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Catholic Social Teachings: Toward a Meaningful Work

Ferdinand Tablan

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Abstract Meaningful work is both a moral issue and an economic one. Studies show that workers' experience of meaninglessness in their jobs contributes to job dissatisfaction which has negative effects to business. If having a meaningful work is essential for the well-being of workers, providing them with one is an ethical requirement for business establishments. The essay aims to articulate an account of meaningful work in the Catholic social teachings (CST). CST rejects the subjectivist and relativist notion of work which affirms the absolute freedom of individuals to choose their commitment and goals, even if this includes experiencing satisfaction in dehumanizing work. First, the paper will present a summary account of some of the current views on meaningful work from the objective-normative approach. This will be followed by a systematic treatment of the meaning and value of work in the CST, the similarities and differences it has with alternative views, and its implications for the way we promote meaningful work. The paper will argue that by recognizing the subjective and objective dimensions of work and affirming that although the two are inseparable, the former takes priority over the latter; CST develops a holistic, comprehensive, and coherent account of meaningful work which overcomes some of the difficulties that are usually encountered in dealing with this issue from a purely objective approach.

Keywords Work ethics · Catholic social teachings · Business ethics · Meaningful work

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Introduction

Meaningful work is both an economic and a moral issue. It is closely associated with motivation (Michaelson 2005, p. 13) and is a significant aspect of employee satisfaction. Aside from having a job where they can find supportive social relationship and financial security, workers want a “meaningful employment and the opportunity to grow and develop as a person” (O’Toole and Lawler 2006, p. 8). According to Overell, occupational satisfaction is related to the workers’ experience of meaning in what they do. “There is evidence that what people want from work is to feel useful, fulfilled at least to some degree, to participate in a collective effort and that work should be performed in an environment that respects fairness and dignity” (Overell 2009, p. 14). Decline in job satisfaction has negative effects to business such as absenteeism, employee apathy, and high rate of turnover. O’Toole and Lawler (2006, p. 9) believe that “satisfying the needs of Americans for good jobs is important, if not essential for the prosperity, health, and social well-being of the nation.” If having a meaningful work is essential in living a fulfilled and meaningful life, Gini (1992, p. 67) claims that “access to work that is meaningful and developmental must be part of the basic package of ethical human rights.” Using the Kantian principle of treating persons as ends in themselves, Bowie (1999, p. 70) contends that “providing meaningful work is one possible and rather effective way for a firm to honor the requirement that it respect the humanity of its employees and the imperfect obligation of beneficence.”

But what exactly constitutes meaningful work? The conventional view is that for work to be meaningful, it should be something that an individual is interested in, an activity that she likes to do and spend most of her time on because of the personal satisfaction brought about by the

activity itself. This subjective approach, however, is problematic. It would make it difficult to theoretically distinguish meaningful work from an absorbing play or leisure. “Meaningful work and leisure consist of activities that aren’t just instrumental, but are rewarding or pleasurable in their own right” (Ciulla 2000, p. 17). A number of business ethicists think that to provide every employee with a subjectively conceived meaningful work is unrealizable. Individual satisfaction is too broad and vague to be the basis of creating a meaningful employment. There are occupations that are socially necessary but may not be personally satisfying. Even if we assume for the sake of argument that it is feasible for every employee to be provided with meaningful work the way she defines it, it remains unclear why this should be a management obligation (Bowie 1998, p. 1083; Parker and Bevan 2011, p. 17). Hence, before business leaders can determine the factors that will make meaningful work possible, we need an objective-normative definition which will allow us to distinguish meaningful work from non-meaningful one.

A standard argument against the objective-normative approach, on the other hand is that “it is implausible that one could formulate a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions of what kinds of activity the term *meaningful work* refers to” (Walsh 1994, p. 237). When workers are asked to define meaningful work, they do not actually share a single understanding of the word “meaning.” First, meaning may refer to *telos* or purpose. The meaning of work depends on what the work creates for the individual and the community. Meaning may also refer to *sensus* (sense making) or the intention that one holds. “In this approach, ‘the meaning of work’ is about the values that are placed on work by the individuals who do it” (Overell 2009, pp. 5–6). Lastly, meaning may also be determined by the presence of “fit” between the person and his employment. Today, many use the language of “fit” in describing the job that they find meaningful. A job fits because it enables the worker to use her talents and abilities, or there is a harmonious alignment between work and the individual’s goals, values, temperament, and lifestyle (Muirhead 2004).

The meaning of human work is central to the Catholic social teachings (CST).¹ The purpose of this paper is to provide a specific application of CST on the contemporary

ethical discussion of meaningful work. First, it will present a summary account of some of the current views on meaningful work from the objective-normative approach. This will be followed by a systematic treatment of the meaning and value of work in the CST, the similarities and differences it has with alternative views, and its implications for the way we promote meaningful work. The paper will argue that by recognizing the subjective and objective dimensions of work and affirming that although the two are inseparable, the former takes priority over the latter; CST develops a holistic, comprehensive, and coherent account of meaningful work which overcomes some of the difficulties that are usually encountered in dealing with this issue from a purely objective approach.

The Objective-Normative Approach

The objective-normative approach defines meaningful work as that which actualizes certain human potentials: creativity, autonomy, abilities and talents, identity, and sociality. This is not simply a matter of personal preference, for the cultivation of these goods is necessary to fulfill a human end or purpose, e.g., happiness, self-development and well-being, or personal excellence. Work is not just the use of mind or muscle in order to achieve a particular task or obtain our material needs; it shapes human personality and is the most significant factor that affects the development of our self-identity. Philosophically, this approach has its roots in the Marxist theory of work. To be human in Marxism is not simply to be born with a rational nature. “Man as he sprang originally from nature was only a mere creature of nature, not a man” (Engels 1972, p. 261). Human nature is a product of human activity, not heredity. “Birth only provides a man with his individual existence and constitutes him in the first instance only as a natural individual” (Marx 1975, p. 175). To be human means to work, to produce something, and to imprint a human image in something that is non-human. Work is man’s conscious use of his natural faculties which result directly or indirectly in the transformation of nature for the purposes of satisfying some form of human need. But work is not only the transformation of matter but also the objectification of human nature. Through work, humans become aware of their powers and bring them to perfection. As a conscious and teleological act, it is always accompanied by reason. In labor, man distinguishes himself from other species. As he produces objects that are necessary for his subsistence, he likewise produces consciousness of these objects, of his fellow workers, of human society, and of himself. Work is not only instrumental in humanizing nature, but also in humanizing man too. Work is man’s species activity, i.e., it is not only an act of man but also his self-activity.

