

# Meaningful Work and Full Employment

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*This paper affirms the continuing importance of full employment, as the best prospect for most people of the goods of meaningful work and of self-respect, and welcomes the failure of new technology in Western societies to engender mass unemployment, despite predictions to the contrary. It also replies to criticisms from John White (in *Education and the End of Work*) of a previous paper of mine, 'Work and the Human Essence' (1984). Employing a different sense of 'meaningful work' related to agents' major goals in life, White claims that little work is meaningful, or capable of becoming so, and that social policy should recognise this and exonerate most people from expectations of employment. His argument embodies a distinctive understanding of human flourishing, and a critique of my earlier argument from the human essence. This paper defends that argument, plus a separate argument of my earlier paper from self-respect, which White apparently ignores, for meaningful work as crucial to human flourishing. Most employment, I maintain, is capable of being modified so as to become meaningful work, and since this is most people's best prospect of that good, policies of full employment should not be discarded, either in the West or in the Third World.*

## 1 Meaningful Work, Computers and Employment

The publication of John White's *Education and the End of Work*, with its philosophical critique of defenders of full employment and its advocacy of a 'post-productivist world',<sup>1</sup> makes timely a return to the subject of meaningful work, which I discussed in the inaugural number of *Journal of Applied Philosophy* in 1984.<sup>2</sup>

In the course of defending in that essay the goal of full employment, I gave some credence to fears that as many as four million workers in Britain alone might lose their jobs as a result of the introduction of 'microprocessors' (computers) and of automation, as well as mentioning rival predictions that these innovations would actually create jobs. Although unemployment grew during that period, it is gratifying to be able to acknowledge that the more pessimistic predictions were not fulfilled, that the more optimistic predictions had some substance, and that at the end of the nineties the goal of full employment was once again a significant possibility, at least in Britain. This is good news for a range of reasons, not least the contingent fact (argued to be such in my earlier essay) that paid employment is for many people, and granted their circumstances, a necessary condition of self-respect, as well as of meaningful work.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time the world-wide picture is less rosy, with massive unemployment and underemployment in the Third World. While this need not betoken an absence either of meaningful work or of opportunities for self-respect (if it is allowed that subsistence farming, care of the young and many other activities of the self-employed and of the unemployed often embody both), it involves a salutary reminder of the need for the kind of sustainable development that can harness the potential of millions of unemployed and underemployed people, and that in all the circumstances advocacy of a post-productivist world is arguably inappropriate for much of the world, whatever its cogency for the West. While the working week of many is too long, and White's case for its reduction can be welcomed, such reduction can hardly form a priority at least in societies where widespread poverty and inequalities are the central social problems.

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<sup>1</sup> John White *Education and the End of Work: A New Philosophy of Work and Learning* London, Cassell 1997. White discusses a post-productivist world at page 19 and in chapters 4 and 5. I am grateful to Richard Norman for comments on an earlier draft of the current paper.

<sup>2</sup> Robin Attfield (1984) 'Work and the human essence' (hereafter, WHE), *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 1,1.

<sup>3</sup>Attfield WHE, page 149.

## 2 Meaningful Work, Major Goals And Autonomy

As will soon emerge, White rejects my account of the place of meaningful work in a flourishing human life, and my related arguments. However, before that disagreement can be explored, it is worth remarking that White is not employing the same concept of meaningful work as I have done, either in 'Work and the Human Essence' or in my books on ethical theory, *A Theory of Value and Obligation*<sup>4</sup> and *Value, Obligation and Meta-Ethics*.<sup>5</sup> Although these understandings of meaningful work overlap, their differences have enough impact to be worth clarification at the outset.

