸ This very broad outline of a market socialist system is taken from Miller 1977, pp. 475-476; Schweickart 2011, pp. 58ff.; Gilabert and O’Neill 2019.

possible within a property-owning democracy, the way such democratization folds directly out of the defining feature of market socialism means we might think it is better placed as an economic system in ensuring the problematic (from the perspective of meaningful work) instances of the vertical division of labour can be overcome.

But before we move onto the detailed horizontal division of labour, an important point to remember here is that a concern with promoting meaningful work only provides an argument supporting the institutionalization of democratic involvement in workplace associations that are large and complex.¹⁸⁹ And so a system of market socialism, at least when we limit our focus to the promotion of meaningful work, would really be a system in which only society's large and complex work associations are worker cooperatives. Private ownership over the capital within smaller firms (and hence the hiring of wage labour to work such capital), would be permissible. This would technically make the system a mixed-property regime (Krouse and McPherson 1986).

Is this a problem? No, for two reasons. First, this actually makes the account of market socialism explored here align with most existing defences of socialism's emphases that it is only the major means of production or 'commanding heights' of the economy that need to be publicly owned and leased out to worker cooperatives (Schweickart 2011, pp. 82-83; 2012, pp. 206-207; Gilabert and O'Neill 2019, §4.2; Arnold 2022, p. 278).¹⁹⁰ No convincing account of socialism

¹⁸⁹ For a different argument that large firms are special from the standpoint of justice, based on the political and economic power that is accorded to large firms, see Wilesmith 2021.

¹⁹⁰ It also aligns with William A. Edmundson's strategy of defining the means of production as those productive assets not able to be severally owned. See note 170. I do recognize however that there might not be a completely perfect overlap between firms that are large and complex and those that control the major means of production or are positioned at the commanding heights of the economy.

requires things like mum-and-pop shops, or small start-ups, to be socially owned and worker-controlled. When market socialism is justified at least in part out of its ability to promote meaningful work, there is at least a clear rationale for this stipulation. Second, as Richard Krouse and Michael McPherson (1986, pp. 127-131) argue, one benefit of a mixed-property regime is that it ensures individuals, with their different preferences, will not be required to work in only one organizational arrangement but will instead have the freedom to choose between working in a cooperative or a privately owned firm. Especially when we keep in mind that meaningful work can be available in privately owned firms that are small, maintaining free choice of occupation in this regard is surely what any liberal theory will ultimately require.

Turning now to the ability of a system of market socialism to ensure the widespread availability of work that is person-engaging. An initial thought might be that the institutions of market socialism will not be able to securely provide such work given its emphasis on worker-controlled cooperatives by itself says little (or really nothing) about the quality of work within those cooperatives. After all, we are talking here of a *market* socialism system, so worker cooperatives are still going to be profit-oriented (Arneson 1993, p. 281), and profit-oriented firms face the same structural pressures regardless of whether their ownership structure is private or public (Ollman 1998, pp. 99-100; Heath 2022, p. 68). As such, we might think worker cooperatives in market socialism will inevitably face the same downward pressure on quality of work in the name of efficiency that currently obtains in capitalist firms, and this pressure might preclude the work in socialist firms being person-engaging.

Two points in response. One, it is not quite accurate to say worker cooperatives have the same profit motive as capitalist firms. This is because, first of all, the emphasis in socialist firms would be on profit per worker instead of total overall profit (Miller 1977, p. 476; Schweickart 2011, pp. 90-92). And this might make a difference when it comes to decisions affecting the quality of work available. To give just one example of how the incentives work differently, in a worker cooperative there would not necessarily be any incentive to bring about an organizational structure that was based on exploiting the detailed division of labour among an expanded workforce, given the return to each worker might be less (even if such a structure would be more profitable for the firm overall). For the capitalist firm this decision is a no-brainer. Additionally, because in worker cooperatives the decisions about organizational structure will be left up to those doing the work, their interest in doing certain kinds of work and not doing others will be better reflected in organizational decisions. This is not possible in capitalist firms, given the interests of workers is not something managers aiming to maximize shareholder returns give weight to. (Other than in the rare case when the former supports the latter. For example, concerns with quality of work only because this positively affects the retention rate). As David Schweickart argues, if workers in cooperatives “can reorganize their work processes so as to make them more satisfying, more skill enhancing, more in accord with ‘the Aristotelian principle,’ they may well choose to sacrifice a bit of ‘efficiency,’ and hence income, to do so” (2012, p. 210). Indeed, if we recall the horrible effects of mundane and monotonous drudgery on those who do it (see §2.2.1), we might think it very unlikely a worker cooperative would ever choose to undertake it.

