1 What Is Work?

'We all need to work,' my mother would say in that tone which, while purporting to enunciate an obvious truth that needed no support and would brook no argument, actually contained a threat.

However, she seemed to be right. My maternal grandfather operated a loom in a textile mill in West Philadelphia; my paternal grandfather had been a baker, and then he worked on the railway. In the 1940s one of my paternal uncles married a woman who inherited a farm in southern Indiana, which they worked (eventually together with their five children). In the 1940s the farm was not completely self-sufficient, because the family could not live solely on what they produced themselves; they produced mostly for sale in the market, however, yields and prices were such as to allow my uncle and his family to live from selling what they produced without taking other employment. Increasingly, however, during the 1960s, the economic situation changed, so that in addition to his work on the farm my uncle needed to find a job as an industrial cleaner in a pharmaceutical plant in town. As time went on, the work in town became more and more important. My father was a mechanic at the Fairless Works of US Steel in Eastern Pennsylvania; his job was to repair the diesel locomotives and overhead magnetic cranes that were used to transport ore, iron, and steel from one part of the steel mill to another.

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My grandmother spent all day cleaning the house, washing clothing, and cooking, and my mother worked as a typist, filing clerk, stenographer, and secretary in various companies that bought and sold things. I myself had a series of summer jobs in the steel mill during the 1960s, and also worked for one summer as a 'freight-agent' ('*Frachtagent*') in the Rhein/Main Airport in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Between starting permanent full-time employment in 1971 and my retirement in 2014, I spent my entire working life teaching, examining, producing reports and evaluations, and writing books and articles. We use the same general word, 'work', for all these activities, despite their manifest differences. Is it reasonable for us to do this? What is this activity we call 'work'? I would like to begin by discussing some of the sorts of things we spontaneously say (and think) about work and some of the things we contrast it with, such as relaxation, leisure, play, idleness, unemployment, vacation/holiday, and retirement.

Our conception of work is modelled, in the first instance, on industrial labour of the kind my father and grandfather did. We tend to think of work as a clear, simple, self-evident concept with which anyone will be familiar, but if one thinks about the things people tend to say about work, they suggest that it is more complicated, and that people at least partly see that. For instance, I can clearly recall three rather different kinds of things my father used repeatedly to say about work, which suggested at the very least that the concept as he used it had an interesting internal articulation or referred to different dimensions of human action, although he himself may not have been

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absolutely clear about this. Once a day he would eat a very heavy meal, and he would often remark that he needed to eat a lot of nourishing food to 'keep my strength up for work'. So work was an activity that required exertion; it was different from idleness (for which one did not have to keep one's strength up), and what it required was not easy. Often, after eating, just before his shift started, he would announce while leaving the house that he 'had to go to work now', sometimes adding to this that he needed 'to go and earn a living'. This suggested, first, that 'work' was something distinct from the rest of life, involving, in his case, going off to a separate area, the steel mill, which was a large space surrounded by metal-mesh fences, patrolled by a private security force, and comprising several large buildings connected by roads and lengths of railway track. Going there was not a choice or something he necessarily wanted to do; it was a matter of necessity: he 'had' to go. The third thing he would say was in a way the most striking: in the case of any behaviour he considered to be overly fussy and fastidious, the presentation of excuses, appeal to personal preferences or attitudes, or instances of excessively complex ratiocination, he would remark that 'we work on a production basis here'. This last remark was derived, I discovered, from what his foreman at the steel mill used to say to all the men in his section. What it meant was that no amount of reasoning, talk, or moral scruples really had any standing when it came to work; only the quality (and especially quantity) of the finished product counted. Work was something concerned with what was 'out there' in the real world, visible to all, countable and assessable, not a

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matter of mere opinion or a part of the drama of anyone's inner sphere. The steel mill even produced pencils bearing the inscription *US Steel: Knowing's not enough!* If even knowing was not enough (compared with demonstrable output), a fortiori, any kind of *attitude* a worker might have to what he or she did was irrelevant. Some of these pencils always found their way into our house. When I myself started work at the steel mill I realised that the motto in that pithy inscription was part of the company's *safety* policy, the idea being that accidents were not the company's responsibility, but were all the result of carelessness on the part of the workers: they 'knew' they should wear their helmets and steel-tipped shoes at all times, but it was hot in a steel mill in Pennsylvania in August and the steel-tipped shoes and helmets were uncomfortable. My father, however, did not interpret the motto on the pencil in this narrow and specific way. He took it to indicate that 'work' was a separate domain governed by its own objective internal standards, and that not even '*knowing*', the paradigm of a serious, well-grounded, but merely mental attitude toward the world, had any special standing in comparison with these imperative standards. Work was the final framework and the model for all of human life. The 'work' referred to in the phrase 'we work on a production basis' was in fact the work of human living in all its forms and varieties. Human life as a whole should be just as free of posturing, fancy reasoning, excessive expression of feelings etc. as work in the steel mill was. One of the reasons my father liked the production ethos of his job was that, as long as he kept the relevant locomotives and cranes

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running, it was nobody's business what he ate, what he thought, what he liked or did not like, what his personal habits were, or what attitude he had toward his work or management. Work was serious, life was serious, and the ethos of steel production was the ideal to which one should aspire in all respects and all domains, if one wished to be a serious person.