¹ Catholic social teachings refer to a wide variety of documents of the magisterium of the Catholic Church which respond to the changing social and economic challenges of the modern world. “There is no canonical or official list of the documents belonging to Catholic social teachings” (Aubert and Boileau 2003, p. 17). “Beginning with Leo XIII and his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), which addressed some of the problems that were emerging in the relationship of management and labor due to the great changes brought about by the Industrial Age, every pope thereafter would utilize his office to address social concerns” (McKenna 2002, p. 13).

Desjardins, Schumacher, and Bowie provide a conception of work which is in line with the objective-normative model. Desjardins (2012, p. 144) defines meaningful work as “work at which individuals express their identities and which allows individuals to flourish in all their diversity.” He further adds that meaningful work must produce high quality goods and services that satisfy authentic human needs and serve the common good. For Schumacher, work is a fundamental part of our humanity, thus the question on what kind of work is meaningful cannot be separated from questions regarding our rational nature and the purpose of life. He believes that a good work fulfills the following functions:

- (1) to give a person a chance to utilize and develop his faculties; (2) to enable him to overcome his inborn egocentricity by joining with other people in a common task; and (3) to bring forth the goods and services needed by all of us for a decent existence. (Schumacher 1979, p. 76)²

Bowie for his part highlights the importance of respecting the worker’s autonomy, since work is essential in the development of one’s selfhood. A meaningful work must be freely chosen and must not be a hindrance to the realization of the workers’ personal happiness and moral development.³ Further, “To treat a person as an end itself sometimes requires that we do more than merely refrain from coercion or deception, it requires that we take some positive action to help a person” (1998, p. 63). Management has an imperfect duty of beneficence to organize a workplace where employees can make the best use of their rational faculties and exercise their independence, but it must never act paternalistically. Workers must be given the “latitude to pursue their individual conceptions of happiness in accordance with their own desires” (Bowie 1999, p. 66).⁴

Virtue ethicists (Walsh 1994; Beadle and Knight 2012) believe that the concept of meaningful work can be correlated with Aristotle’s notion of *eudaimonia* or human flourishing. According to Aristotle, the human chief good lies in the activity of the rational soul in accordance with

virtue. Virtue is excellence in human function “as” human which means living a life subject to rational oversight. The meaning of work depends on how the activity promotes the exercise and perfection of human powers, especially the intellectual ones. To accomplish this, work must entail specific activities that are open ended rather than mechanical or determined, i.e., they allow a continuous dialectical process between the subject’s intent and practice, and it is through this process that decision making, communication, imagination, and improvement of task take place. To be open ended means that meaningful work should involve complex roles that give opportunities for self-expression, innovation, critical thinking, and creativity. Because virtues are the result of human action and their cultivation is constitutive of human good, virtue ethics places the meaningfulness of work on the goods internal to productive activities, other goods that we may derive from work but are not directly related to them are merely “incidental benefits” (Walsh 1994, p. 246). What virtue ethicists would like to accomplish is to develop a non-subjective, non-circular, and a normative framework that can be used, not only in assessing whether or not an occupation is meaningful, but also in establishing further empirical research agenda.

Contemporary work theorists Gini and Ciulla articulate their respective views on meaningful work in relation to human fulfillment. Using historical, literary, empirical, and philosophical sources, the two authors delve independently into the historical and cultural presuppositions of the many meanings of work. According to Ciulla (2000, p. 225) to define meaningful work on the basis of one’s subjective preferences is “morally dangerous.” Gini defines meaningful work in terms of the totality of internal goods (self-mastery, self-esteem, physical and mental health, and perfection of our abilities) and external goods (individual and social wealth) that it creates. Obtaining a good work is important because “We literally create ourselves in our work” (Gini 2006, p. 127). Bowie’s notion of a completely autonomous worker is an illusion, for a dialectical relationship exists between the worker and her work. While we shape and control our work, our work shapes us too. It determines our social roles, our stable sense of self-esteem, the place where we live, our economic status, the quality of our lives, as well as our physical ailments, and psychological disorders. “It structures our time and imposes a rhythm on our lives. It gets us organized into various kinds of communities and social groups” (Ciulla 2000, p. 7). Work can be a source of our happiness and fulfillment, but it can also be a source of our degradation and ruin. Like Marx and Ciulla, Gini (2006, pp. 139–140) is worried that emphasis on work as an end in itself can limit our options and possibilities, leading us to miss other equally important things in life like leisure and recreation. For some of us,

² See also Gini (1992, pp. 233–234; 2001, pp. 51–52).

³ In his reply to his critics, Bowie says that he has no problem amending his account of meaningful work to include intellectual virtues and psychological goods. He writes, “I would like to continue the conversation to see if a Kantian and an Aristotelian convergence might develop around a self-fulfillment theory of a meaningful work” (2012, p. 187).

⁴ Criticisms have been leveled against the implication of Kant’s notion of imperfect duty for business. Imperfect duty gives one a wide range of options because it does not specify any particular course of action to achieve an end. “This means one is duty bound to *do something, sometime*, to help others in need but one need not help on every occasion—beneficence in this case, is optional” (Ohreen and Petry 2012, p. 369).

work has become “a narcotic, our coping mechanism for life” (Gini 2001, p. 122).

Ciulla's disagreement with Marx is that while he views human history as a product of labor, she (2000, p. 8) considers work itself as an “artificial need manufactured by our history and culture.” The need to work is an outcome of our education, training, and moral conditioning. She refuses to give an essential definition of a meaningful work (*we just know it when we see it*), and tends to be vague in regard to the relation between meaningful work and meaningful life (or the good life in the Aristotelian sense). Both have objective and subjective dimensions, but she does not explain the relationship between the objective and the subjective element. Meaningful work refers to those activities that enable us to live a happy life, but “those who cannot find them at work may still find them in leisure” (Ciulla 2000, p. 226).

