Andrea Veltman
Meaningful Work
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Reviewed by Mechthild Nagel, 2018

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When I was a teaching assistant for an ethics class, I relished preparing the undergraduate students for the eventuality of our strike for union recognition. I told them that Kant would favor the strikers, because we were being used as a mere means to an end. (After all, the state's National Labor Relations Board refused to recognize graduate employees as workers and compared our status to prisoners.) So, with "serfs at work" signs, I appealed to the ethics students that they also needed to support our dignity campaign. I was delighted to see that Andrea Veltman, a veteran *Hypatia* contributor, makes a business case for Kant's defense of the humanity in persons, that is, treating workers as ends in her illuminating chapter "Autonomous and Oppressive Work" (89-92). She boldly argues for a radical transformation of current business practices with consideration of the categorical imperative.

In fact, Veltman makes clear that her book's main focus is to provide a normative defense for meaningful work and only secondarily a consideration of *political* justification. Utilizing eudaimonic theory in conjunction with recognition theory, she argues for a robust theorization of work, which has received short shrift in Western ethics. It is as if ethicists were still under the spell of Aristotle's ideal of the male, elite Athenian philosopher, freed from the constraints of the drudgery of work, all the way to Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, where he claims that leisurely life (without work) can secure (social) esteem. Veltman notes that meaningful work gets short shrift in ethical liberal traditions that discuss the meaning of flourishing or eudaimonic conditions. In her introduction, she mentions twenty "vectors of impact," such as economic security, psychological well-being, and esteem. Work affects health, positively or negatively, gives purposefulness and proximity to strangers, and helps us to develop a range of ethical virtues (4-9). She advances a *centrality of work* thesis, which she revisits in her last chapter on value

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pluralism, within a flourishing life. Veltman downplays antiwork proposals (cf. Weeks 2011, mentioned by Veltman in another context) and suggests that leisure and play activities are conditioned by work (not vice versa). She writes that "[w]ork habits impact leisure activities, as people apply habits developed at work to leisure" (9). She extols the virtue of work as social duty, but she remains silent on what effects the "centrality of work" thesis might have on those who have disabilities that prevent them from workforce participation. Veltman rejects narrow definitions of work as paid activity and notes that care work is purposeful. She considers the special case of parenting as a "borderline case of work," noting that some full-time caregivers may feel deprived of experiencing key aspects of fulfilling work (26). Objectively speaking, parenting becomes serious (and traumatizing) work, for example, when a parent is investigated for potential child abuse or neglect and has to prove to a state agency and a family court judge that she is a devoted mother, being subjected to different mandatory programs (Nagel 2018). Overall, Veltman gives plausible examples of what counts as dignified work and gives a nod to strong labor unions and state-sponsored workplace regulations (30). In one case, though, her argumentation is problematic. Sex work has come under intense scrutiny by feminist theorists, with sharp divisions between carceral feminists (who advocate prohibition) and sex-worker rights advocates. Veltman takes a different approach: "One might also point to prostitution or participation in pornography as forms of work that undermine dignity. Or, if the reader believes prostitutes or pornographic models and actors retain dignity at work, consider the extraordinary indignities of slave labor or labor inflicted on prisoners in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany" (31). I will pass over the troubling analogy of paid work and slave labor. However, given that the book seems to give a blueprint for meaningful work in capitalist "liberal democracies" (70), it may be more appropriate to gesture at contemporary prisoners' chain-gangs, condemned to demeaning, stigmatizing, worthless stone-breaking in southern US states, than at Nazi practices.