But the second point in reply here is to be clear that there is nothing about market socialism that requires it to embrace or reify an unregulated market and all its effects – a system of market socialism can have a regulatory framework, nonmarket service provision, and so on. Applied to what is our concern here, a system of market socialism could certainly institutionalize a regulatory framework, motivated by the justice-relevance of meaningful work, that had the aim of promoting person-engaging work and ensuring monotonous drudgery is avoided. To do this it could employ some of the same levers we have already mentioned in both §5.3 and in the discussion of a property-owning democracy, such as job quality clauses and mechanisms to share socially necessary drudgery. In the context of market socialism, these requirements could be seen as part of the conditions (in addition to the capital assets tax) attached to the act of worker cooperatives leasing productive capital from the state.

Indeed, these sorts of mechanisms seem suitably comparable to how in David Schweickart's account of market socialism (which is probably the most developed and nuanced), there are a whole range of ways market competition is regulated and contained out of a concern with social justice. For instance, out of a concern that each region in a state get its 'fair share' of public investment and worker cooperatives are not engaged in a competitive race to the bottom, Schweickart argues each subregion of society ought to get the same per capita share of investment funds, even if this is not maximally efficient for society overall (2011, pp. 63-67). Additionally, and especially pertinent to the discussion here, Schweickart argues that part of the revenue from the capital assets tax ought to go towards ensuring the government can act as an employer of last resort through the provision of public goods and other services not traditionally provided by market mechanisms. What such a system does is "guarantee a meaningful job to

anyone able and willing to work,” which he takes as important through the way it supports persons’ self-respect as valued contributing members of society (2011, p. 81). One can easily see how the argument connecting meaningful work to self-respect across Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 can step in here and play the same sort of role, justifying a range of institutions and policies aiming to increase the availability of person-engaging work both inside and outside the socialist market. There is nothing foreign about these kind of policies to a system of market socialism.

That concludes my discussion of how a property-owning democracy and market socialism compare in their ability to provide an economic context in which meaningful work might be securely promoted. We have seen that when it comes to promoting work that is sufficiently complex to be person-engaging, both a property-owning democracy and a system of market socialism could do well. The former because its concern with widespread but private ownership of productive assets encapsulates a concern with the distribution of human capital (which includes developed skills and talents), the latter because its institutionalization of self-managed worker cooperatives ensures the organization of work reflects the interests of those undertaking it. When it comes to promoting democratic involvement in large firms, while this is possible within a property-owning democracy any such emphasis coheres rather awkwardly with its aims, given its focus on private ownership struggles to capture how workplace democracy in large firms is an instance of collective decision-making. Market socialism has no such issues as worker-controlled firms are its fundamental institution. As I said at the outset of this chapter, this difference between the two systems in relation to the vertical division of labour might give one reason to regard market socialism as the preferred system to promote meaningful work.

I also said that there was a second reason market socialism might be preferred, which I will briefly outline now. The idea is that market socialism's treatment of the major productive assets in society as social rather than private property, does a better job expressing the fundamental place of social interdependencies and mutual reciprocity within the ideal of society as a system of social cooperation. Here I am following some comments William A. Edmundson makes as part of his argument that concerns about the stability of justice as fairness require social ownership of the means of production to be constitutionally protected. As Edmundson puts it, when "the major means of production belong to everyone, liberal socialism [what I have been calling market socialism] educates citizens to regard themselves as reciprocally related, productive co-venturers" (2017, p. 155). This clearly has the ring of those Millian style arguments about democratic workplaces being schools in democracy (Pateman 1970; O'Neill 2008, pp. 42-48; Hussain 2012, p. 192). But my point here is not directly about the importance of cultivating democratic virtues in citizens, but rather how because persons' self-respect is so closely tied to undertaking socially contributive activities that express the "feature of human sociability that we are by ourselves but parts of what we might be," there would be something of a dissonance if, then when it came to the indivisible productive capital in society, its private ownership and control failed to correspond to the same ideal. Indeed, as soon as we ask whether private or public ownership is a better representation of society, continues Edmundson, "[t]o pose the question is almost to answer it. To show everyone that their society is indeed a cooperative scheme for mutual benefit, it makes sense to establish everyone an owner of the essential means of producing those benefits" (2017, p. 159).