I take these three sayings of my father to illustrate three important aspects of our most usual conception of work:

(a) it is a process that requires expenditure of energy and is strenuous: the product is not produced effortlessly or by magic, but by *human* exertion (in particular the exertion of the individual or a group of individuals who are said to be working)
(b) it is a necessity of life
(c) it has an external produced product that can be measured and evaluated independently of anything one might know about the process through which that product came to be or the people who made it (I'll call this for short 'objectivity' in one sense of that highly ambiguous term).

In paradigmatic cases of what we, people in the West at the beginning of the twenty-first century, call 'work' these three elements are all present. Work in the full-blown generally accepted sense will contain all three elements as part of an integrated whole. However, these three strands do not seem always *necessarily* to go together; one can imagine them as being separate and separately instantiated. Even in some cases that are familiar to us from our everyday experience this is true, and it certainly is true if one looks at how human activity has been structured historically. If only one or two, but not all three, strands are not co-present in a certain class of cases, it will be a matter of judgement, convention, tradition, historical accident, and individual initiative whether or not we call the activity 'work'. Guide dogs leading the blind in Britain often carry a sign reading 'Guide dog working', or sometimes 'Don't distract me, I'm working'; should the dog be paid for this work? Can a robot exert himself (or herself)? If a visit to a park calms office workers down so that they can return to work reinvigorated, is the park a work place? Could a dog, a robot, or a park join a labour union? We are not forced by the logic of our concepts to answer these questions one way or the other. Concepts are always open-ended. This does not mean that what counts as work is a mere matter of arbitrary decision. It does mean that how far metaphorical extensions will reach and to what extent they will embed themselves in our daily lives and become literally true is unpredictable. That 'the robot works' is literally true might be easily granted given that 'robot' comes from a common Slavic root that means 'work', but is 'guide dog working' a metaphor or not? If not, when did it become literally, rather than metaphorically, true? A wide variety of historical, linguistic, political, social, literary, and other contextual factors and forces is involved in establishing something as a form of work. How these factors will in fact play themselves out in any concrete situation in the future is not random, but it is also not strictly predictable.

The three components just mentioned constitute, I submit, the central core of our usual conception of work, but there are some other further aspects that are not quite as essential, but which also play an important if more subordinate role in the way we think about work. My father used the expression 'go (out) to work' completely unselfconsciously. That is, work was

(d) a distinct and almost self-contained activity, and thus was most appropriately conducted in its own separate space, a factory or garage, or mill (or eventually office) in order that it not be confused with anything else.

He, of course, realised that some people worked from home – the odd craftsman, perhaps, like the various men who had a small business repairing cars in their own garages. Even such people, however, would be generally assumed to have their own work-space. Furthermore, he also realised that some people liked their work, or even could combine certain kinds of work with lightheartedness, but that was an accident, a lucky break for the person who liked doing what had in any case to be done. Levity, jokiness, good humour were almost always in tension with the underlying idea of working. Practical jokes, in particular, in the steel mill were extremely dangerous, a cause of innumerable accidents. Thus

(e) work was almost invariably distinct from what one might do for fun, for pleasure, or as a joke. It was paradigmatically serious.

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Finally, there was a tacit assumption that ran through everything my father said and thought, which was absolutely fundamental and was really so self-evident that it did not need to be separately expressed:

(f) work is archetypically activity for which you receive pay in the form of money; it is monetarised.

Again, it was not as if my father forgot that one of his brothers did a lot of work, and hard work, on his farm, for which he certainly did not receive cash from anyone – he was growing things for his own and his family's consumption. It was just that that was construed as a kind of subsidiary or subordinate phenomenon. Raising crops for one's own consumption was something to be understood in the final context of paid work, because if you ate what you grew yourself, you didn't have to buy it. Working for cash, raising crops to sell (and then working as a cleaner), was the main event around which everything else had to be finally grouped and relative to which it had to be construed.

The more seriously one takes (d) and (f), the more housework, characteristically done by women, will be taken to be a marginal phenomenon, because, although it eminently satisfies criteria (a), (b) and (c), it is usually unpaid and usually does not take place as a separate and distinct activity (in the sense intended in (d)).

The three elements of work which I have listed above do not constitute anything like a formal definition of work, nor does one get such a definition if one adds the further three features. Rather they point to, and mark out in a vague and approximate way, a kind of discursive territory within which

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discussion of work is conducted. Before continuing this discussion, though, it would make sense to try to clarify to a slightly greater extent the three main elements in our conception.

Exertion

Physical and Moral Exertion

To work is to do something strenuous. To call something ‘strenuous’ means in the first instance that it requires someone to exercise their muscles continuously and intensely, as normal people would do in moving rocks from one place to another all day long, rowing a boat, or threshing grain.

