

Work in a Free Society

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What is it to think progressively about work? From what philosophical standpoint do the great moral challenges presented by work come most clearly into view?

We can say, generally, that progressive thought aims at freedom. To think progressively about work, then, is to think about it in a way that brings into view the opportunities for freedom it affords and the obstacles to freedom it presents. The great moral challenges presented by work then appear as challenges in relation to the realization of freedom. How, then, are we to conceive of work in that relation?

I want to distinguish two ways of answering this question; two rival philosophical standpoints from which to think progressively about work. The first, which goes back at least to Thomas Paine and John Stuart Mill, I'll call the 'libertarian' view. The second, which goes back to Hegel and Marx, I'll call the 'social' view.

Libertarianism about work starts from an easily shared intuition about what it means to be free: you are free when you are able to do as you choose. I am free, on this view, if I am at liberty to say no to some options and yes to others, and conversely, I am unfree when I have no choice in the matter, when there is no choice to make or no options to choose from. Freedom, on this view, has no specific aim or end other than whatever it is an individual wants to do, have or be. Since I am free, on this view, when no one stops me from doing, being or having what I want, or coerces me into doing, being or having something I don't want, this can be called a *negative* conception of freedom.

Freedom understood this way includes the freedom to choose and pursue *a conception of the good life*. It is important to include this because it is a sign of a free society that people do not live out the same conception of the good, but many. There is no fact of the matter when it comes to the good life, and left to themselves, given the choice, individuals will forge their own good for themselves. Libertarians are what we might call *sceptics about the good*: they deny that there are any generally valid answers to the question of what it is to live well or to flourish.

So it is up to each individual to decide for herself how to lead the good life. Not being forced to pursue a conception of the good decided by someone else is thus an essential ingredient of freedom. It is also an essential ingredient of *justice*. For the good of each individual is not just a matter for the individual to decide upon for herself, it is each individual's *equal right* to pursue the conception they choose. In a just society, each individual will have this right protected. Moreover, no individual will be systematically *disadvantaged* in the exercise of that right. Justice is a matter of securing maximal scope for individual freedoms while leaving no one systematically disadvantaged in the exercise of their freedom.

If we take this standard of freedom and justice and apply it to contemporary society, how does it fare? For the progressive libertarian it fares very badly, and this mainly because of the way in which society distributes and rewards work.

The way the system is set up, most people work not because they choose to, but because they *have no option*. Work is a necessity for them, something they have to do in order to survive. If it were not for the wage that work brings, and the means of subsistence purchasing power gives access to, most people wouldn't do it. In most cases, work is done out of necessity, not out of choice; and those with the choice, namely those with independent sources of income (real estate owners, lottery winners etc.), typically choose something else instead.

If we are serious about creating a free society, the libertarian reasons, each individual should have the real choice, or should be granted the 'real freedom',¹ to enter the labour market or not. No one should ever be coerced into work. Furthermore, those who do choose to work should not be systematically advantaged relative to those who choose not to work. Recall that for the libertarian, no conception of the good is inherently higher than another. So those whose conception of the good does not involve paid work are entitled to equal rights, and an equal initial share of social resources, as those whose conception of the good does involve working.

On this view, then, work in a free society is a choice that individuals have the power to make. It is, above all, in exercising that power of choice that an individual can be said to be really free. Such a society is also fair or just in maximising freedom without bias towards any one conception of the good, which in relation to work means not only granting the freedom to work or not *to all*, but also non-discrimination between those who opt for work and those who don't in the social distribution of resources.

What can be done to bring about such a free society? The key measure for libertarians is the introduction of an unconditional basic income. A reduction in the standard number of working hours is another popular demand. To those who complain that such measures are merely utopian, libertarians about work can point to the increasing pace of automation, to technological advances that can be expected at once to increase wealth and to wipe out the need for repetitive, unpleasant work. Those with an eye on technological developments can see a world without laborious work emerging on the horizon, and it is this horizon that should be orienting us in our thinking about how to think progressively about work.

Libertarianism about work thus combines 1) a negative conception of freedom with 2) scepticism about the good, 3) a rights-based commitment to distributive justice, and 4) a technological optimism that buffers it against the charge of mere utopianism. The society in which individuals are really free, and equally so, is within reach, so long as 1) the proper distributive measures are in place around income and 2) technology is allowed to develop to take the burden out of work.

¹ See Philippe van Parijs, *Real Freedom for All: What (If Anything) Can Justify Capitalism?* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

This vision of work in a free society has become so popular it would not be an exaggeration to call it the orthodoxy amongst progressives about work. It informs the visions of the future of best-selling authors like Rutger Bregman, Yuval Noah Harari, Paul Mason, and George Monbiot, to name but a few. But libertarianism is not the only standpoint available from which to criticize the contemporary world of work and to imagine a better one. Let us turn now to the 'social' understanding of what work in a free society might mean.