I admit however that this argument is likely contentious. For example, if a private property system distributed ownership shares in those indivisible productive assets (as we saw was possible with a property-owning democracy that implemented Roemer's coupon model), couldn't this express the importance of social interdependencies too? Perhaps. This is why I have not claimed the foregoing is a decisive reason to favour market socialism over a property-owning democracy. Additionally, I recognize the point here is not an argument in support of market socialism based on its ability to promote meaningful work. It is instead an argument for market socialism that, just like my argument about the justice-relevance of meaningful work, takes as its starting point the political value of social relations of interdependence and mutual reciprocity. It is then at least a point that is in the same spirit as what I have been arguing throughout this thesis. The central place work and production have in these social relations is going to have multiple implications for theories of justice. The importance of meaningful work is just one of them.

A final point. For the sake of exploration I have been treating a property-owning democracy and market socialism as discrete systems. But as already seen in the discussion about a mixed-property regime, to phrase the choice as an exclusive disjunction is perhaps not necessary. Indeed here I think we can borrow a point made by Martin O'Neill: these models of economic systems are ideal types best understood as sets of policies rather than general regime types, and so hybrid versions that include aspects of various systems are certainly possible (O'Neill 2009, pp. 389-391). And so perhaps the takeaway from this section ought to be that because a property-owning democracy and market socialism both have features pertinent to the promotion of work that is person-engaging and which involves the worker in its contributive

aspects, an economic system that best supports the widespread promotion of meaningful work may well be a hybrid system combining elements of both. After all, the creator of the term ‘property-owning democracy’ James E. Meade would not have accepted a disjunction between it and market socialism, given he concludes that at least in relation to the metrics he regards as important, what is needed are “measures to equalize the distribution of the ownership of private property *and* to increase the net amount of property which was in social ownership” (1964, p. 75. My emphasis. See also Jackson 2012, p. 46; White 2012, note 8).

What the aims of a property-owning democracy teach us is that the widespread ownership of the skills and talents that constitute human capital is an invaluable resource in grounding a concern with ensuring work opportunities are person-engaging. What the aims of market socialism teach us is that given the prevalence of large firms in systems of modern production, individual involvement in work’s contributive aspect is not automatically guaranteed. Both lessons are crucial in thinking through how the widespread promotion of meaningful work might be brought about. And it is not exactly as if the two systems are antithetical to one another, given they both promise societies no longer divided into a propertied capitalist class and a propertyless working class. When we look out from our window in the capitalism of today these two systems on the horizon don’t look so different from one another.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

6.1 – A Recap of the Argument

In this thesis I have argued that meaningful work is in the interests of persons generally because it is a social basis of self-respect. This makes concerns about the provision and availability of meaningful work relevant to a liberal conception of justice that takes nonperfectionism seriously. While it is generally assumed that due to its justificatory constraints political liberalism can offer no substantive commitments about what justice requires in the world of work, I hope my argument has convinced the reader that this assumption is false. Connecting meaningful work to individuals' self-respect provides a very different basis to its value than is usually offered, where meaningful work is taken as normatively significant in virtue of its role in perfectionist claims about the good life. As interesting as these arguments often are, they can have no legitimate place underpinning the political principles and policies governing a society defined by reasonable pluralism about the good.

I am not here going to outline all the argumentative moves I made to get to the conclusion that meaningful work is a social basis of self-respect, other than noting that the argument hinges on two claims, both related to the social interdependencies between persons. One, work is fundamentally linked like nothing else to social contribution. And two, the activity of social contribution has political value. It is the former that makes social contribution so crucial to an account of meaningful work, and it is the latter that makes meaningful work so crucial to justice.