Actually, there seem to be two components to this: first, a strictly physical or technical aspect, but also a second ‘moral’ aspect. To start with the technical sense, ‘work’ was used in physics and engineering originally to refer to the amount of weight a given animal can raise to a certain height. One can then extend the concept by applying it not just to how much a whole given animal, such as a horse, can lift how far, but also to how much a particular human muscle group can lift. Eventually the concept of ‘work’ can be formalised in physics and detached from the idea of an animal moving or lifting something, so that the work which a boiler or engine does can be defined abstractly as the product of force exerted and distance. In any case, what is important is that work can be measured strictly by its external result: the weight moved can be externally measured and the height to which it is raised can also be measured, and between them they determine what the ‘work’ is. How much work one human being can do is then partly a matter of natural endowment: a horse can in general raise a heavier weight than an unaided human can. Partly, however, it is also a matter of nutrition and training. An able-bodied adult who is well nourished and lifts weights regularly will, in general, eventually, be able to life heavier weights further than a comparable adult who has no training. A human job is strenuous if it requires a certain amount of physical work in this sense of 'work', the strict one employed in engineering.

There is, however, also a second way in which we use the word 'strenuous'. One can call this the 'moral' sense (in the slightly old-fashioned sense of 'moral' which is often used by philosophers). 'Strenuous' here is an adjective designating how much effort I can and do 'force myself to make'. Animals, and particularly humans, can 'try harder' (or, alternatively, 'slack off'). We can try to make them try harder, for instance by whipping them, something that used regularly to be done to animals like horses and to human slaves. How hard I have to try to attain a certain result will be relative to my natural physical and psychological endowments and my state of training. There may be a weight I can lift only with great exertion – by trying very hard – but which a person naturally stronger or in better training than me would lift without any special difficulty. Occasionally we have the experience of a human, A, who is inherently capable of less work than some other human, B, but who nevertheless regularly surpasses B in measurable work. B, for instance, is physically much stronger than A, and he *could, if he really exerted himself*, move a much greater weight of stone a greater distance during his work-shift, but A forces himself to make greater efforts during the shift and actually moves more stone further than B does. One might think of the distinction as illustrated in the slight differences in the meaning of 'work'. Say that both A and B have a quota of 500 stones weighing 10 kilos each to move a distance of three metres each during a given time. During that time B moves 1,000 stones over the distance, and A only 500. We might say

(a) B did more work (in the engineering sense) than A did

but

(b) A had to work harder (in the moral sense) to fulfil the quota than B did.

These two statements are perfectly compatible with each other.

Of course, there can be a number of different reasons for discrepancies, even a systematic recurring discrepancy, between the amount of actual work (in the engineering sense) which a given individual (or group) performs and what he, she, or they are in principle capable of. One such reason is that the person whose work we are considering is suffering from the condition we call laziness, lack of application, failure to exert oneself.

Contrary to the ethos of steel production which so impressed my father, some people have an inclination to valorise effort highly, even in the absence of any corresponding objective result. This moralising attitude sometimes infects discussion of merit or desert. It can cut both ways. My father's foreman thought that only production was important, in that no amount of effort or good will could compensate for deficiencies in the measurable amount of work (in the engineering sense). In addition, lots of religious leaders, teachers, moralists, and, for that matter, ordinary humans tend to have suspicions about any form of apparently lazy behaviour. They might even be inclined to think that a supremely gifted person who is performing huge amounts of work effortlessly is not 'really' working. It turns out that it is entirely possible in some contexts to avoid such moralising attitudes, but it is extremely hard to do this consistently in all cases and contexts. One great problem is that effort (as opposed to actual performance) is very difficult to measure, and there is no consensus on how to evaluate its weight relative to other factors in a final assessment of some work.

So full-blown work is, in a typical case, strenuous, both in the engineering and in the moral sense. Up to this point, it has been assumed that the activity that is called strenuous is a physical activity of some sort – raising of weights, moving of objects, pulling things along, or something like that – but eventually, words like 'exertion', 'effort', and 'strenuous' can have their meanings extended to encompass what are taken to be comparable mental phenomena, such as solving a complicated equation which requires a high degree of concentration and persistence in the use of mental powers that are construed as being like the power of our physical muscles. So there is 'manual' and 'mental' work (sometimes called 'work of the hands' and 'work of the head' in the Marxist tradition). Eventually, one might extend the concept of 'work' to include not simply more or less straightforwardly mental activities – bookkeeping, stenography, simultaneous translation, processing large amounts of data, or solving complex formal problems – that are clearly strenuous and require high degrees of concentration, but even to more ethereal spheres such as marriage-counselling, acting, facilitating. Given that it is difficult enough to see where natural ability and training end and where effort begins in the case of physical or manual work, the difficulty of applying these distinctions to cases of work of the head, the mind, or the spirit increases exponentially, so assessing the work done gets even more difficult.