My understanding in these works of the capacity for meaningful work (obviously derivative from Marx, but at the same time reflecting widespread usage) is of a free and creative productive activity. For this sense of 'a free and creative productive activity', creativeness need not involve originality or innovation, but does involve the activity being autonomous (in that the worker endorses its point and its standards), depending on skill and judgement, and taking its shape from the worker's conception of the operation. Production was taken to include the generation of theories and of works of art as well as of services and of material goods. The implication was further drawn that where work is meaningful, the worker to some degree cares about its standards.<sup>6</sup> In 'Work and the Human Essence' I added that 'the worker will not be likely to endorse the point of allotted tasks or the standards required for good workmanship unless he or she is enabled to have some say in deciding how their work is to be executed'.<sup>7</sup> Thus meaningful work in several ways involves autonomy, but its value also turns on the way in which it fulfils one of the generic potentials essential to humanity. A further implication of this account is that while much work (some paid, some unpaid) is meaningful in this sense, much more either is not meaningful at all, or is meaningful only to a low degree, but that a good deal of work could be made meaningful (as well as new opportunities for meaningful work being brought into being) if suitable policies are adopted by governments and employers. (Clive Jenkins, who died recently, was cited as advocating such new arrangements.)<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, White (in a section entitled 'The Meaning of Work') relates meaningful work to an agent's major goals in life, and makes its value turn entirely on autonomy. Like me, he recognises that work is essentially productive activity,<sup>9</sup> and, like me, he rejects the assumption of John Rawls, that a flourishing or worthwhile life requires its subject to have a life-plan.<sup>10</sup> But he so defines 'a flourishing human life' that 'a life can be said to be more flourishing, that is, higher on a scale of well-being, the more the agent's major goals in life are fulfilled' (where 'major goals' are ones 'which are more important to the individual over his or her lifetime as a whole in a personal hierarchy of importance'),<sup>11</sup> and interprets the concept of meaningful work accordingly. Thus 'Autonomous work is a form of activity whose end-product ... is chosen as such as a major goal of an autonomous agent', something that 'they would prefer to do even if they did not have to earn a living'.<sup>12</sup> White labels as 'personally significant work' both autonomous work in this sense, and also work undertaken on the basis of traditional expectations (and not autonomously) as long as the end-product is or becomes one of the worker's most cherished goals. Work of neither of these kinds is 'personally non-significant work', and as such is heteronomous.<sup>13</sup> Hence the intrinsic value of work

<sup>4</sup> Robin Attfield *A Theory of Value and Obligation* (hereafter, TVO) London, New York and Sydney: Croom Helm 1987 see chapter 3.

<sup>5</sup> Robin Attfield *Value, Obligation and Meta-Ethics* (hereafter, VOME) Amsterdam and Atlanta GA, Rodopi, Value Inquiry Books Series 1995; see chapter 4.

<sup>6</sup> Attfield WHE, p 143; TVO, p 49; VOME, pp 57f.

<sup>7</sup> Attfield WHE, p 143.

<sup>8</sup> Attfield WHE, p 149; see also Andreas Escheté 'Contractarianism and the scope of justice' *Ethics*, 85, 38-49 (1974)

<sup>9</sup> White op cit, p 4.

<sup>10</sup> White op cit, pp 45, 94; Attfield WHE, p 144.

<sup>11</sup> White op cit p 5. See also John White 'Education, work and well-being' *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 31, 2, (1997) pp 233-247, p 240.

<sup>12</sup> White *Education and the End of Work* p 5.

<sup>13</sup> White op cit, p 6.

depends simply on its relation to major goals in life (even, presumably, if the fulfilment of these goals discloses their hollowness and engenders disillusion, or again even if work that is unrelated to such goals brings out unnoticed powers and discloses unexpected fulfilments).

However, some personally non-significant work is chosen by autonomous agents, as White now affirms, where the benefits towards which the work is a means, including the attractiveness of working conditions, constitute the agent's major goals, as opposed to the work itself. These are cases of *autonomous agency in work*, as opposed to *autonomous work*.<sup>14</sup> And it is autonomous work, as opposed to autonomous agency in work, that White regards as 'roughly equivalent' to what I had called 'meaningful work' in 'Work and the Human Essence'. Here White suggests that, on my account, the worker 'values the product as of personal significance to him or her, and also autonomously, both in applying skill or judgement and also in having some say in planning the work'<sup>15</sup>. However, as will be seen, White seems wrong about this suggested 'rough equivalence'.