The argument of my thesis then starts from what really is a very simple fact – we need one another in order to carry out our own plan of life. At one level this feature of persons is so plainly obvious that it appears almost trivial to state it. But what I hope to have shown is that once we do a better job integrating this fact into a political theory, its implications for what justice requires in the world of work are far from trivial. Meaningful work matters not just because given current economic conditions we happen to spend so much time working, but because the social interdependencies to which it corresponds are part of the political relations that make justice relevant in the first place.

6.2 – Four Unanswered Questions

I will finish this thesis by outlining four sets of questions that might have occurred to the reader, but which have gone unanswered on my part. The first two of these relate to the scope (both spatial and temporal) of the argument, while the next two focus on the argument's application to some real-world concerns in the here and now, in particular its relation to non-ideal theory and a politics of transition, and also to some contemporary public commentary on meaningful work.

The first two questions about scope provide I think fruitful opportunities for future research, and here I will only briefly gesture at some initial thoughts and considerations. Regarding spatial scope first: the natural question to ask is whether meaningful work is something that matters from the standpoint of justice only in the specific context of developed liberal democracies, or whether it matters in concerns of global justice. Of course, given economic relations are one of the most important ways persons are connected globally and have such strong effects on persons' lives, research on global justice puts much attention on issues

related to work and the structure of economic institutions. Examples include concerns about the fairness of global trade rules (Moellendorf 2005; Risse 2012, pp. 261-278, 346-359; Miller 2017), the exploitation of sweatshop workers (Zwolinski 2007; Young 2011, pp. 123-152; James 2012, pp. 308-325), and the entitlements owed to temporary migrant workers (Carens 2013, pp. 110-128; Ottonelli and Torresi 2012). But the emphasis in these discussions is often only on the fair distribution of work's burdens, and far less attention is placed on what justice might require when it comes to the provision of work's potential benefits. And a concern with work's benefits, such as those affiliated with meaningful work, surely ought to be, we might think, no less important to theories of global justice than a concern with avoiding things like exploitation, degrading work, or dangerous work. For example, if justice was indifferent to an unequal distribution of meaningful work globally, then it would seemingly permit a situation in which the globally privileged offshored all the monotonous drudgery and unfulfilling work to the developing world, all in order so they could bask in the benefits from undertaking work that is person-engaging and rewarding. But such a scenario (at least intuitively to me) comes across as deeply inegalitarian.

Despite these comments, throughout this thesis I have tried my best to remain noncommittal on the question of meaningful work's status in concerns of global justice. I have only been referring to 'society' and the 'state,' without specifying any particular political community. I have done this for two reasons. The first is simply that I did not want to bring in any extra complications to what (for me at least) was an already difficult argument. The second (perhaps more justifiable reason) is that remaining noncommittal about scope allowed me to isolate what I took to be most important variables related to the question motivating this thesis:

which was whether meaningful work could be a legitimate concern to liberal theories of justice and their commitment to nonperfectionism. There exists both statist and cosmopolitan variants of such liberal theories, and my aim was to provide an argument applicable to both.

I recognize however the issue here might not be so simple, and that particular parts of my argument might seem inapplicable or even inappropriate within an account of global justice. For example, it might be wondered whether the account of meaningful work I have developed, and the importance it gives to social contribution, is culturally specific to the norms and histories of Western liberal democracies. Or, because the argument relied on the ideal of society as a system of cooperation between free and equal persons (especially in Chapter 3), it might be thought it cannot travel globally because it will only apply to those societies in which this idea of society forms part of the public political culture.

I will not respond to these concerns here, other than mentioning one way I think my argument is relevant to concerns of global justice. I think it difficult to deny that the social interdependencies and reciprocal relations I have been pointing to throughout this thesis apply between individuals globally no less than they do between fellow citizens (especially when these interdependencies are characterized partly in terms of a potentiality, as I have been understanding them). To carry out our own plan of life, we often rely not only on the skills and talents of our compatriots but also the skills and talents of persons everywhere. And as I argued in Chapter 4, this “feature of human sociability” (here we can put the emphasis on ‘human’) can ground the connection between meaningful work and self-respect not just through the way it relates to a political ideal of society as a system of cooperation, but also through the way it

connects to personhood. As such – and this is me moving very quickly through the argument – it would seem to be important that all people, regardless of their geographical location, have a real opportunity to contribute to others through work in a way that supports their self-worth as persons. If the aim of global justice, then, is to turn existing global relations of social *interaction* into justice-compatible relations of social *cooperation* (e.g., see Abizadeh 2007; James 2012), then it at least seems initially plausible that part of this endeavour might involve concerns with the global provision of meaningful work.