In general, the objective-normative approach focuses on the physical or material conditions of the job itself, i.e., factors that are extrinsic to the workers' subjectivity. It implies that the right kind of tasks and the proper organization of the workplace can foster human flourishing or fulfillment, thereby making work meaningful. But while conditions in the workplace that will make work interesting and engaging can be identified objectively, the concept of meaning is also subject dependent. Different persons have diverse conceptions of what is a fulfilling occupation depending on their needs, preferences, interests, beliefs, and situatedness, and most often, it is the subject's condition which makes work fulfilling. With the current state of unemployment, not all Americans can find the job that satisfies all their expectations and wants, some have less options but to accept any job that is available no matter how unsatisfying it is, while others have to make a trade-off between the kind of work that meets their immediate needs and those things that they value most. “Indeed, for most workers, whichever need is unmet on the job becomes the one they are most concerned about fulfilling next” (O'Toole and Lawler 2006, p. 9). In addition, people's religious beliefs and worldviews also shape the meaning they assign to work. Hence, how meaningful our work is depends in a certain measure to our value system and priorities.

Catholic Social Teachings on the Meaning and Value of Work

The social concern of the Church is the authentic development of man and society which would respect and promote all the dimensions of the person: “whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will” (Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* 1965, no. 3).⁵ Being

⁵ See also John Paul II (1987, no. 1).

created in God's image and likeness,⁶ the person is a subjective being who is “capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency to self-realization” (John Paul II 1981, no. 6). She is not like any other physical object existing in the world for she is the subject of her own action. Through her immaterial intellect, she surpasses the material universe. Her reason enables her to “discover the earth's productive potentials and the many different ways in which human needs can be satisfied” (John Paul II 1991, no. 32). This primacy, however, is not only in the natural realm but also extends even to the social order. Having a rational soul, the person acquires an inherent dignity which cannot be compromised at any cost. Such dignity implies that she takes priority in economic life. Despite the extensive use of advanced manufacturing machines and automation, the person remains the proper subject of work and the efficient cause of production.

The CSTs position on human essence as rational does not mean that the person is a *fait accompli*. Human beings are constantly striving for fulfillment and perfection which cannot be satisfied by an individual alone due to the nature of human needs (physical and non-physical) and the individual's limitations to meet all her needs. The human person is also a social being. “For by innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential” (Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* 1965, no. 12). She has the natural capacity to participate in social life, i.e., to interact with other persons and promote their good in such a manner that in so doing, self-fulfillment is achieved. In actions that are directed toward the benefit of others, the person becomes more fully herself, for only persons are capable of making a disinterested gift of themselves to others. Since social participation is necessary for human fulfillment, a social being willingly seeks the common good and the welfare of the community because private good and common good are never opposed to each other. There is no inherent conflict between one's personal development and social advancement.

Gini (1992, p. 233) and DesJardins (2010, p. 466) see significant parallelism between the conception of work in Marx's earlier writings and in *Laborem Exercens* (LE). In his text, John Paul II reveals a new aspect of the human being which earlier encyclicals somehow neglect—the person as a *homo laborans*. Work is an essential ingredient in the development of the person and a fundamental

⁶ Because metaphysics is necessary to ground human rights and dignity, CST is normative in its orientation as it analyzes and judges human experience in the light of the Divine truth and the philosophy of being of the Christian tradition, while at the same time assimilating the insights of the entire philosophical tradition, the most important of which is the subjectivity of the human person.

dimension of her rational existence. According to the pope (1981, no. 4), the church

is confirmed in this conviction by considering the whole heritage of many sciences devoted to man: anthropology, paleontology, history, sociology, psychology, and so on; they all seem to bear witness to this reality in an irrefutable way. But the source of the Church's conviction is above all the revealed word of God, and, therefore, what is a conviction of the intellect is also a conviction of faith.

God did not create humans to be idle (Genesis 2:15). Work is an integral part of the Divine plan from the very beginning. Following the Aristotelian-Thomistic notion of act and potency, CST argues that the person is incomplete and contingent not only because she is created, but also because she is in the process of self-actualization or self-determining, both in terms of her activity and subjectivity. The actualization and dynamism of the human being are derived from her potentiality. When she works, she does not only improve her physical environment, but also develops herself and experiences a sense of fulfillment. Work is a self-realizing process on the part of the workers, it actualizes their potentials and enhances their natural capabilities. It carries with it a sense of purposefulness and usefulness which are so indispensable to one's self-esteem. One feels a sense of accomplishment by achieving her goal and producing something that satisfies another's need. Work is part of the person's real, embodied, and historical existence.

LE makes a distinction between the objective and the subjective senses of work.⁷ Objectively considered, work is a transitive action that brings about the transformation of things. As such, it is a means to economic development and appears in various types or values depending on its output. The proximate or immediate end of work is the satisfaction of human needs. It involves the transformation of natural objects for human use. But subjectively, work is only a single activity, it does neither admit degrees or qualifications nor is it rated or priced in any manner, for its worth comes from the fact that it proceeds from the person. Subjectively, work is also an immanent action as it brings about the self-realization of the worker.

The notion of the subjectivity of work and its priority is original in the writings of John Paul II and a reflection of his personalist background in philosophy. The word subjectivity, however, has a technical meaning in the pre-pontifical writings and the encyclicals of the pope. It is not synonymous with subjectivism—the view that the individual creates her own self and values. CST rejects the subjectivist and relativist notion of work which affirms the absolute freedom of

individuals to choose their commitment and goals, even if this includes experiencing satisfaction in dehumanizing work. John XXIII (1963, no. 14) defines authentic freedom as that “which most truly safeguards the dignity of the human person.” The person is not only the efficient cause of production but also its final cause as well for the end of work is to promote the well-being of the worker. Work belongs to the person from whom it arises and for whose benefit it is intended.

As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his reason of his very humanity. (John Paul II 1981, no. 11)

The subjectivity of work means that the human person is the subject of work. Being a subject is more than being an agent, for a subject is a conscious, self-governing, and self-determining being who experiences her own self in her actions. She is aware that she is responsible of her action and its concomitant effects. As an *actus personae* (act of the person), work cannot have a separate and independent meaning apart from the actual individual worker. In all types of work, it is the person who acts and human faculties are the ones that are utilized. Every act leads to an end which is the realization of the subject's intent, its fruition or fulfillment. Fulfillment leads not just to the completion of the act but to the perfection of the subject. As expressions of our inmost being, our acts have physical, ethical, and spiritual repercussions on ourselves.