For, while my account of meaningful work involves the agent endorsing the point of the work and caring about its standards, it does not involve the work or its end-product figuring among the agent's major goals in life. (Many other writers employ such a sense of 'meaningful'.<sup>16</sup>) A worker could accept the value of a good product (whether in the form of goods or services, theories or art), and of good standards of production, exercise skill and judgement, and have a say in the working arrangements too, without her or his major goals in life being in any way involved. Thus the work might be one of many activities forming a week's or a year's work, or might be a temporary or marginal activity, or even a regular activity that does not form a major element in the worker's sense of identity. So it might not be work of personal significance (in White's fairly demanding sense, as explained above), not being either autonomously chosen because its end-product comprises for someone a major goal in life, nor corresponding to one of a person's major goals as a result of the traditional expectations of their society. By the same token, meaningful work (as I have depicted it) could sometimes fail to be autonomous work (in White's sense of that phrase), even though it would usually have a degree of personal significance (in a less demanding sense) and would invariably have some strongly autonomous aspects.

This is borne out by the list of examples of meaningful work outside paid employment, cited here by White from my essay 'Work and the Human Essence': 'study at school or university, care of the young, [and] the old, voluntary work for charities, housework and gardening'.<sup>17</sup> (The original list included care of the sick as well, and also subsistence farming.<sup>18</sup>) For, according to White's presentation of his own position, most of these can be examples of heteronomous work: 'Heteronomous work can also include much unpaid housework, decorating, gardening, shopping for basics, car maintenance, care of young children and care of the sick or elderly.' (Granted that White discusses study at school and voluntary work for charities in adjacent passages in his book, the overlap of the two lists can scarcely be a co-occurrence.) This is because, as White observes, these activities could be undertaken not by choice but out of obligation.<sup>19</sup> Such they certainly could be, but without forfeiting the qualities in virtue of which they could often reasonably be regarded as cases of meaningful work, being performed with skill and/or judgement, with an endorsement by the agent of their point, on the part of an agent who cares about the standards involved, who has a significant say in the process, and from whose conception of the activity it largely takes its shape. Admittedly, cases in which these activities are undertaken by choice approximate still more closely to *free* as well as creative productive activity; but when the qualities just listed are present (as they sometimes but not always are), the activity is already autonomous enough to qualify as free in important respects. For we do not normally require that to be autonomous, let alone to be

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<sup>14</sup> White op cit p 7 (White's italics)

<sup>15</sup> White op cit p 23.

<sup>16</sup> For example, the various writers (from Hannah Arendt to Jonathan Schell and David N James) discussed at Robin Attfield *The Ethics of the Global Environment* pp 64-66 Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press and West Lafayette Ind, Purdue University Press 1999.

<sup>17</sup> White op cit, p 23.

<sup>18</sup> Attfield, WHE, p 145.

<sup>19</sup> White op cit, p 8.

meaningful, a job of work should be freely chosen in all respects, let alone that it or its end-product be regarded by the worker as among their major goals in life.

This might all appear to suggest that what I called 'meaningful work' corresponds not to White's 'autonomous work', but to what he contrasts with this, namely 'autonomous agency in work'. But this would be a mistaken interpretation. For when White depicts autonomous agency in work, he has in mind work of which the benefits comprise a major goal of the agent, or of which the working conditions comprise its attractiveness and in that way relate the work to the agent's major goals.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, meaningful work (in my sense, and, I would suggest, in a great deal of ordinary usage) will sometimes lack these qualities, but involves the worker endorsing its point and standards, while also depending on the worker's skill and judgement, and taking its shape from the worker's conception. Work can be meaningful (in this sense) without having to contribute to the agent's major goals in life, whether directly, or through benefits or working conditions; at the same time it can still (I suggest) be importantly autonomous, and can still contribute importantly to an agent's life being a flourishing life through the development of the agent's powers that the work embodies.