A different set of questions on which the argument of this thesis has remained silent relates to normative concerns about the effect of technology on the nature and availability of work in the future. As Anthony Appiah outlines, with technological advancement progressing it is not evident how the normative value found in work can best be retained, and we need to grapple with the fact that “[t]he rise of the robot and of AI both eliminate and reshape jobs, as we know, in ways that bring costs as well as benefits for human flourishing” (2021, p. 1).¹⁹¹ Two questions present themselves here in light of the argument of this thesis: first, what effect is technological development having on the nature and availability of meaningful work in the short-term? And second, could the justice-relevance of meaningful work give us reasons to object to a potential longer-term future with less or no work?

Regarding the effects of technological development in the short-term, the first thing to say is that the inclusion of new technologies in work processes is radically altering the nature of persons’ work. As an example, take the increasing use of artificial intelligence and algorithms to complement much of the work undertaken in advanced economies (these technologies are now

¹⁹¹ The point is clear enough even though I would not put it in terms of human flourishing.

used to help make decisions from things as diverse as capital investment, bail hearings, and the recruitment of workers). From the perspective of meaningful work, what makes such use of technology problematic is its opacity – how its decisional rationales are mostly hidden from workers. This is relevant to meaningful work because it can thereby reduce the extent a worker is involved in the contributive details affiliated with their work process, in a way I think could be argued is analogous to the effects of the divisions of labour (§2.4.1). This suggests that concerns with work being meaningful could be added to the reasons offered for greater accountability of and transparency in such systems (e.g., see Vaassen 2022; Vredenburg 2022).

Moving to the question of the technological replacement of work, from the perspective of meaningful work there is at least one regard in which automation can be a good thing. As I mentioned in §5.3, insofar as automation is replacing work that is monotonous drudgery, then the opportunities for meaningful work in society can potentially be increased (with the stipulation that this would only be the case if it occurred alongside efforts to ensure alternative meaningful work options were available to those the technology has replaced, such as skill retraining programs or a basic income).

However, advances to the productive power of technology thanks to things like machine learning and artificial intelligence mean technological developments are beginning to not only complement complex work processes, but to put them in danger of total replacement.¹⁹² Indeed, studies claim that approximately half of the work currently undertaken in advanced economies could be automated in the short-term future (Frey and Osborne 2017; Manyika et al. 2017). Just for some examples, take the way trading algorithms and AI decision-support tools have replaced

¹⁹² John Danaher calls this the “displacement potential of modern technology,” see Danaher 2019, pp. 31ff.

much of the work in the finance sector, how machine learning often gives better medical diagnoses than human doctors, how smart robots are beginning to carry out surgeries independently from humans, the way AI can now provide legal advice on the likelihood of winning court cases, the fact many news articles are now completely written by algorithms, and how most companies have now fully automated their customer service through AI chat bots.¹⁹³ Even persons in ‘creative’ occupations, like artists and poets, are vulnerable to replacement from technological automation given the recent (and forecasted future) developments in machine learning models.¹⁹⁴ This means technological advancement might have the potential to massively reduce the existence of meaningful work in society. To be sure, forecasts of widespread technological unemployment can be met with some skepticism.¹⁹⁵ But for the sake of argument, let’s just grant the premise that in the medium to long-term future we could be living in a world with little to no work.

For some writers this possibility is attractive enough to be a vision of utopia.¹⁹⁶ But what might the argument in this thesis have to say about that? I am not sure. Obviously, in such a scenario any ‘work’ would be stripped of the very thing I have argued makes work unique and crucial to concerns of justice – viz., its connection to social contribution and the way it allows

¹⁹³ These examples come from Susskind and Susskind 2015, pp. 46-100; Ford 2018, pp. 35-38; Danaher 2019, pp. 7-20.