The subjectivity of work takes priority over its objective aspect. The person as a subject cannot be an object. Being an end in itself, the person cannot be subordinated to other lesser ends or values. To put more emphasis in its objective feature is to alienate workers from their nature by transforming them into a mere instrument of production. Any human activity that violates human dignity and treats the person simply as a tool of production cannot be considered work. The transformation of matter which results from work is less significant to the transformation of persons as they work. While CST recognizes the importance of external and internal goods that come with honest work, including the acquisition of virtues, the dignity of work does not come from sophisticated level of complexity or from the knowledge and technical competence that it requires. “The sources of the dignity of work are to be sought primarily in the subjective dimension, not in the objective one” (John Paul II 1981, no. 6).

Since *Rerum Novarum*, CST has emphasized the right to work as the most important among the workers' rights. The encyclicals, however, have no explicit mention of the right to a meaningful work. In defining the person as a *homo laborans*, *LE* in Baum's (1982, pp. 10–11) analysis, avoids any form dogmatism. Such definition is chosen because it sheds light on “man's position in history, to analyse the

⁷ John Paul II (1981, no. 6).

threats to human being in present day society, and to move toward the construction of a society in which people are able to live more authentically.” It is not the intent of John Paul II to impose a single, universal, and abstract definition of meaningful work on everyone. At the start of his analysis, he considers work as “any activity of man, whether manual or intellectual, whatever its nature of circumstances, it means any human activity that can and must be recognized as work... to which he is predisposed by his very nature, by virtue of humanity itself” (John Paul II 1981, no. 1).

John Paul II (1981, no. 18) says that when we consider the rights of the worker, the first to be defended and promoted is the right to find a “suitable employment for all who are capable of it.” This right is derived from the fundamental human right to live, and the pope calls on the state to ensure that all workers reach a satisfactory level of employment in order for them to meet their basic needs. This right, however, does not necessarily include the right to have a meaningful or fulfilling work. Having the right to work does not entail the right to get a specific type of work, to have a personally satisfying job, to get a job that one sees fit, or to live a certain lifestyle. It is about being able to freely choose a means of livelihood that is consonant with human dignity.⁸ To this right is certainly joined other rights that are necessary in order for the worker and her family to live decently, to be physically and mentally healthy, and to enjoy a level of security and independence. These rights are categorical expressions of the fundamental moral characteristic of every person, and “which are therefore universal, inviolable and inalienable” (John XXIII 1963, no. 145).

Certain similarities exist between the objective-normative approach to the question of meaningful work and the language of workers’ rights enunciated by CST. Compliance to specific work conditions is morally necessary so that the welfare of the workers is protected. However, they are not by themselves sufficient to guarantee that the individual worker will find meaningful employment, for they mostly deal with the material conditions of the job itself, not how the worker relates to the content of her work. In addition to its objective dimension, *LE* teaches that work has a subjective dimension too, and this must be considered in order to fully understand what is a meaningful work. Respecting the worker’s rights is necessary, but not sufficient to acknowledge the subjective dimension of work. Work is inseparable from the concrete reality of the human worker. CST emphasizes that the concern of the Church is not the person in the abstract sense, but the unique and historical individual.⁹

It is the overall impact of work on the personal growth and inner life of the individual that is usually neglected when business ethicists talk about improving working conditions

in a normative manner. Consideration of its subjective dimension makes our understanding of meaningful work holistic. For work to be meaningful, the full range of employees’ needs—material, social, familial, psychological, existential, and spiritual must be addressed, including their personal values (John Paul II 1981, no. 15). Respecting the workers’ dignity and autonomy does not only involve protecting their rights, but also includes empowerment and positive support for their integral development, in consideration of their present situations and actual options. This involves positive obligation of love and care, i.e., “having the disposition to contribute to the wellbeing and flourishing of the person... and making full effort to implement suitable actions to this end” (Melé 2009, p. 232). The objective-subjective view of work in *LE* goes beyond the minimum standards of working condition contained in the purely objective approach. Meaning implies different levels or degrees. In the same manner, there are different degrees of work dissatisfaction or alienation. The problem of employee satisfaction has also to be dealt with from the perspective of how employees experience their relation to their work.

The Priority of the Subjective Dimension of Work

The priority of the subjective dimension of work has several implications for the way we promote meaningful work. The objective requirements of meaningful work must be preceded by the latter’s subjective dimension. It means that in determining the right working conditions that will enable workers to find meaning in their jobs, “such conditions must come to reflect a full understanding of the reality of human personhood and the person’s inherent impulse to manifest and fulfill his or her own subjectivity” (Savage 2008, p. 213). Efforts toward job enrichment or improved working conditions must be the outcome of continuous and open dialogs and consultations between management and employees rather than based on assumptions or generalizations about the workers which the management have, most of which may not be accurate (e.g., they work only to collect a paycheck). Not all employees need the same resources in the workplace. Since it is impossible for the management to satisfy all their needs or expectations at the same time, it would be best for the management to offer flexible benefits packages and actively involve the workers themselves in determining all the issues related to their occupation.¹⁰ For example, benefits

⁸ See John Paul II (1981, no. 18; 1991, no. 47).

⁹ See John Paul II (1979, no. 13; 1991, no. 53).

¹⁰ “Since more often, however, decisions concerning economic and social conditions, on which the future lot of the workers and of their children depends, are made not within the business itself but by institutions on a higher level, the workers themselves should have a share also in determining these conditions—in person or through freely elected delegates” (Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* 1965, no. 68).

obtained by workers through collective bargaining have greater impact to their daily lives compared to legislated or management initiated wage increases (Appelbaum et al. 2003). This is because through collective bargaining, the actual needs and concerns of the workers are met. While employees' experience of meaning in their work is an important factor in organizational productivity as it makes the workers more committed to their jobs, to impose objectively conceived criteria for the right working conditions having productivity and control as the only goals is not only paternalistic on the part of the management, but also such attempts fail to respect the subjectivity of the worker who cannot be treated as a means to an end. Empirical research and technical solutions to job dissatisfaction and work alienation should not only focus on the worker's material interest but also must include concerns for the morality of work by considering what work *does* to the person-subject.