The second chapter analyzes contemporary theories of work as a human good, rejecting hedonism, proposed by J. S. Mill, on grounds that it is ill equipped to account for multiple intrinsically valuable goods promoting flourishing (40-41). Neo-Aristotelians who defend perfectionism may need to appeal to egalitarian political norms to eschew charges of elitism (44-45). Although the prominent capabilities theorist Martha Nussbaum develops an important catalogue of human goods that mirrors the concerns of the decent work initiative of the International Labor Organization, Veltman faults her for neglecting work or meaningful work in her famous ten-point human capabilities approach (48). However, Nussbaum does acknowledge briefly the value of reflective, nonalienated work in other writings (49), as does Rawls in a later work (60). The chapter concludes with a consideration of Marx's writings on nonalienated, self-expressive forms of labor and of religious ideological views of the dignity of work, especially in Protestantism (61-70).

In the third chapter, on autonomous and oppressive work, Veltman analyzes the social dimensions of workplace ethics. Again, she faults theorists of autonomy for neglecting the status of meaningful work and contrasts a Kantian ideal of autonomy with Frederick Taylor's scientific management and its lasting legacy on today's managerial ideology, which places little value on on a worker's unique decision-making capability (73). Veltman makes a case for feminist relational autonomy and deftly argues in favor of a *universal basic income*, developing a robust defense of this proposal against skeptics in addressing their classic objections: duty to work and

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motivation to work. The advantages of a universal basic income in a capitalist society are numerous, based on the ideals of justice and autonomy: fighting hunger and poverty; giving adult victims of intimate-partner violence more autonomous decision-making (for example, leaving an abuser); giving the unemployed or precariously employed the right to reject job offers (95); getting better-paying jobs (101). A universal basic income may be able to obviate the need for cumbersome bureaucratic welfare systems that criminalize or mistreat those who enroll in their means-tested programs (96). Veltman does briefly mention punitive workfare (99). Clearly, a universal, non-means-tested basic income could be quite life-affirming for those who are currently enmeshed in the tentacles of family or criminal court procedures and who lose their children because they are homeless and jobless. Veltman notes that empirical studies also show that people are in fact motivated to work (for pay), which, I surmise, may be especially true for those residing in Anglo-American countries with their puritan work ethic and the concomitant social shaming of idleness. Furthermore, the need to work will always exist, but with a guaranteed income, workers would be in a better position to negotiate for meaningful positions. A current campaign, by the US-based GiveDirectly organization, of unconditional support for Kenyan and Ugandan villagers living in extreme poverty has already shown that even a tiny monthly stipend ($22) is making an enormous difference in both women's and men's lives. Rather than becoming idle, people show in early results an increased interest in investment opportunities and keeping children in school (https://www.givedirectly.org). Veltman mentions the right of citizens to a basic income in a well-ordered society, but she remains silent on such needs for undocumented noncitizens, who tend to do the dirty, dangerous work, which is universally considered nonmeaningful. It would have been helpful if she had provided clear policy solutions aiming toward humane working conditions. Veltman is quite skeptical about state regulatory power, which I certainly appreciate with respect to the disciplinary apparatus of the legal system. She thinks the social duty to work, to assist in public/community projects, is better pressed through social sanctioning than through the state's legal or bureaucratic enforcement mechanisms, adding that a "social duty to work also appears justifiable only if associated with a broad and inclusive conception of work that includes paid and unpaid caring work" (100).

In chapter 4, "What Makes Work Meaningful?," Veltman finally defines meaningful work with four criteria: developing capabilities, supporting virtues, providing purpose, and connecting to social or environmental affinities or contexts (117). Drawing on Susan Wolf's analysis, Veltman highlights the subjective and objective values of meaningful work, and quite similarly to Nussbaum's capabilities approach, focuses on autonomy, self-worth, and adds recognition as a facet of the four dimensions. One might wonder what dimensions of meaningful work would be foundational in societies that value relational or Ubuntu ethics more than individual agency. It is also noteworthy that Veltman considers the self as creator of virtues such as self-respect, honor, dignity, and pride (114-15). This insight seems to be contrary to empirical findings and conceptual analysis in moral psychology and humiliation studies, which would hold that these values are socially constructed. Workers are drawn to finding something meaningful in their daily toil, as exemplified by a young Chinese garment worker in a sweatshop (136). "Finding meaningfulness is a basic human desire; it is not a bourgeois privilege" (137). Veltman focuses on the importance of validating care work with respect to the social dimensions of the criteria, making use of Beauvoir's conceptual differentiation of enduring work and ephemeral labor. She

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notes that childrearing usually creates "durable beings of value," yet she is careful not to romanticize the drudgery of everyday childcare work (128-31).