Idleness, Play, Holiday, Retirement

To say that work is a strenuous activity could mean to say it is inherently disagreeable, or unpleasant to the person who performs it, because we might think that people don't naturally like to have to strain their muscles. There are at least four other human states that are regularly contrasted with 'work', and seeing how these contrasts are constructed will give the concept of 'work' more contour. First, if I am not engaged in any particular activity at all, then I am clearly not working, unless I am a life-model for an artist. If the lack of activity is voluntary, I am idling; if the lack of activity is a relatively brief period between two periods of work and is construed as a necessary part of a process by which I regain my strength after exertion in order to work again, I am resting; if my lack of work is involuntary I am unemployed (or perhaps disabled, or both). Another possibility is that I am not inactive, but am doing something, perhaps vigorously, which does not count as work – for instance, I am playing a game. Much

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human play (which in many contexts is strictly distinguished from work) can be highly strenuous. Many organised sports, which large numbers of people play 'for the fun of it', require very high levels of exertion. Playing rugby is much more strenuous than discharging several of the jobs which I successively had at the steel mill and all of which counted as 'work'. Whether an activity is work or play is something that depends partly on the wider context and cannot always be determined by direct inspection of the action in question alone. There are professional rugby players for whom this is a job, but for most of those who play it is not work. This example also shows that 'work' in some contexts is not a physical or biological, but a specifically *social*, category.

The professional and the amateur rugby players may engage on the field in activities that are observationally virtually indistinguishable. What makes this activity 'work' for the professional is the specific complex matrix of social relations within which the activity is embedded, especially, of course, the fact that rugby is for the professional a (virtually) full-time activity for which he is remunerated and by which he earns his living, (f) in the list above.

A third possibility is that, as I might say, I am 'on holiday' (having a break, taking a vacation) during a brief period which I construe as a short interruption of a much longer period of sustained work. During such a period I may be free to rest and do nothing, to play, or to engage in various other non-work activities. It is up to me, within limits, how I will spend my holiday, whereas work is typically subject to necessity, a necessity imposed by nature, which means in most cases by an employer, or in some cases by myself in response to a perceived natural necessity.

Finally, I may once have worked consistently for a relatively long time, but now I decide permanently to stop. This may be because of age, or disability, or because I think I have accumulated enough entitlements to support myself for the rest of my life without working any more, or in principle for no particular reason (although this last is rather uncommon). Then I say I have 'retired'. This is different from being compelled permanently to stop working for some reason; then I have not retired, I have been forcibly retired. Thus at the end of the First and Second World Wars women who had certain kinds of jobs that were otherwise considered to be men's jobs were dismissed en masse, and until very recently people who were keen to continue to work and still perfectly capable of doing what was necessary were forcibly retired at some arbitrary age.

Necessity

The 'necessity' of work that is in question here is not logical necessity. Rather, work is a necessity relative to a certain set of goals which we think we can assume that all humans have. These goals include mere biological survival, but go significantly beyond that. Even a family in complete destitution may biologically survive. What we attribute to people is the need to lead a life which satisfies at least the minimal conditions of what they take to be a *human* life, where that is culturally defined; sometimes this is called a 'decent' life. My father, mother, sister, and I could probably have survived on the streets of Philadelphia for a while through some combination of scavenging, theft, odd-jobbery, begging, and various other forms of charity, so the necessity to work was a need to avoid a culturally unacceptable outcome like this rather than immediate physical demise. Standards of what counts as an acceptable decent life are not just socially constituted but have varied enormously through time and in different places. In many societies people will simply not eat certain perfectly nutritious and widely available food for a variety of social, cultural, and religious reasons (rats, beetles, slugs, the corpses of healthy, recently deceased humans). In Philadelphia in the late 1940s and early 1950s, having an electric washing machine was not part of the necessary equipment of a 'decent' life – we had a combination tub/scrubbing-board/mangle with a handle that one had to turn in the basement of the building we lived in. Having a television was an almost unthinkable luxury – acquiring one in 1953 made my grandmother the toast of the whole neighbourhood. Now, however, in most parts of Europe and the United States, both a washing machine and a television would probably be considered essentials.

A second important point about the necessity which is at issue here is that it operates and imposes itself, in most cases, at a very general level, and there is a long path moving through a large number of steps by which this necessity eventually articulates itself and fastens itself on some highly specific task. Perhaps it is true that I need water, and there is nothing much else that can be said about that: virtually nothing else is substitutable for it, so the path from the general statement 'humans need water' to any specific necessity ('You have been working in the hot sun all day, and need to drink a glass of water') is direct and simple. But many human needs don't have that simple structure. For instance, I also need sufficiently nutritious food (a rule expressing a general necessity), but in any specific case one food can replace another without grave ill effects: instead of rice we could have pasta, or potatoes. Equally it is not necessary that I eat this cauliflower – some broccoli or samphire would do equally well – so, although I must eat something (eventually, or I will suffer for it), I do not with the same absolute and clear necessity need to have a cauliflower or a mango to eat now. Even if I am diabetic I can usually substitute one source of sucrose for another.

Analogously, even if one assumes the goal of continued subsistence, it was not necessary for my father to work at *that* particular job which he had at US Steel. He could have worked at a job different from the one he had in the same mill, or he could have found some similar work in a similar plant (which would probably have required moving), or tried a different kind of work, but it was necessary for him to take *some* job, *one or the other from among those realistically available to him*. He had no inherited wealth, entitlements (stocks or bonds), or other resources (such as my uncle's farm) which would have permitted him to live without engaging in waged labour, and no matter how many jobs as lawyers, carpenters, acrobats, teachers of Spanish, or, for that matter, tool-and-die-makers were 'open', they were not realistically available to him. The same was true of jobs as a railway mechanic in Sweden, Poland, or Italy.