It is also a moral duty for management to promote the right work/life balance among its workers. "Work constitutes a foundation for the formation of *family life*" (John Paul II 1981, no. 10). A study done in 2010 by the Council of Economic Advisers of the US President indicates that creating a balance between work and family/personal lives is a major concern of many Americans.¹¹ People become less efficient in their work when they have difficulty combining the two as "this negatively influences the effort they put in their work, their commitment to the organization and their work-to-family enrichment"¹² (Tummers and den Dulk 2011, p. 13). *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican Council II 1965, no. 67) states that "The entire process of productive work, therefore, must be adapted to the needs of the person and to his way of life, above all to his domestic life." Although work is an activity proper to the person and that it is of vital importance to human society, CST also teaches that people should not be completely absorbed by work and economic pursuit. "Human activity takes its significance from its relationship to man. Just as it proceeds from man, so it is ordered toward man" (Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* 1965, no. 35). Some strategies to reduce work-family conflict include flexible schedules, job/leaves sharing, childcare assistance, phased retirement for older workers, compressed workweek, and telecommuting. Managers must do their best to accommodate workers' request for a particular day of the week to be their day off, if such is essential so that they can attend to their family and religious duties.¹³ Maintenance of the family, especially the raising and education of children, is not merely

an incidental good we derive from work. It is always an important part of work in its subjective dimension (John Paul II 1981, no. 10), for it gives workers a profound purpose for their hard work.

Nonetheless, the subjective aspect of work is not in opposition to its objective aspect. *LE* clearly states that the two dimensions of work cannot be separated. The advancement of all the requirements of meaningful work from its objective dimension enhances its subjective dimension, for it can make the individual worker's experience of work more meaningful. In order to find meaning in one's work, the right psychological attitude of the worker is not enough, certain objective conditions are necessary, the absence of which will turn work into an alienating force. In as much as work is not a mere economic activity, not every economic activity can be considered work. Any human activity that compromises human dignity by seriously harming or degrading people cannot be called work regardless of how much economic value it generates or the quality of the products and services it produces. Slavery production in sweatshop factories or concentration camps is not human work, but forms of human exploitation.

"[T]he idea that there are objective conditions of meaningful work potextually entails a moral obligation on the part of the employer to the employee" (Michaelson 2005, p. 16). Teaching employees about work ethic by the management should be accompanied by a serious and dynamic effort on the part of the latter to create a just workplace and improved working environment. Because work is inseparable from the person, improving work conditions is a moral obligation of the firm, and this must be done even when its productivity status does not require it. Providing employees with a meaningful work is more important than the profits that a company derives from its products and services. Management must promote the enhancement of workers' potentials and explore measures to constantly address the causes of work alienation by determining the kind of occupational environment and workflow design that will make it possible for workers to find meaning in their employment. Since workers are fulfilled when they realize that their jobs take part in something that is socially useful, business leaders are called upon to produce goods and services that truly meet the needs of society and contribute to authentic human progress. Gambling centers, violent video games production, and tobacco industry are a few examples of economic activities that may be highly profitable but do not accomplish such goals.

¹¹ See Executive Office of the President Council of Economic Advisers (2010), *Work-Life Balance and the Economics of Workplace Flexibility*.

¹² "Work-family enrichment occurs when resources from one role improve performance or positive affect in the other role" (Tummers and den Dulk 2011, p. 7).

¹³ "Rest (combined with religious observances) disposes man to forget for a while the business of his everyday life, to turn his thoughts to things heavenly, and to the worship which he so strictly owes to the eternal Godhead" (Leo XIII 1891, no. 41).

Workers, for their part, must look at their choice of employment as a moral decision, for every decision we make in line with our work involves our whole selves. Since work is the “axis of human self-making” (Baum 1982, p. 10), we have the moral duty to be careful in choosing the kind of work that we do. Whatever external “goods” we derive from our jobs (salaries, popularity, vacation privileges, etc.) cannot offset the loss of human dignity in some types of economic activity that objectifies the person (e.g., prostitution, drug dealing, pornography), even if these are legal, freely chosen, and socially accepted, for no objective aspect of work can replace its subjective dimension. Some examples of white-collar crimes (stock-exchange manipulation, forgery, money laundering, and accounting fraud) require high level skills and complex tasks that provide opportunities for the cultivation of our rational faculties and acquisition of socially desired virtues such as perseverance, self-discipline, industriousness, or even proper pride for one’s technical competency, but these cannot be considered meaningful work. The value of work cannot come from the workers’ product or the type of activity they engage in, but from the human worker herself. Being an *actus personae*, work cannot be used to harm persons.

Referring to the subjective dimension of work, John Paul II writes (1981, no. 10)

All of this brings it about that man combines his deepest human activity with membership of a nation, and intends his work also to increase the common good developed together with his compatriots, thus realizing that in this way work serves to add to the heritage of the whole human family, of all the people living in the world.

There are professions in healthcare, public service, and non-profit sector that give people a unique sense of meaning in their work because they serve the common good and fulfill genuine human needs. Service to others is a powerful motivational force that enhances the individual’s perception of the meaning and value of her profession. Hence, choosing a meaningful work has the potential to be socially beneficial (Michaelson 2005, p. 16). Further, when business is established and run in order to contribute to the welfare of society and its employees, doing the business could be meaningful in itself (Michaelson 2009, p. 44).

Alienation and the Possibilities Toward a Meaningful Work

If work is indeed something noble and necessary for human development, how come most people are unsatisfied with their work? For Ciulla, autonomy is the key toward a

meaningful work and as long as work is done for someone else in exchange for wages, meaningful work will remain an elusive dream for the working class, a luxury of a few, or a matter of luck. We may be able to identify and create conditions that will make *worthy work* possible, but they are not necessary or sufficient to produce meaningful work¹⁴ (Ciulla 2012, p. 129). Gini (2001, p. 218) thinks that meaningful work is an ideal that is almost impossible to realize for “There is no perfect formula to achieve a balanced economy, meaningful employment, and a stable infrastructure.” What is left for most of us to do is to focus on whatever worthwhile we can find in the jobs that we have. Muirhead’s concept of meaningful work as fit is possible only if one does not need an immediate work and there exists a variety of options to choose from in the job market. Furthermore, “Better matching of people to the job does not guarantee mutual satisfaction, but it is clear that people who are mismatched to their job tasks rarely if ever achieve satisfaction” (Gini 2001, p. 46). Muirhead (2004, p. 159) admits that the tension arising from the types of work that society needs (social fit) and that which an individual finds interesting or valuable (subjective fit) will remain as the most difficult challenge in providing meaningful work for all. He concludes that meaningful work is not a concrete goal but a regulative ideal which “might inform legislation that facilitates and encourages, even when it does not directly compel” (Muirhead 2004, p. 25).