Chapter 5 answers the pertinent question of whether meaningful work is available to all people, starting off with an ironic nod to More's *Utopia*, wherein only criminals would have to perform demeaning work (142). Here, it would have been opportune to mention that the United States is the only country in which slavery is quite ironically codified in the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, which abolished chattel slavery, but in which free people convicted of a crime are considered prisoners of the state. Therefore, it would have been interesting to ponder the question of whether prisoners, who work for $15/hour or for "free" in the state of Texas, are able to engage in meaningful work. Veltman, by contrast, focuses on the stigma that sanitation workers face and whether their socially important work could be subject to communal job rotation, as Paul Gomberg has proposed (146). She rejects resolutely a claim of Oscar Wilde, who was incidentally a prisoner of conscience, advocating for the abolition of all rote and dangerous work, by specifically mentioning care work. Some work, such as childcare and caring for people with disabilities, cannot be outsourced to robots (150-51). Gomberg's call for shared, rotational work in *How to Make Opportunity Equal: Race and Contributive Justice* (Gomberg 2007) is necessary to undo the unequal educational opportunities that prepare some children for lives of routine labor and that perpetuate a racist division of labor, and to encourage all to develop mastery in various types of work (152-56).

Because her focus is on ethics, Veltman does not hone in on the rich Marxist feminist literature that discusses extensively production and social reproduction in the workplace and family structure (cf. Ferguson, Hennessy, and Nagel 2016). Her concern lies more with establishing ethical conduct in a well-ordered society and consideration of work among decent people, clearly working within a Rawlsian framework. Here I find Veltman's analysis oscillating between nonideal theory, by mentioning Iris Marion Young's work on oppression and social responsibility, and ideal theory that organizes principles around a polity that is not muddied by ableism, racism, xenophobia, and heteropatriarchal norms. One case in point, articulated in her last chapter, "Value Pluralism and the Ethical, Social, and Political Implications of the Centrality Thesis," concerns, again, her (ethically grounded) theory of the state. She is adamant in denying the state any role in regulating meaningful work. This makes quite good sense in a classical liberal ideological framework where the focus remains on autonomous, rational choice and the virtue of negative freedom. Oddly, she slips from a right to meaningful work (which she rejects) to a right to work (190), which, interestingly, is the euphemistic slogan of US southern states that revel in keeping the power of trade unions at bay. She also notes that even Marx does not endorse a "right to meaningful work" since he rejects the concept of natural rights (190). In the end, Veltman endorses Gomberg's concept of *contributive* justice (instead of goods being distributed by the state). "Contributive justice obtains when everyone in a household, organization, or community pulls his or her weight, rather than shifting undesirable duties onto others, which enables everyone in turn to enrich communities through work that utilizes developed skills and talents of persons" (192). This may lead to a (naïve?) view that the free agency of a worker is prized--again, in an *ideal* social context where racism and other forms of discrimination do not enter the picture. Where do trade unions or workers' cooperatives or mutual aid societies fit into this picture of a well-ordered polity? What of unions that pursue a

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social justice or movement agenda? Are trade unions simply poised to use the enforcement arm of the state to assert their own bureaucratic agenda, thus stifling creativity in the workplace?