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Individual and Social Necessity

A third important point about the necessity of work is that work is 'necessary' in two distinct senses for two different agents or quasi-agents. Work is a necessity for individuals, but it is also a necessity for societies as a whole. I must work if I wish to have food and drink and lead a decent life, but my society as a whole (however that is specified) must also work so that food is grown, drink made available, consumer products produced, and essential services provided, if we are all to survive and lead a minimally acceptable life. That this socially necessary production is absolutely essential for almost any kind of individual work that we know is obvious. My father's work would have been impossible, and would in fact have made no sense at all, in a world without diesel locomotives, railways, and steel mills, none of which he produced himself, and although it is not in the same way inconceivable that my uncle, or someone very like him with appropriate pre-industrial agricultural skills, could have worked his farm without a tractor, in fact he and his family could not have survived without one. The tractor was the product of a mechanised society, which also could have been said to have needed to produce a certain amount of them. It would have made no sense to say of my uncle that he needed to produce a tractor himself because he was about as much capable of doing that on his own (or with the help of his family) as I am of flying to Mars by flapping my arms.

Thus, the need a society has for work to be done and the need each individual has to work are not at all the same thing. In most societies that have existed up to now, as far as

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we can tell, it would not have been possible for most people to remain completely idle and make no contribution to ensuring the subsistence of the group. If not direct physical necessity, then some combination of that and various forms of social pressure would usually suffice to ensure that anyone who could work would make some kind of contribution to social production and reproduction. Some societies, for instance those of 'really existing socialism' which could be found in Eastern Europe between 1945 and 1989, even had an official policy of insisting that every individual take some part in social production – failure to work was an instance of 'social parasitism' and something in principle punishable by law (often subsumed under legislation against general anti-social behaviour). In most human societies, however, there will be at least a few individuals – some very wealthy, very privileged, or otherwise entitled persons – who will be (in fact, even if not in principle) exempt from the necessity of working, but these will need to be a relatively small number because human labour power is in many societies a scarce resource. Even these wealthy or otherwise privileged individuals will need labour – it is just that it will be the labour of others, without which they would not survive.

The two senses of 'necessity' come apart then. Work is a *social* necessity in that every society (considered as a whole) has certain tasks which 'need to be' performed if the society is to maintain itself in existence. This does not imply that every individual member of that society individually must participate in discharging those tasks. Work is not always necessary for each individual, because those with the right entitlements can be exempt. Without farmers,

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teamsters, and railways food would not be produced and distributed, and so it is a social necessity that someone do the farming, although it is not necessary for each individual to be a farmer or even occasionally work as a farmer.

The two senses of 'necessity' come apart in the other direction, too. From the fact that individuals need to work to survive and lead a minimally acceptable life, it does not follow that what I do to ensure that I have such a life is actually in all senses socially necessary. First of all, not *all* production is of things that are in any sense necessities. The steel produced in the factory where my father worked was mostly used for cans and containers, and although metal containers are highly useful, not all kinds are strictly necessary. Traditionally, a distinction was made between necessities and luxuries, or perhaps between necessities (food and water), conveniences (washing machines), and then luxuries (Strasbourg geese, opera, calf-leather-bound books, diamonds). The distinction between necessities, conveniences, and luxuries is, of course, almost never sharp, and it is historically constantly changing and highly dependent on the wider social context. Between 1950 and 1980 a washing machine moved from the category of luxury to that of necessity. In a society of mostly small, independent farms, those who work the farms will need some mode of transport for their agricultural produce, such as a horse and wagon in order to get to railheads and then railways; the farmers won't, perhaps, strictly 'need' individual cars. Sometimes, however, a factory is built at a certain distance from any habitation, and no public transport is available, so having a car becomes a necessity for anyone wanting employment

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there. There is also production of luxury goods which by their very nature are not necessary or even particularly useful. Think about the steel produced in some plants which was specifically made to serve for ornaments on cars, such as the huge tail-fins on some of the US cars manufactured in the 1960s, which were thought by some, even at the time, to be superfluous and wasteful, and which some, in addition, actually found to be aesthetically unappealing, and were only so widely desired because they were so visibly expensive and useless. Finally, lots of people satisfy their need for work by producing objects that are not just useless and socially unnecessary, but actively harmful. The tobacco industry employed thousands of workers for decades.

Money and Credit

Work in my father's world was completely monetarised. 'I need to work' meant 'I need to make a living,' which in turn meant 'I need to make money.' In our societies money is the virtually universal means of acquiring what we need. Perhaps it is not an absolutely universally useful instrument for satisfying absolutely all needs – maybe I need love, self-respect, a sense of meaning in my life, and money will not buy those things – but it certainly is the case that, for a very wide range of other basic needs, in a society like ours money will do the trick. My uncle in Indiana may have originally 'needed' to plough and harvest his field because it contained maize, some of which the members of his family would consume directly and some of which he fed to his farm animals (so that the members of his family could eventually eat them). More and

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more frequently, however, what he needed was money – to pay his taxes, buy fertiliser for his fields and fuel for his farm vehicles and machines, get medical attention for his livestock and his children when they were unwell, etc. Because the need for money is not as immediate as that for air or water, this does not mean that it is any less real. In a fully monetarised society like ours, the immediate visible form that the 'need to work' takes for most people is a need to acquire money.