Marxism believes that there is no hope for the proletariat to find meaningful work in the capitalistic system, and only the overthrowing of the latter through a social revolution would make it possible for the workers to achieve complete and perfect freedom in the life of production. Ownership of capital is viewed by Marxism as a power which enables the ruling class to exploit the working class, that is why “the whole history of mankind (since the dissolution of private tribal society, holding land in common ownership) has been a history of class struggles, contests between the exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes” (Engels 1964, p. 5). In the utopian Marxist state, work will cease to be a class attribute for everyone must work for her needs. The economy will be cooperatively and centrally planned. The means of production will be publicly owned and wages will be socially appropriated to meet the collective needs of society.

Both Marx and Ciulla base their arguments on the thesis that the wage system arising from employer–employee relationship is essentially alienating. *LE* contends, however, that it is not the ownership of industrial capital per se that makes work alienating, the latter happens because the worker has no control over the process and the outcome of

¹⁴ “Worthy work is work that is morally and/or esthetically valuable. It is objective” (Ciulla 2012, p. 126).

her work—she lacks awareness that she is working “for herself.” This occurs in “excessive bureaucratic centralization, which makes the worker feel that he is just a cog in a huge machine moved from above, that he is for more reasons than one a mere production instrument rather than a true subject of work with an initiative of his own” (John Paul II 1981, no. 15). CST recognizes the significance of wage issue in solving the social question. The amount of salary the workers receive determines how just the economic system is and it is also the best indicator to gauge how the universal destination of natural goods is being realized. But CST does not condemn the wage system per se, as long as the remuneration which the workers receive, at the minimum, is sufficient for them to live decently and support the rearing and education of their children. Moreover, wages together with other working conditions cannot be justified exclusively in terms of the presence of “free” consent of the workers. Leo XIII (1891, no. 45) states that “If through necessity or fear of a worse evil the workman accept harder conditions because an employer or contractor will afford him no better, he is made the victim of force and injustice.”

As Ciulla points out, there is no easy solution to the modern-day challenges in addressing the problem of alienation and in making human work meaningful. Although she agrees with Bowie that “there are moral conditions that increase the potential for people to find meaningful work” (2012, p. 115), she is skeptical of any attempt on the part of the management to provide employees with meaningful work as this may only lead to greater employee dependency on management and market forces which could be more harmful for the workers in the long run, given the unstable US economy, the practice of at-will employment, and the current high rate of unemployment. Training and motivational seminars are oftentimes mere managerial strategies in order to make workers feel good about working so that they will work more, rather than addressing injustice in the workplace. Ciulla (1990, p. 113; 2012, p. 124) asserts that corporations are not capable of providing meaningful work for their employees, and they are not morally obligated to do so. Their obligation is to “offer employees a work arrangement that allows them to find meaning either in their work or their free time.”

“The Catholic vision has never quite so pessimistic, although it is realistic enough in its understanding of human failings” (Cusick 2006, p. 20). Behind every component of the economy, from shareholders, management, labor, suppliers, and consumers are human persons who are free and conscious beings, capable of transcending their individualities and commercial concerns in order to form solidarity of persons. Bowie thinks that despite of the asymmetrical power relations between employers and employees which makes the latter vulnerable to abuse and coercion by the

former, meaningful work is still possible. In his work (1999), he explores several measures that can prevent coercion and deception in the workplace. In the same manner, several Vatican documents have laid out concrete proposals that will ensure a just and equitable distribution of profits and active participation of the workers, such as the practice of subsidiarity, unionism and collective bargaining, joint ownership of the means of work, participatory management, shareholding by labor, or other mixed model (John Paul II 1981, no. 14). Compared to the traditional bureaucratic organization of business where policies and visions are transmitted top down, participatory management aims to transform business into a community of persons who are “working together for the advancement of their mutual interests in accordance with the principles of justice and other Christian teachings” (John XXIII 1961, no. 142). Subsidiarity requires that employees on the lower level should be trained and treated as co-entrepreneurs. This enables persons as rational beings with freedom and dignity to flourish in their jobs because they know that they are trusted.¹⁵ The above list can certainly be expanded to include other instruments that can democratize the workplace such as the open-book management which Bowie (1999, pp. 54–57) proposes. The point is that while there are businesses that exhibit the characteristics of what Gini (2006, pp. 131–137) calls *totalitarianism in the workplace*, a business establishment need not be organized in that way.

From the objective-normative perspective, work that fails to develop human abilities or virtues does not only lack meaning or value, but also it could be damaging to the worker (Walsh 1994, p. 243). According to Schumacher (1979, p. 77), we ought to “reject meaningless, boring, stultifying, or nerve-racking work in which a man (or woman) is made the servant of a machine or a system.” Bowie (1999, p. 70) says that work which “undermines rationality is immoral.” Blue collar and lower white-collar dead-end jobs that are too simple, mechanical, and do not involve much decision making or intellectual stimulation would fall short of their standards. That these jobs are accepted voluntarily is not a sufficient condition to respect the autonomy of workers, for “Routine jobs cause persons to be less inclined, in all aspects of their lives, to engage in purposeful striving that is characteristic of autonomous individuals” (Gini 1992, p. 234). On the other hand, activities involved in engineering, medicine, law, architecture, and the arts would all qualify as meaningful work (Walsh 1994, p. 244). Marx proposes that monotonous and tiresome jobs be rotated and distributed to all employees. Working hours should also be reduced to the shortest time possible in order to give workers ample opportunities to rest, to recreate, and to enhance their artistic

¹⁵ See Melé (2005) for some examples on how the principle of subsidiarity can be implemented in business organizations.

or literary talents. O'Toole and Lawler suggest that all repetitive and assembly-line jobs be eliminated through automation or outsourcing.