One might also approach meaningful work regarding the utility of state-sponsored programs such as the historically race-based policy of affirmative action in a capitalist democracy. Veltman is very clear on arguing in favor of "opportunities" for a flourishing work life. However, meaningful jobs are fiercely guarded by the elite, who have much to protect. For example, a recent review of the State University System of New York (SUNY) reveals that the last two decades show that the recruitment and retention of Black and Latinx faculty has been "abysmal" across all sectors of the sixty-four-campus system (Sinclair and Katzin 2017). We know of sticky floors and glass ceilings, and having a chance to enter the elite workplace (tenure-track academic positions) is left to those with ample social and cultural capital. And in SUNY's case, the faculty union has not been able to prevent an arctic racial climate. I also do not think it is wise to dismiss these concerns as reflecting (mere) political aims (cf. 110 and chapter 6, passim).

No doubt, at the micro level, this statement has value: "Perhaps reflecting on what makes work meaningful, and on what human values attach to work, can in turn help individuals, communities, and employing organizations make wiser and more ethical decisions when faced with occupational choices and open possibilities for the provision of work. But what we do after reflecting on the meaningfulness of work is up to us and need not involve the state" (110). I want to focus on the last sentence of the quote, which argues for sidelining the regulatory power of the state. Veltman mentions the Shaker community's support of rotational manual labor, but, arguably, Amish and Mennonites' mutual aid philosophy provides a richer model for testing meaningful and cooperative work with minimal interaction with a bureaucratic state. Indeed, it would be lovely if the state left communities of color alone, comparable to the extent that these white communities are. However, a cursory review of historical events in North America remind Black communities and Indigenous nations that they live in settler colonial states. The MOVE organization in Philadelphia pursued a bucolic vision (while also critiquing boldly the police and politically corrupt power structure). They were attacked, with a C4 bomb dropped on their house courtesy of the FBI, wiping out the entire African American neighborhood of over sixty buildings. The Black Panther Party organized along a platform of subsistence living, antimilitarism, and the right to self-determination. The FBI declared the organization a prime state enemy. By contrast, Black theorists have declared the United States a failed state for African Americans. Policing is a matter of law enforcement, which means establishing command presence and striking terror or fear in subjects not considered citizens. Black Lives Matter is a movement's response to the white supremacist "pursuit of happiness" (cf. 190). Such "pursuit" is a dream deferred, since meaningful job opportunities involve long commutes, if they materialize at all.

Lest Veltman leave us with a laissez-faire ideology, she does concede that in "non-ideal conditions" of global south or north countries' economies, there is a need for labor laws and enforcement of such laws to preserve dignity, health, and safety of toiling workers, the need to prevent child and sweatshop labor, and so on (200). However, she immediately brings us back to the realm of business ethics, and appeals to a corporation's enlightened self-interest in doing the right thing such as "prioritizing people over profit" (201). And she seems to agree with Marxist critics that democratic socialist "elements" may have potential for creating conditions for more

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meaningful work than capitalist ones. Perhaps if Patrice Lumumba of the Congo or Salvador Allende of Chile had been "allowed" by imperial forces to experiment with democratic socialism, we would be in the position of testing alternative economic systems and their salutary impact on workers and their families. Alas, considering these historical examples, the CIA, in collusion with transnational capital, would not take such chances. In the end, Veltman seems ready to part with capitalism (211), but only if a strong ethic concerning workers is in place after revolutionary practices have won the day. Indeed, the challenge of addressing bullying in the workplace and persistent discriminatory practices is immense. At historically white colleges and universities in the US, racial inequity starkly persists, and perhaps both Veltman's four normative criteria for envisioning meaningful work for everybody and strong incentives for legal compliance with antidiscrimination and antibullying measures would bring about lasting changes. And enlightened self-interested employers might just turn over their enterprise freely to their workers to run the business in a cooperative manner, producing fertile conditions for meaningful work.

Meaningful Work carves out a new direction in liberal political theory and makes for essential reading in a business ethics seminar for undergraduates as well as graduate students. It develops a cogent defense of a eudaimonic capabilities approach by analyzing diverse workplaces and providing a novel feminist contribution to care ethics.

Note

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