Money, no matter how useful, does not stand on its own two feet. When my uncle's house burned down or when he needed to buy a large piece of agricultural machinery, he increasingly came to think of what he needed not as 'money' but as 'credit'. Would the bank advance him the large sum of money he needed (in order to replace his broken combine harvester, so that he could harvest, sell his crop, and use the money to buy food, clothing, and other necessities for his family)? Since the financial crash of 2008 it has become commonplace to think of banks as inherently profligate institutions giving credit almost unthinkingly left and right, with a cavalier attitude toward risk, doing virtually anything to expand the amount they lend. This, however, was historically an aberration, created by a highly specific political policy which massively deregulated the financial sector and created a situation of perverse incentives to particularly irresponsible lending. Before the Big Bang of deregulation, most banks were keen to manage the risk they ran by lending responsibly, that is, only to individuals and enterprises that were 'creditworthy'. One could show oneself to be creditworthy by long years of diligent work, intelligent management, frugality, and punctilious repayment of existing debts. So one way of looking at my uncle's situation is that he had to keep working assiduously to satisfy a need he had to be (seen to be) creditworthy (when the day came that he would require a loan or an advance).

The way in which I have discussed money and creditworthiness might suggest that the realm of credit was something derivative or even parasitic, an appendix hooked on to the monetary system as a kind of afterthought.[1] For various reasons, this is the way things might seem to us, but actually – conceptually and historically – the order ought to be reversed. Credit and creditworthiness are both historically older and logically more fundamental than the monetary system. Even before the invention of money, farmers who lost their crops as a result of natural disasters might beg their more fortunate unaffected neighbours for an advance of seed and provisions, with a promise of return in kind or in the form of labour in their creditors' fields come harvest time. If food and seed were really scarce and precious, it would be natural for those who still had some not to waste it by giving it to people who were notoriously incompetent, idle, or unreliable, or whose promises of compensatory help in the future could not be trusted. This would be a rudimentary assessment of creditworthiness. So one of the reasons I need to work (and to be seen to work) is to maintain my status as minimally creditworthy, because without that, in a precarious world, I run great risks if I am eventually in difficulties. Since the appearance of assiduous application, dutifulness, and sobriety can differ from the reality of these things, there is a gap that can be exploited by the unscrupulous, and for that reason in many societies lenders take

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special precautions before advancing funds to people whom they have not thoroughly investigated.

The immediate form in which the necessity to work presents itself is that I must work to make money. Money, however, is something that is inherently instrumental; it is the mere tool par excellence. No one can eat cash – money is important only in its use, only for what it can buy. A miser may accumulate money for its own sake, but avarice in the classic sense, the simple hoarding of more and more money which is never used for anything, is just a psychological perversion. The traditional miser, for instance Molière's Harpagon, is very different from a more modern figure who might superficially seem to have some similarities to him, the billionaire 'investor' who desires to accrue money (in the form nowadays of shares, bonds, lines of credit, and other complex instruments) without limit. The difference is that the billionaire seeks more of something not simply to hoard it, but to use ever greater financial leverage to acquire power and control. Simply hoarding things does not in general give one control of anything. Avarice, one could say, belongs to the world of immediate consumption, which is in itself naturally limited: how many kilos of potatoes can one person (and her family and friends) eat? We all know sad cases of people who spend their whole life working and economising and die with – for example – a well-stocked cellar full of the wine they did not drink because they were saving it (or did not even work themselves up to that explicit thought, just followed a hoarding instinct). The miser violates a basic imperative in a simple system of work and consumption, by taking money radically out of circulation. The lust for indefinitely

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expanding financial power today, which would eventually allow you to buy newspapers, radio stations, and whole shoals of lawyers and politicians, establish research institutes devoted to promoting legislation that favours your interests, bankroll lobbying and public relations campaigns, etc. has no proper name (yet), but it belongs to a different context altogether and, whatever it might be, if it is a perversion, it is one in a different sense from old-style avarice. It is not connected with consumption, but is a form of desire for more and more control, and, as such, a kind of rational reflection of the basic imperatives of our economic system.

Since it must seem to many people that the immediate goal of work is the acquisition of money, and since money is something inherently instrumental which has no value of its own, this can lead to a strong association of work with that which is instrumental. Work, then, can come to seem to be in its very essence something we do not do for its own sake but only for something else which we can use it to acquire. In the technical vocabulary which philosophers have developed, work is always merely a means to an end, never an end in itself.