¹⁹⁴ For a sense of what is possible it is worth exploring examples of the images generated by Open AI’s DALL-E deep learning software. Text prompts can be anything, such as ‘a painting of a fox sitting in a field at sunrise in the style of Claude Monet,’ to ‘an astronaut lounging in a tropical resort in space in a photorealistic style.’ See: <https://openai.com/dall-e-2/>. The same company is also responsible for ChatGPT, which uses deep learning to produce human-like textual responses to prompts.

¹⁹⁵ For example, see Atkinson and Wu 2017. Doubts might be raised because widespread technological replacement of work has been falsely predicted for centuries (the most famous example probably being John Maynard Keynes predicting in 1930 that in 2030 persons will work no more than fifteen hours per week, see Keynes 2008), and also because there are at least certain forms of work, such as care work, whose very nature seems to rely on things machines will struggle to provide, such as physical connection and emotional support that rely on shared experiences.

¹⁹⁶ E.g., John Danaher: “we should do what we can to hasten the obsolescence of humans in the arena of work” (2019, p. 2).

persons to engage in relations of social interdependencies. As Shelly Kagan puts it, “what the technological assumption [about replacement] does is rob our productive behavior of much of its point, since there is no longer any need for us to produce anything” (2019, p. 184).¹⁹⁷ And so while people in this future might be able to engage in what looks to us today like meaningful work (they could still write poetry, or build a house with their hands...), they will really instead just be engaging in something more akin to a game, given these will be activities that are intentional attempts to overcome unnecessary obstacles (computers make better poetry, houses can be 3D-printed...).¹⁹⁸ In undertaking these activities persons won’t be contributing to the needs of unassociated others at all. And as such, according to the line of argument offered in this thesis, we might think that a crucial support of their self-respect and sense of self-worth will thus be missing. To that degree at least, a future without work might not necessarily be an unconditionally good thing after all. Perhaps then, this gives us in the short-term some reasons to act in ways to prevent such a future from coming about.

But I think we need to be cautious here – hence my noncommittal language. This is because the argument about meaningful work’s connection to self-respect, and thus relevance to theories of social justice, relies on taking as given that “[i]t is a feature of human sociability that we are by ourselves but parts of what we might be. We must look to others to attain the excellences that we must leave aside, or lack altogether” (Rawls 1971, p. 529). This feature linked meaningful work to self-respect both through the way it underpinned the ideal of society being a system of social cooperation (Chapter 3), and how it was taken as a constitutive element of personhood (Chapter 4). But in the scenario we are considering here, where technology has

¹⁹⁷ Kagan goes on to argue that this raises a problem because it is the very instrumental nature of work that is the source of its intrinsic value.

¹⁹⁸ Here I am following Suits’ definition of games. See note 165.

replaced all the contributive activities we can imagine and we no longer need one another to carry out our own plans of life, this feature of human sociability will no longer obtain. As such, I think there are good reasons to doubt that in this future world claims about social contribution will feature in any ideals of society or accounts of personhood, and therefore good reasons to doubt that – at least in way I have outlined in this thesis – social contribution through meaningful work will have any connection to self-respect. For persons in the long-term future then, the technological replacement of work might not be so troubling.

Third unanswered question: how does this thesis' argument relate to political concerns about transitioning from the world of pervasive injustices we occupy to something at least resembling what justice requires? After all, part of what I have argued is that the effective promotion of meaningful work requires an economic system, or at least economic policies, very different to what obtains under contemporary capitalism, so ought I not also say something about how this transition might be brought about?

For sure, any normative theorizing about justice that is completely indifferent or removed from facts and social realities is misguided (e.g., Cohen 2008, pp. 229-273), and it needs to be action guiding in some way. But from this it does not follow that a political theory's value is directly tied to its immediate applicability and relevance to political concerns on the ground. This is because ideal theory and non-ideal theory have different ends (for a nice typology see Robeyns 2008). As (mostly) a form of ideal theory, the aim of this thesis has been to examine whether a society that is completely just would care about the availability and propensity of meaningful work. The conclusion I came to was that such a society and the individuals who make it up

certainly would care about the promotion of meaningful work, given its connection to their political status as free and equal participating members. In order to do this, I used a methodology that relied on several idealizations, such as the conceptions of society as a system of social cooperation and as a social union of social unions, and the nature of the social interdependencies between persons. I don't deny there is a significant gap between the nature of these idealizations and the nature of the world around us (if there wasn't then they wouldn't be idealizations).