Though a noble activity, work can be a dehumanizing element in life when abused and divorced from its original end. The result is the alienation of work, i.e., its separation or estrangement from the human subject. However, there are reasons to doubt the accuracy of the Marxist account of the alienating effects of all tedious and unchallenging jobs. Empirical research indicates that work alienation in production line has negative psychological effects to the workers and generates job dissatisfaction, but "workers do not become as simple or stupid as their work asks them to be; they are not destroyed as human beings" (Muirhead 2004, p. 158). Fromm (1976, p. 101) claims that "if workers can be truly active, responsible, and knowledgeable in their work role, the formerly uninterested ones change considerably and show a remarkable degree of inventiveness, activity, imagination, and satisfaction." Automation or outsourcing of jobs that involve repetitive tasks may worsen local unemployment and reinforce the common prejudice against these jobs, i.e., they are boring or senseless. Because technology aims to decrease the labor required in the performance of a particular task, it increases and diminishes human aptitudes at the same. "For others, it reduces discretion because jobs and processes are monitored to a degree of detail never before possible" (Parker and Bevan 2011, p. 10). Alienation can take place both in the "factory assembly line and the intellectual assembly line of the mega-law firm" (Gregory 2004, p. 141).

What makes menial or narrowly specialized job alienating is not just the activity itself. Even Marx agrees that alienation in work is not absolute or intrinsic, otherwise finding fulfillment in one's work would be impossible. Self-fulfillment in Marxist terms is not to liberate the person from the burdens of work, but to set her free from the bondage of alienation. According to John Paul II (1991, no. 41), "the concept of alienation needs to be led back to the Christian vision of reality by recognizing in alienation a reversal of means and ends." It happens when workers are treated simply as instruments of production, and their work is valued only in its objective sense resulting into technology (machines and systems) *dominating* the person (John Paul II 1981, no. 8). The personalist value of work is forgotten as we fail to see the efforts of cashiers, housekeepers, or bus drivers as acts of the person that have intrinsic worth or excellence, independent of their economic or social valuation. Once a set of criteria for a meaningful work has been objectively established, there is the danger of devaluing all other activities that do not meet such standards as meaningless, non-eudaimonian, or dehumanizing. The teleologic emphasis of the objective-normative view places the meaning and respectability of work on the quality

and complexity of the activity, not on the dignity of the worker. From its subjective aspect, there is no such thing as mental-superior or physical-inferior work. "While one can say that, by reason of its subject, work is one single thing" (John Paul II 1981, no. 8). Any type of work engages the entire being of the person, no matter what proportion of mind, muscle, or will is involved.

As the subject of work, we need to find deeper meaning for our daily toil and sacrifice. Work will always involve weariness, sacrifice, discipline, and dissatisfaction—it cannot be the primary want of life or a mere play. We cannot redesign all types of work to make them complex or challenging, and to expect that all employees would continue to advance in their careers is unrealistic. The physical exhaustion that accompanies labor is not considered by CST as meaningless, objectively evil, or punitive. Toil is familiar not only to those who engage in clerical or physically demanding jobs, but also to all types of workers including

those at an intellectual workbench, to scientists, to those who bear the burden of grave responsibility for decisions that will have a vast impact on society. It is familiar to doctors and nurses, who spend days and nights at their patients' bedside. It is familiar to women, who, sometimes without proper recognition on the part of society and even of their own families, bear the daily burden and responsibility for their homes and the upbringing of their children. (John Paul II 1981, no. 9)

But this does not diminish the value of work. Work is good not only because it is satisfying, but also more importantly, it is something worthy in itself by the fact that it is an activity that emanates from the person. Under its subjective dimension, no decent work, no matter how tiresome or simple, can be meaningless because it presupposes the subjectivity of the person. Apart from this personalist analysis, it would be impossible to fully comprehend the true meaning of virtue.¹⁶ The dignity of work corresponds to the dignity of the person because in work, the person acquires virtues and "becomes more of a human being." Virtues are human excellences partly because of the toil needed to develop them, for they manifest our potential for perfection.

Work and Human Fulfillment

His enormous respect for the dignity of the person makes John Paul II convinced that finding fulfillment in work is possible. The person for the pope is not a helpless victim, "he or she is a subject who decides about him- or herself"

¹⁶ See John Paul II (1981, no. 9).

(Savage 2008, p. 214). The search for fulfillment is in itself a duty, not an option. As Paul VI (1967, no. 15) explains, “every man is called upon to develop and fulfill himself, for every life is a vocation.... Endowed with intelligence and freedom, he is responsible for his fulfillment as he is for his salvation.” Since the person is an embodied spirit whose soul is directly created by God, the ultimate end of the person’s being and operations cannot be found in the temporal or the mundane—it is a share in the life of the triune God. It is not only human relationship that is established through work, but also the latter relates the person to her Creator. The sanctification of work happens not only when it is directly related to charitable works and religious duties, but also in any type of work. By doing ones work well and offering it to God, work acquires a supernatural value.

While Gini is correct in positing the centrality of work in our personal and social lives, our self-identity is not just passively shaped by the circumstances in our environment, it depends to a large extent on our free choices, self-consciousness, determination, and how we deliberately adapt to the external world. As free and autonomous beings, persons always experience the subjectiveness of their being and acting. They are intended by nature to work in a responsible way, even if in their doing, they have to recognize and in a sense, obey the laws of economics and social development (John XXIII 1961, no. 63). Every employment or economic activity entails some form of control and restrictions. Human freedom is never meant to be absolute or unlimited.

The person is the object of her own conscious actions because she cannot direct herself toward external goals and values without directing her very being or values at the same time. Human action by its nature is self-end or inward directed. As acting persons, our work cannot be separated from our being and the daily lives that we live. This implies that the search for a meaningful work is intimately connected to our personal search for the meaning of life. John Paul II (1991, no. 41) defines alienation as “the loss of the authentic meaning of life.” It is not simply the loss of meaning in human activities or the estrangement of the person from her work, but the human estrangement from her own authentic nature, including her reason for being and her final end. The loss of meaning in work is also a part of the general condition of human alienation. It will be difficult for someone to find meaning in her work if she sees life itself as meaningless. Any human undertaking that requires considerable effort but devoid of any deep sense of personal significance becomes a burden, inauthentic as a life pursuit, or even unbearable in the long run.