We have spoken of one perversion of the natural means/ends relation, the vice they called 'avarice'. In the nineteenth century, Marx diagnosed what he took to be another serious perversion of the means–end relation when he discussed the nature of work in the capitalist form of production.[2] The natural state of affairs, Marx thought, was that people worked *in order to live*, that is, they did some strenuous and perhaps slightly disagreeable things in order to be able to live a life full of a variety of different activities:

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they cleared out the rubbish from the house, for instance, so that there was an agreeable space for games, study, social interaction, eating. As always with Marx, it is the variety and fluidity of the activities involved and the way in which they were connected with the possible further development of human powers which is most important. The members of the nineteenth-century proletariat, though, rather than working in order to live, were forced to live *in order to work*. That is, they could not develop any of their capacities freely, but *all* activities of their lives had to be ruthlessly subordinated to the single goal of working. Since this was a reversal of the natural teleological relation, it was right to call it a 'perversion'. In the late twentieth century, a similar idea would be taken out of the context of social criticism and transformed into a matter of individual psychology, so that certain people would be called 'workaholics'; such people were thought to have a pathological dependence on what should be an activity that was an important enough part of human life, but that needed to be kept in its place.

Objectivity

The third main element in the concept of work is that there is a product that can be detached from the process of production and evaluated in its own terms, independently of the attitudes and intentions of the person(s) who produced it. The most obvious examples of a product are physical objects: the cobs of maize, bushels of wheat, and watermelons grown and harvested on a farm, or the sheets of steel produced in the steel mill. However, just as

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'strenuousness' can first be a property of physical activity but then come to be used of mental or moral exertion, so 'producing a product' can mean not producing a physical object, such as a piece of sheet-metal, but a more abstract process, such as writing a book, composing a piece of music, constructing an argument or theorem, or directing a play.

Goods and Services

Some economists distinguish two kinds of work: producing goods and rendering services. Even directing a play can be seen as the production of a kind of product: there is a performance which takes place at a particular time and can be evaluated. In contrast, rendering a service would be the kind of work done by a physiotherapist, an astrologer, or a person who washes cars. In such cases there may be a change of state (filthy car becomes clean, person unable to bend a leg regains the use of it, person in a state of anxiety about the future becomes confident [even if we would judge that that confidence is misplaced]), but there is no detachable product.

This distinction between goods and services is not sharp. The wig-maker works by making a wig (a 'good'), but the barber works, too, by washing and cutting your hair. A stylist, too, is working by merely arranging what is already there in an attractive way. We may even say that an image-consultant who does no more than just have a series of general conversations with you about aesthetics and sociology is working ('This is how they are doing it in *really* fashionable circles now'). This is not, in itself, a denigration

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of what a stylist or image-consultant might do, and certainly not in itself a reason to think what they do could not count as work.

The fluid and relatively insubstantial nature of the distinction between goods and services, with a gradual transition from one to the other, also emerges in stark relief if one reflects that, in one sense, my father's job belonged to the service sector in that he did not himself through his own direct action contribute to the production of the steel; he did not fire the ore or even himself move it or the resulting iron and steel, in their various forms, from one physical location to another, as the drivers of the locomotive and the operators of the cranes and fork-lifts did. He serviced the engines, inspecting them periodically to maintain them in working order and fixing them when they broke down. What was important was that there was a close, unmistakable, and objective physical connection between what he did, the ability of the locomotives and cranes to function, and the eventual outcome: the huge stacks and coils of sheet steel that were loaded into barges and freight-cars for dispatch elsewhere for use in further industrial processes.

So one might try to construct, by a series of small incremental steps, a sequence starting from my father's case, taking it, for the moment, as a kind of paradigm of work. Suppose that what he is doing is repairing a crane which is broken.

(1) He follows objective procedures – that is, he visibly manipulates parts of the crane in a tangible way, not at random, but following some more or less set rules which

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could be formulated and followed equally by any other mechanic, with the result that the crane works again, and through a further series of identifiable mechanical steps, the production process continues and eventually the coils and sheets of steel emerge at the end.

Suppose now that it is not the crane itself that is broken, but the operator who has been slightly hurt; suppose he has cut himself.

(2) The works nurse (or, in more serious cases, the works doctor) will follow objective procedures in cleaning and dressing the wound, and administering an anti-tetanus shot; these procedures can be formulated and are those more or less any doctor or nurse would follow; if all goes well and there are no complications, the crane-operator will eventually be able to work the crane again, with the result that production resumes.

In reality, of course, if the injury was anything other than absolutely trivial and immediately curable, the crane-operator would probably be sent home and replaced with another worker that day. What would happen next would depend on the particular socio-economic regime in place: the crane-operator would go to the infirmary, or be sent home on (paid or unpaid) furlough, or laid off, or even dismissed on account of disability, depending on the specific situation and the legal code. The management would have expected a mechanic to do almost *anything* to repair a crane rather than having it scrapped, because it was an expensive piece of machinery. The crane-operator, on the other hand, was just an individual operative from a potentially large pool

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of qualified workers, and was not nearly as valuable, and the company certainly would not think it could afford to stop production while he recovered. Let us, however, bracket this bit of knowledge about what might actually occur in practice and simply consider the work situation in relative abstraction.