But I don't think this means the project and its findings are irrelevant to the different aims of non-ideal theory (which are informed by taking injustice as the starting point), such as comparing how various alternative social states can be more or less just, and exploring how we might transition between them (e.g., see Sen 2006; 2009, pp. 15-18). This is because idealizations and their assumptions are often necessary for our understanding of what we value and ought to prioritize, which can then help us offer recommendations that are both achievable and desirable (Stemplowska 2008, pp. 328ff.; Swift 2008; Valentini 2009). In my view, the strongest criticism against ideal theory is that it provides no guidance, or even the wrong guidance, when it comes to questions of comparison and transition (Farrelly 2007; Anderson 2010, pp. 3-7). But I hope I have said enough in this thesis to protect it against that charge, given I have not just considered the ethical importance of meaningful work and then left it at that but have also explored how meaningful work might be promoted institutionally. Furthermore, I did this not just at the level of economic systems as a whole (which could leave the thesis with the somewhat unhelpful directive of: 'promote meaningful work by overthrowing capitalism'), but also considered how meaningful work might be promoted through implementing smaller changes which would be more feasible in the social and economic context in which we find ourselves.

What I hope this shows is that the arguments of this thesis, by contributing to our understanding of where we – you and me, in the here and now – want to be, can give guidance not only on what the end goal of social justice is, but also on what is required to help us along the way.

Fourth and final unanswered question: in what way does this thesis' argument relate to the contemporary public concern with meaningful work? This concern is reflected in the uptick of commentary (be it in the form of news articles, Ted Talks, or opinion pieces) on the widespread desire among persons to find meaning in their work, as well as in surveys finding that most persons would be willing to sacrifice some income in order have greater meaning at work (e.g., see Achor et al. 2018; Gast et al. 2020). For the most part, 'meaningful work' in these pieces means people believing that in their work they are fulfilling some kind of larger purpose, connecting with their ethical values, and positively contributing to society and the betterment of humanity.¹⁹⁹

So then, would a world where there is widespread availability of meaningful work as I have defined it – work with sufficient complexity to be person-engaging and which involves the worker in its contributive elements – be a world that satisfies this need? We might think it would be, given the emphasis I have been placing on the importance of palpable social contribution coheres quite nicely with some of those determinants of persons finding 'meaning' in their work that I just mentioned. That is, when persons are confident that through the deployment of their skills and talents they are enabling others to successfully carry out their plan of life, this will

¹⁹⁹ The emphasis on belief resultantly makes these pieces examples of the subjective view of meaningful work. For some examples, see Morgan 2022; Salt 2022.

likely support their belief that they are fulfilling a larger purpose, making a positive difference, and so on.²⁰⁰

However, in these pieces one is often confronted with claims about persons' desire for meaning in work that is in terms of fundamental meaning and greater purpose in life generally. As put by a clinical psychologist in a recent BBC article on the topic, when work is meaningful "it makes people feel like their lives have meaning" (quoted in Morgan 2022). And so, while nothing in my account is stopping persons using meaningful work to ground meaning in their life, it is important to reiterate that any provision of meaningful work as I have been understanding it will not necessarily meet this desire. This is because throughout this thesis the discussion of meaningful work has been limited only to what might make work itself as a distinct activity meaningful, and I have argued meaningful work's normative importance derives not from how it links up with conceptions of the good and beliefs about value that people hold, but only from how it relates to the political interests of persons, given its fundamentally link to individuals' ability to participate in society understood as a system of social cooperation.

Of course, questions about what makes life meaningful are far more important to individuals than questions about what makes work as a distinct activity meaningful. But questions about meaning in life are defined by reasonable disagreement, and so a liberal conception of justice must leave them up to individuals to work out for themselves.

²⁰⁰ As I noted in §2.5, in both quantitative and qualitative studies the variety of skills encouraged in work along with being involved in work's positive social impact have been found to be strong predictors of subjective meaningfulness.

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