This view starts off with dissatisfaction about the negative conception of freedom. It is true that in many circumstances 'being free' to do something means having a choice in the matter. But there are also circumstances in which it is not choice as such that makes for freedom, but the ability to *identify* with something or someone. To be unfree, in such circumstances, is to be at odds with oneself, to find oneself defined in an alien way, a way that one cannot embrace or take as one's own. A free person, by contrast, is someone who is 'at home' in their world, even if they did not choose many of the things that make up this world. It is the fate of every human being, after all, to have their power of choice limited by some circumstance: the natural endowments they are born with, habits acquired in childhood, social forces that shape them through the course of their lives, personal tragedies, and so on. Freedom in such matters is not so much a matter of making choices out of them, but of coming to see the limits of choice as acceptable.

So while increasing your options is one road to freedom, it is not the only one, and maybe not the main one. On this alternative view, finding yourself is the key to freedom, and this inevitably means some acknowledgment of your limits, of your dependence on something external. Since it is only in relationship to some 'other' that the self can ultimately obtain its gains in freedom, this can be called a *relationist* view of freedom. On this view, a free society is more than just an aggregate of individuals each choosing for themselves their own conception of the good, where to fit in with others and whether to fit in or not. It is a society made up of individuals who are aware of their dependence on each other and can find themselves in -- are 'at home' with -- the contributions they make to the common good.

The social view does not have the same scruples as libertarianism when it comes to invoking such a notion of the common good. The question of what makes us flourish may be hard to answer, and there may be no single answer that everyone would agree on. But that doesn't entail scepticism about the good. Empirical psychology tells us that there are better and worse places to look in our pursuits of happiness: we are more likely to find it in friendship, civil social interaction, and activity that gives us a sense of purpose, for instance, than we are in making lots of money, comparing ourselves and competing with others, or spending time on our own doing nothing.

There is a myriad of ways -- by no means all of which are conscious or chosen -- in which our identity and flourishing is bound up with work. Effective work provides an individual with a sense of their own power, of their agency or capacity to bring something about, not just in fantasy but also in reality. In modern societies at least, the recognition one obtains for the work one does is a crucial source of self-esteem, and without such sources no one can maintain a healthy identity. Work is also an important vehicle for enlarging one's sense of

self: for many people, it provides the main point of social contact outside the familial sphere; and for some, it makes concrete their sense of contributing to society and belonging to it.

To acknowledge the importance of work in shaping identity is not the same as endorsing the 'work ethic', at least as that is commonly conceived, or endorsing the social valuation of particular types of work. Still less is it to say that work on its own makes people happy, or that it necessarily contributes to happiness. Work shapes identity for better or worse. And it is above all this fact - the identity-shaping power of work - rather than the external goods associated with work (most notably income), that the alternative to the libertarian view work takes as its starting point for thinking about what work in a free society might mean.

Given what we have just said about freedom, it follows that work in a free society will have the character of a contribution to society which the individual can consciously identify with or embrace. Work will be free, in this sense, if the worker is 'at home' with it; or otherwise put, if the worker is able to 'find herself' in her role as *this* contributor to society. The role of being a contributor will not, in such a society, be conceived as something to opt in or out of. Rather it will be something the individual has a free relation to in being able to appropriate it or call it her own.

The practical challenge is to create conditions of work that make such a relation available to everyone. Technology has a role here, but it is not so prominent as it is in libertarianism about work. Of more significance is the culture that pervades working activity, and in particular, the presence of democratic norms.

How might the culture of work be changed so as to give fuller expression to relational freedom and to institute democratic norms? First, we need to replace a *managerial ethos* obsessed with targets, external interests (especially of shareholders), and the evaluation of individual performance within the work organization, with one committed to genuine cooperation. Second, the *unions* should be given a stronger say in work organizations. This is needed to ensure both that the management of work is in a meaningful sense the self-management of those who do the work, and to redress the power imbalance that inevitably shapes the employer-employee relation. These two measures are vital if we are to provide greater work security, improve work-life imbalance, make work less stressful, establish relationships of mutual recognition and respect at work, and to ensure that working activity is not so meaningless that it is impossible to engage with it or express oneself in it in some way.

However, we need to acknowledge that some kinds of activity may have to be done that fail to meet those conditions. We thus need a third measure, namely to *share* such activity fairly. In a free and just society, we should all be doing our fair share of the burdensome work that benefits other people without contributing to the individual worker's flourishing by developing their capacities, enabling self-expression and so on. Above all, this means ending expectations that only certain types of people should be doing such work, ie the gendered and racialised character of such work.

The contrast with the more familiar libertarian 'post-work' view should now be clear. We have seen that libertarianism is committed to a negative conception of freedom, scepticism about the good, a distributive model of justice, and an optimism about the future based on

technological progress. These views can seem self-evident to progressives about work. But the 'social' view I have presented challenges these assumptions. It replaces a negative conception of freedom with a relational one; it rejects scepticism about the good in favour of an empirically informed attitude towards the sources of human flourishing; it puts contribution rather than income-distribution at the centre of its account of justice; and its hope for the future is based more on the untapped power of democratic norms than technological prowess.

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