The third case in the sequence is the physiotherapist who provides a service (which is a form of work) when the crane-operator suffers some kind of muscular damage, or chronic strain:

(3) the physiotherapist manipulates the crane-operator's body in a series of identifiable ways with the result that, if all goes well, he can (eventually) bend and extend his limbs in the required way, with the result that he can rejoin the productive process.

Here one can begin to add services that are less and less directly productive, but still in some way essential to production, such as 'industrial cleaners' (like my uncle) who are not, as one might think, primarily interested in aesthetics, but just in removing possible obstacles to the smooth running of the plant: bits of debris that workers could cut themselves on, spilled liquids that might be inflammable, piles of discarded, spoiled, or defective by-products that might block paths that need to be clear for the fork-lifts to operate. Eventually, after an indeterminate further number of entries into the sequence of services, one might get

(*n*) at some point in the past some teacher, probably following procedures prescribed in a school curriculum

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manual, taught my father (more or less), the crane-operator, the nurse, and the physiotherapist to read and calculate, thereby allowing them to acquire the skill of following written instructions for operating and repairing machinery (in the case of the former two) and curing minor physical ailments and injuries to the human body (in the case of the latter two), with the result that mechanised production in a very wide range of contexts could begin in the first place and resume when it was interrupted.

Suppose, however, that the crane-operator has not cut his hand or strained a muscle, but begins to suffer from bouts of depression that prevent him from coming to work or from working efficiently or carefully when he does turn up, and consults a psychotherapist:

($n + \varepsilon$) the psychotherapist treats the crane-operator for depression in one of a variety of ways, including prescription of medication, or behavioural therapy or a traditional 'talking cure', so that, if all goes well, he can come to control his depression sufficiently to return to work.

If we continue this imaginary sequence, we might try to add even further steps away from the basic paradigm of direct contribution to immediate production of goods, and eventually come to

(Ω) The priest (minister, imam, rabbi, guru, bonze, Kantian philosopher etc.) gives general religious consolation to workers and their families, tries to explain to them that

> their lives, despite appearances to the contrary, really do have some sense or meaning, gives them some general orientation for action, and encourages them to be dutiful in their work, thereby, if all goes well, preventing them from committing suicide, or falling prey to terminal lethargy or destructive insouciance; as a result production can continue.

In this progression, each step seems to be located further and further on a scale with several dimensions. The connection between work and result becomes more and more highly mediated by mental, psychological, and attitudinal factors, rather than being a question of a simple mechanical process. Hence the connection is less visible, and easier to fake.

This does not mean that the connection between my father and the motions he makes to fix the crane is without any mental or psychological component. Certainly, if one takes a sufficiently broad view of the context, it was necessary for mechanics minimally to have their wits about them in dealing with whatever the problem was. Still, what a mechanic does to get production going is, in an obvious sense, moving a part of the machinery (for example), whereas what the religious specialist does to get things moving is to perform religious ceremonies and gestures and to speak in such a way that enough members of his or her congregation understand and find themselves motivated to show up, fresh and, even if not exactly bushy-tailed, at least willing to work the next day.

A further component of the idea of objectivity which occurs here is the assumption that if the process is 'objective', the result can be predicted and replicated. The result is not a one-off or an accidental consequence and it does not depend on some magical rapport between a particular individual and the work-process. As one moves through the examples, the procedures used become less easy to formulate, less well codified and routinised, less easy for someone else to replicate (and thus less 'objective').

The Autotelic

Even if one accepts that this kind of step-by-step progression can be constructed, it certainly seems as if something has gone at least slightly wrong if teaching a child to read or consoling the bereaved is construed exclusively as a means to the production of an end; the distortion is compounded if that end is thought necessarily to be the continuation or expansion of production. The idea that I try to regain my health and the use of my limbs *in order to be able to produce coils of steel* again is already slightly bizarre in itself, and to think that this is really the *only* reason I wish to recover would represent a deep-seated kind of alienation. The *non plus ultra* of this form of aberration is described in Heine's poem *Das Sklavenschiff*,[3] where a slaver discovers that too many of the slaves who are immobilised and locked down in the hold of his ship are dying of 'melancholy' during the Middle Passage. So he forces them to come on deck, to sing, dance, and be merry 'because otherwise my business would be ruined'. Here the slaves are forced to satisfy perfectly natural human needs for sunlight, movement, activity, and

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even play, and to do that *only* in order then to be sold into a life of coerced labour.

Certainly, virtually all traditional philosophers have thought that if you wished to have your psyche in order, simply so that you would then be able to work, you were at the least seriously mistaken and probably deranged. If you had a healthy soul, *one* result would be that you would be able to work, and so in some sense it was not false to say that you wanted to get healthy in order to work; but in a non-perverted state it would also be the case that having your soul minimally in order had value in itself and independently of any further consequence that such health might have. In fact, one might even think that the question 'what is the value of having a healthy soul?' made no sense at all. Psychic health was 'autotelic', an unquestionable end in itself. Some philosophers, Plato's Socrates for instance, might say that the health of one's soul was the most autotelic thing (or state?) that existed for a human being.[4] At least if we look at the world from the point of view of individuals, production does not seem to be the only possible final framework for thinking about life.