Finding fulfillment in work, therefore, does not only entail looking for the *right* job. Even if work is crucial in determining the overall quality of our individual and social

existence, it cannot be the ultimate basis of the meaning of human life, for work is for the person, not vice versa. We need to examine ourselves too and discover what is our ultimate goal, why do we exist, why do we suffer, what do we love, and what makes life worth living. While the Catholic Church emphasizes the vital role of business leaders and individuals who are involved in the areas of human resource development and management in “organizing productive and meaningful work, by recognizing the dignity of employees and their right and duty to flourish in their work... and structuring workplaces with subsidiarity that designs, equips and trusts employees to do their best work” (Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace 2011, p. 3), business leaders as businesspersons may have no better insights than anyone else when it comes to the fundamental question of life’s meaning. Organization may be a place where we can experience meaning, but it cannot be the source of life’s meaning. “Thus, we cannot look first to the role that others play in creating the ‘right’ conditions for work; we must look first to ourselves to discover the impulse toward self-realization and to accept the exigencies it places upon our personhood” (Savage 2008, p. 214). Since we become “more human being” through work, what makes our life and work meaningful is something that we have discover on our own for we are all responsible for our personal becoming. We must do our best to find a meaningful work that fits our personality and dignity, but we must also do our best to find meaning in the work that we do, in the personal relationships that we create, and in the lives that we live. To a large extent, “The capacity of the individual to choose meaningful work depends upon the willingness of the institution to provide it” (Michaelson 2005, p. 23), but the willingness of institutions to provide opportunities for meaningful work is more likely reinforced by the seriousness of our commitment and the depth of significance that we bestow on our work. While not every worker responds favorably to job redesign and enrichment, studies suggest that the latter generates affirmative results with workers who have a positive outlook and who are committed to living a meaningful life.¹⁷

Conclusion

The objective-normative approach demonstrates that work is good both as a means to an end, and as an end in itself. Work is meaningful in so far as it contributes to our development and flourishing. It is by constant activity that we actualize the capabilities which nature and society have endowed on us. While work is also a teleological activity in CST, the purpose of work in the latter includes its physical,

¹⁷ See Cherrington (1980, pp. 230, 266–269).

social, spiritual, ethical, and immanent/subjective dimensions. The promise of fulfillment in work that Catholicism offers is grounded on a holistic understanding of the person, i.e., a historically situated subject informed by particular relationships of love and responsibility, who is called by God to work in order to actualize her embodied, relational, and rational nature.

The purely objective approach to the problem of meaningful work fails to connect work with the person's subjectivity. It places the value of work on the activity in question, rather than on the human worker. Thus, it cannot provide a comprehensive and adequate moral basis for meaningful work. A particular type of work can produce different kinds of good and can enhance and limit human abilities at the same time. But why should the meaningfulness of work be limited on those goods or abilities that a Kantian or a Marxist values? Subjectively considered, work is only a single activity—there is no distinction between lower skilled and highly skilled jobs, between manual and intellectual jobs, or between menial and complex jobs. If meaningful work is normatively good because it is related to some kind of human end or telos, why, and to what extent is the business organization responsible in providing meaningful work for its workers? Both Gini and Ciulla downplay management obligation on the ground that the objective condition of work is not necessary and/or sufficient to provide workers with meaningful work, while Desjardins does not consider this question significant.¹⁸ Even Bowie (1999, p. 70) admits that providing workers with a meaningful work is not an absolute moral requirement, and “if labor market does not permit a firm to honor the obligation of beneficence in this way, it is not required to do so.”

On the other hand, CST begins its analysis of work on the meaning of the acting person. As a human activity that is inseparable from the person, work has objective-subjective dimensions. The outcome of this analysis is the affirmation of the value of work as emanating from the dignity of the worker. The personalist value of work creates an obligation on the part of management to address the problem of alienation and to provide workers with the necessary conditions for meaningful work. The normativity of the objective requirements of meaningful work is based not on what they can actually accomplish, but on the subjectivity of work. But recognizing the worth of every worker entails more than respecting their autonomy, i.e., giving them a say in the decision-making process. Whenever the person works, it is morally necessary that she realizes that she works for herself, for the final end of the process of production is the promotion of the total well-being of the workers, that they “will not only

have more, but above all be more: in other words, that they will realize their humanity more fully in every respect” (John Paul II 1981, no. 20).

The recognition of the objective-subjective dimensions of work in *LE* helps us overcome the false dichotomies that are usually encountered in dealing with the question of meaningful work. First of these is the subject-object dichotomy which is expressed in the traditional opposition between objectively defined meaningful work versus work as meaningful for the individual. As an economic activity, work has an objective dimension, but as a human vocation, work has a subjective dimension. Another false dichotomy is between the individual desire for meaningful work and the objective social value of work. This seems to place personal and social goods to be in conflict with each other. As a social being, the person has the ability to produce what she needs and at the same time, to foresee and satisfy the needs of others. The third of these dichotomies is between work and life which views the two as if they belong to two separate and unrelated realms. As a subject of work, work is inseparable from the person and a part of her unique and concrete existence—the meaning of work cannot be separated from the larger meaning of life. There is also the dichotomy between the internal and external effects of work. The two are interrelated and inseparable for John Paul II, for work is simultaneously directed toward the external world and the person's inner dimension. Some scholars question whether meaningful work is a management responsibility or a private matter that comes naturally to the workers (Michaelson 2011; Lips-Wiersman and Morris 2009; Ciulla 2012). Objectively, organizing work places that build and sustain meaningful work is a management obligation, but subjectively, meaningful work is a personal discovery. The two, however, are interconnected in the same way as the objective and subjective dimensions of work are inseparable. The meaning of work cannot be automatically given, but it is not a mere subjective construct. Finally, there is the false dichotomy between work as a right and a duty. Since work has an objective dimension, those who are responsible for the social and economic organizations of work must respect the rights of the workers so that work can contribute to their flourishing and fulfillment. But subjectively, work is also a duty, for “Man must work, both because the Creator has commanded it and because of his own humanity, which requires work in order to be maintained and developed” (John Paul II 1981, no. 16).

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¹⁸ “I wish to consider meaningful work independently of whether or not it is prudent, practical, or politically feasible to claim it as an employee right” (Desjardins 2012, p. 146).

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