This is because a flourishing life need not be understood in terms of the fulfilment of an individual's major life-goals, as opposed to the development of the individual's powers and faculties. For the majority of nonhuman lives, where major life-goals play little or no part, this needs no argument; and a plausible related account of flourishing lives in general, and thus of flourishing individual human lives, can also be given (including, in the case of flourishing human lives, the exercise of autonomy). Such an account was embodied in my 1984 essay. To flourish as a member of a species (I claimed, following Aristotle) involves being able to exercise either all or most of the essential capacities of that species. (The concept of 'essential capacities' is explained and discussed further in the next section.) The capacity for meaningful work (I went on to argue) is an essential human capacity. Hence the ability to exercise one's capacity for meaningful work (again in the above sense) is a constituent of flourishing human lives, and needs to figure in a satisfactory account of such lives.<sup>21</sup> (Self-creation, and the conscious goals that it involves, also features in my account of a flourishing human life, but as a distinct and separate constituent.<sup>22</sup>)

The conclusion that meaningful work (in my sense) is a constituent of a flourishing human life is rejected by White, together with the argument from essential capacities,<sup>23</sup> plus (implicitly) a further argument for the same conclusion, the argument from self-respect. To the argument from essential capacities, and to White's critique, I now turn.

### 3 Essential Capacities and Meaningful Work

Essential capacities, which include nondistinctive as well as distinctive capacities, are 'capacities in the absence of which from most members of a species it would not *be* the species which it is'.<sup>24</sup> While there are problems attaching to this definition (for example, how could a species ever be or become a different species from the one that it is?), the problems need not be insuperable. Thus I have more recently represented 'essential capacities' as capacities or potentials 'in the absence of which from most of its members a species would not be recognisable as the species which it actually is in our world', adding the following equivalence: capacities are 'essential capacities of a species if and only if a species would forego its current identity in the absence of any of these capacities from most of its members'.<sup>25</sup> For present purposes, these reformulations may serve to clarify the notion of

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<sup>20</sup> White op cit, p 7

<sup>21</sup> Attfield WHE pp 145-8. The argument from essential capacities was earlier presented in Robin Attfield 'On being human' *Inquiry* 17, (1974) pp 175-192.

<sup>22</sup> Attfield TVO pp 60-61; VOME pp 68-70.

<sup>23</sup> White op cit, pp 23-25.

<sup>24</sup> Attfield WHE p 145.

<sup>25</sup> Attfield VOME p 48. For a sophisticated defence of the kind of moderate essentialism that I favour, see J.M. Beal 'Essentialism and closed concepts' *Ratio* 16, 2 (1974) pp 190-205.

essential capacities. The problems just mentioned were not those raised by White, and will not be pursued further here.<sup>26</sup>

At the cost of repetition, this may be a suitable place to restate (with fewer asides) the argument from essential capacities (in the sense just presented). To flourish as a member of a species involves being able to exercise either all or most of the essential capacities of that species. The capacity for meaningful work is (as I have argued elsewhere<sup>27</sup>) an essential human capacity. Hence being able to exercise one's capacity for meaningful work (in the sense explained in the previous section) is a constituent of flourishing human lives, and needs to figure in a satisfactory account of such lives.

After expounding the argument from essential capacities (in its 1984 formulation), White appears to agree that the capacity for meaningful work is an essential capacity, but claims that if so, then so too are the capacity to eat hamburgers and the capacity to read *The Sun*, and that this serves in turn to cast doubt on the premise that to flourish as a member of a species involves being able to exercise its essential capacities.<sup>28</sup> However, since no one had the capacity to eat hamburgers before hamburgers were devised, or to read *The Sun* before this periodical was first published a few decades ago, White's claims would, if correct, imply that there were no human beings prior to these events, and that humanity only came into being in the twentieth century.

It should rather be recognised that the capacities for eating and for linguistic communication are both essential capacities of human beings, as the above definition requires, even though at least eating is a non-distinctive capacity. But the capacities for eating particular concoctions and for reading particular newspapers are inessential, since the absence of these capacities from most members of a species would incline no one to claim that the species was nonhuman. Nor would humanity become unrecognisable as such if, during the twenty-first or twenty-second century, hamburgers become obsolete and *The Sun* ceases to be published and read. Indeed, given the same definition, essential capacities are far likelier to be found among generic capacities such as eating, playing and thinking rather than among specific forms of such capacities like the eating of particular foods, the playing of particular instruments such as the *cor anglais*<sup>29</sup> or thinking about particular topics such as meaningful work.

Nevertheless this is the stage at which White proceeds to question whether it is 'a necessary truth that to live well, develop, or flourish as a member of a species involves being able to exercise the essential capacities of that species'. He is inclined to accept that this holds good with regard to the capacity for linguistic communication; human beings cannot flourish without exercising this essential capacity. But 'it is hard to think how one could show that we must come to grief if we never watch *Blind Date* or play the national lottery'.<sup>30</sup> Presumably White says this because he thinks that there are essential capacities to watch this show and to play this game, at least on the above definition of 'essential capacities'. But this supposition is equally misplaced; for a species incapable of watching *Blind Date* or of playing the lottery might well be recognisably human despite these apparent impoverishments. Hence no one committed to the argument from essential capacities has to show that people who fail to watch television shows or to participate in particular pastimes are failing to flourish or to develop as people.

White seems to have selected these examples because most people (or rather the majority of people in Britain) participate in these activities. If so, he may suppose that the above definition of essential capacities means that there are essential capacities corresponding to these activities, simply because they are activities of the majority. But to suppose this would be to misconstrue that definition. Even if most people all over the world watched British television and participated in the (British) national lottery, that would not make the associated capacities essential to being human. For, before the definition of essential capacities became as much as relevant, the question would have to

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<sup>26</sup> Further conceptual problems about essential capacities are tackled at Attfield VOME pp 48-56.

<sup>27</sup> Attfield VOME pp 57-59.

<sup>28</sup> White op cit, p 24.

<sup>29</sup> Attfield; VOME p 49.

<sup>30</sup> White op cit, p 24.

arise whether, if these activities and the associated capacities were to lapse, there would be any tendency for anyone to say that the species was no longer human, or was no longer recognisably human, or had forfeited its identity. But this question would never arise except in jest.

Thus White's objections leave the argument from essential capacities unscathed. In particular, White supplies no reason to doubt that human flourishing involves the ability to exercise such essential capacities, or at any rate to exercise most of them. Indeed those who, like White, are prepared to recognise linguistic communication as an essential capacity, and also to acknowledge that the ability to exercise this capacity is required for human flourishing, have every reason to apply this argument to other essential capacities, such as those for autonomy<sup>31</sup> and for self-creation<sup>32</sup> (capacities which between them cover what White means by 'meaningful work') and also to that for meaningful work (in the widespread sense in which I have been using that phrase). Such meaningful work turns out, then, to be the exercise of one of those capacities, the exercise of most of which is required for human flourishing, and the loss or deprivation of which thus comprises a harm. And this strongly suggests that it should, if possible, be made available to everyone capable of it.

Many people, however, are sceptical of all talk of essences, while others regard talk of a human essence in particular as misguided and dangerous. Yet there is a widespread recognition that whether or not human beings have an essence, we at any rate have a nature, and that what it is for us to flourish depends at least in part on this nature, and involves its satisfaction or fulfilment. Further, while an element in what it is for us to flourish is on most accounts the making of autonomous choices and the shaping of our lives in the light of such choices, most people do not consider this to comprise an exhaustive account of human flourishing.

Faced, then, with alternative accounts of human flourishing, one exclusively concerned with an individual's major goals in life and their satisfaction, and another concerned with a range of characteristic human capacities (including the capacities for autonomy and self-creation) and their development, even those who reject the very concept of a human essence have reason to prefer the second account. That life may bring unchosen fulfilments, the unexpected discovery of unimagined powers, and enjoyment and pride in their development, is a familiar experience; and such experiences add to the case for including in an account of human flourishing the development of generic capacities, and not stopping short at the accomplishment of an individual's major goals. In some lives, the accomplishment of these goals falls flat in the event, and yet fulfilment is nonetheless found in activities that had not previously been prioritised in this kind of way, as the related sense of accomplishment often serves to confirm. Just as autonomy is not the only value, so the corresponding capacity is not the only one that makes us flourish — or makes us human. My case in this section could be translated into the claim that the capacity for meaningful work is another such capacity. What also emerges is that the experiences of achievement and fulfilment that often accompany the development of this capacity supply just the kind of phenomenological counterpart that is to be expected if the case for the importance of meaningful work in human flourishing has been well made out.

#### **4 The Argument from Self-Respect**

My 1984 paper included a separate argument for the indispensability of meaningful work, independent of the argument from essential capacities. This is the argument from self-respect. Meaningful work (much of it outside paid employment, including study at school or university, care of the young, the old and the sick, subsistence farming, and the other examples listed above<sup>33</sup>) is the principal, though not the invariable basis of self-respect in most people's lives, and self-respect is constitutive of a worthwhile life.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> TVO pp 54-56; VOME p 63-5.

<sup>32</sup> TVO pp 60-61; VOME p 68-70.

<sup>33</sup> See notes 17 and 18.

<sup>34</sup> Attfield WHE pp 144-5.

White makes no mention of this argument. But since he wishes to claim that my conclusions about meaningful work lack support,<sup>35</sup> he clearly needs to take this argument into account. His overarching claim here is that ‘work which offers opportunities for autonomous decision-making’ (as opposed to ‘autonomous work’ in his major-life-goals sense) is not a human need, nor a proper goal for social policy, and he seems to be ascribing to me views that contradict this claim.<sup>36</sup> With this claim I have two problems. Firstly, as has already been seen, there are in any case significant differences between meaningful work (in my sense) and what White calls ‘autonomous agency in work’, some of which turn on there being fulfilments implicit in meaningful work that do not depend on autonomy, but which might satisfy a need for such fulfilments. But secondly, if the issue is whether (as I was contending, and as White almost certainly seeks to deny) there is a human need for meaningful work (work which involves the worker endorsing its point and standards, while also depending on the worker’s skill and judgement, and taking its shape from the worker’s conception), and if whether meaningful work (in this sense) is thus a proper goal of social policy, then an affirmative answer is supported by the argument from self-respect as well as that from essential human capacities.

The argument from self-respect pressed into service John Rawls’ analysis of self-respect, and simultaneously rejected Rawls’ assumption that self-respect is only possible for those having a ‘plan of life’<sup>37</sup>, as opposed to those with a more-or-less consistent scheme of priorities for living, sufficient to ensure that they endorse standards affecting their own actions.<sup>38</sup> As noted above, White rejects this same assumption of Rawls (a rejection which this passage of mine may even have prompted).<sup>39</sup> If this modification is taken into account, self-respect involves a person’s conviction that her or his implicit priorities for living are worth carrying out, plus her or his confidence in their ability to fulfil them, as far as this lies within her or his power.

Meaningful work, I further claimed, comprises an activity that usually satisfies the requirements of self-respect itself. Thus ‘the agent of meaningful work has standards and aims about which she or he cares; and also is able to apply them and carry them out’.<sup>40</sup> Whether or not these standards and aims comprise major life-goals, such work usually confers one or both of the above-mentioned ingredients of self-respect, or at least generates or strengthens adherence to a set of priorities of the kind necessary for self-respect. White might remark here that human flourishing need not involve end-products, as work usually does, or even involve activities of any kind at all,<sup>41</sup> and that this stress on compliance with one’s own standards and aims is thus misleading. (Conceivably he might even deny that self-respect is a need.) But I have no need or desire to deny that there are goods other than achievements, and that goods such as satisfaction and enjoyment, unaccompanied by productive work, may characterise whole phases of a flourishing life, as long as self-respect (which need not be expounded in terms of major life-goals) is also recognised as a good, and as one constitutive of human flourishing at that. That this is the case I have argued elsewhere,<sup>42</sup> and needs no supplementary argument here. But if so, then the circumstances of the modern world are such that meaningful work is needed by most people, embodying their best prospect for self-respect as it does.

Admittedly there may seem to be a gap between recognition of meaningful work as a human need and thus as a proper goal of social policy, and recognition of paid employment as such a goal. But, as I argued previously, while some employment offers little scope for meaningful work, most employment embodies traces of autonomy and meaningfulness for the worker, and could be constructively modified so that this autonomous and meaningful content would be increased, and

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<sup>35</sup> White op cit p 24.

<sup>36</sup> White op cit p 25.

<sup>37</sup> John Rawls *A Theory of Justice* section 67 Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press 1971.

<sup>38</sup> Attfield WHE 144.

<sup>39</sup> White op cit pp 45-6.

<sup>40</sup> Attfield WHE p144 For some qualifications, see the text there.

<sup>41</sup> White op cit p 46.

<sup>42</sup> Attfield TVO pp 56-7; VOME pp 65-6.

the work of most employees become meaningful work. Further, paid employment offers for a great many people much their best prospect of self-respect through the meaningful work that it makes possible.<sup>43</sup> Thus, given the feasibility of enhancing the meaningful content of paid work, the apparent gap in the argument between recognition of meaningful work as a human need and recognition of paid employment for all eligible adults as a social goal can be reliably bridged and securely traversed.

Considerations such as these significantly support the goal of full employment, since paid employment offers a great many people their best prospect of meaningful work, and thus (whether or not meaningful work is recognised to correspond to an essential human capacity) of self-respect, which is a good constitutive of human flourishing. These considerations also stand independently of my earlier claim that there is a natural right to meaningful work, although this claim remains a defensible one, granted the analysis of a natural right supplied in that text.<sup>44</sup> But the case for full employment does not depend on that claim being accepted, and is enhanced by the argument from self-respect quite independently of that claim.

### **Afterword: Prospects for Meaningful Work**

As was recognised at the outset, fears about a massive growth of unemployment in western societies such as Britain have so far proved ill-founded. Declining employment in traditional sectors has been matched by increases in the service sector and in new industries, often based on computers. Indeed, computers may even be facilitating increased opportunities not only for employment but also for meaningful work. Enormous scope remains, however, for employment that would harness the unfulfilled potential of many unemployed people and could, if reflectively and sensitively introduced, facilitate meaningful work, which, as I have concluded above, is a human good, of which those capable of it should not be deprived. This philosophical conclusion continues to support policies of full employment.

These conclusions apply just as much to the Third World as to western societies. Since the massive unemployment and underemployment there cannot be countered in the absence of policies of genuinely sustainable development (for which there are many other grounds, ranging from the relief of poverty to the preservation of ecosystems from the impacts of poverty and of unsustainable development), the case for such policies is further strengthened by the above considerations. Whatever the strength of the case for full employment in western societies may be, the case for greater employment opportunities in the Third World can scarcely fail in the circumstances to be stronger. Any advocacy of post-productivism for the Third World, and thus for most countries on Earth, would, if heeded, be likely to make matters worse. Besides debt-relief, what is needed includes investment (both local and international) in socially and environmentally sustainable projects. And one of the reasons this is needed is enhancement of the prospects for meaningful work.

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<sup>43</sup> Attfield WHE p 149.

<sup>44</sup> Attfield WHE p 148.