

## Work and the Need for Meaning: Comments on ‘Should humans work?’

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Santos et al (2020) is an extremely interesting paper on the relationship between technology and work, examined in light of developments of AI, automation and robotics that point towards future scenarios where work might be superfluous. Specifically, on this background, the authors pose their provocative title-question ‘Should humans work?’ Their main message is that the issues surrounding this question have been muddled, mainly due to a failure to keep separate two aspects of the notion of work. The first aspect is what one might call the ‘philosophical’ aspect – the one that involves ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’ by providing meaning and purpose to people’s lives through their work. The second aspect is the ‘technical’ aspect, which concerns access to ‘basic goods’, and which roughly is equivalent to income-generating work. On the interpretation of the present commentary, Santos et al maintain that the confusion arising from the failure to keep the two aspects separate boils down to the following two-pronged claim. First, while the philosophical aspect is obscure and belongs to the province of non-technical disciplines outside the authors’ concern, the technical aspect is:

[A] question of how to produce and optimize access to goods, or basic needs, [and] is therefore a political question and a question of social structure and ultimately an *engineering and technical* task to be carried out, and not a question of “meaning”. (p. 15, my emphasis)

Second, and related, there is nothing fundamentally difficult about this technical question; in fact, they think that ‘an optimization algorithm’ could answer it (ibid.).

In short, the authors think that the two aspects give rise to two kinds of question, a philosophical and a technical one, only the latter of which they address and give a straightforward answer to. Given this seemingly simple answer to the paper’s title-question, someone might wonder if a whole paper is needed to deal with it. Perhaps clarification of the involved terms can dispel this suspicion?

Now, Santos et al do not put much effort into defining the terms they use. Indeed, the paper only contains three explicit definitions, taken from Oxford Online Dictionaries: two of ‘work’ and one of ‘technology’, all very brief (15, 11 and 8 words, respectively). Yet, these definitions are quite helpful to the reader. The first one of ‘work’ as human ‘activity involving mental or physical effort done in order to achieve purpose or result’ (p. 3) is particularly instructive. For it shows clearly what the authors are *not* – at least not explicitly – concerned

with. As they stress, they are not concerned with work in this general sense; specifically, this is not the notion of work that is involved in the title-question of the paper. Instead, they have in mind ‘work’ in a decidedly narrower sense, namely, work in the sense of their second definition: ‘a mental or physical activity as a means of earning income; employment’ (ibid.). They have different ways of expressing this distinction between meaning- and income-generating work, but the most succinct one is between ‘work as meaning’ and ‘work as technicality’ (p. 9).<sup>1</sup>

So far, so good for ‘work as meaning’, then. What about ‘work as technicality’? The authors view this income-related notion of work as intimately linked to the concept of ‘basic needs’. Despite using this latter concept frequently, they provide no definition of it, preferring instead to take it as understood (though they do cite Jolly 1976). Given how often they invoke it, however, it seems that they ought to have at least cited a substantial source of it. For instance, they could have mentioned Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1943, 1954): Maslow’s two lowest levels of needs (physiological needs, safety needs) are often jointly known as ‘basic needs’. In any case, the authors seem to consider the basic-needs-oriented notion of work to be equivalent if not identical to the income-generating notion of work, and they therefore see it as just as clear and unproblematic. By contrast, they view the general sense of work as equivalent if not identical to ‘work as meaning’ and hence, to repeat, as obscure. However, they assume both views without argument. Clearly, arguments are called for, though.

Fortunately, however, the paper has two features that greatly boost its value despite this. First, Santos et al conducted small surveys that had interesting results in the light of the theoretical part of the paper. Second, the paper prompts us to pose an important moral conundrum.

Consider first the surveys. They were a survey of Facebook users (N=34) and one of Harvard graduate alumni (N=29). Their results demonstrate that the two aspects of work are present to different extents in the participants’ attitudes. Although the authors made clear that they only refer to income-generating work in their questions to participants, ‘it was possible to trace down whether people insisted in the concept of “work” per se, implying that they see work as a form of meaning, or whether they were more worried about the technical problem of survival’ (p. 11).

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<sup>1</sup> More formally, one might point out that ‘work’ in their general sense is a *genus* with work in their narrow sense as one of its *species*.

Second, the paper provides an excellent backdrop for reflecting on a moral problem about work. Suppose it is in some sense possible that the most efficient way of securing ‘basic needs’ is by using technology *alone* – call this possibility an Ideal Supply Scenario (ISS). Such a scenario may not be very ‘realistic’, but its theoretical possibility suggests that ‘basic needs’ can be conceptually divorced from ‘work as meaning’. Should human beings work in an ISS? An answer in the spirit of the paper is a resounding No, i.e., in an ISS, human beings should not do income-generating work. This answer should come as no surprise given the authors’ exclusion of ‘work as meaning’ from their answer to their title-question. However, this line of thought is implausible, since human beings have *a need for meaning*. In Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, this need may be a part of the two levels above the ‘basic needs’ (belongingness and love needs, esteem needs), or it may be something broader that encompasses these. Either way, it is fundamental to human motivation (cf. Frankl 1953/1992; Meinertsen 2007), and it could aptly be called a ‘basic need’ in a context where this expression is not reserved for non-meaning-related needs. This would not be a problem for Santos et al, save for the fact that human beings can only meet this need *themselves*. Part of what makes our lives ‘meaningful’ is that we, as agents, procure this meaning ourselves, as it were. To use again the general definition of work from Oxford Dictionaries cited above, meaning-generating work requires *our* ‘activity involving mental or physical effort done in order to achieve purpose or result’. Note that the claim here is not that ‘self-procurement’ is true by definition; only that its denial is very implausible.

This brings to mind Robert Nozick’s ‘experience machine’ (Nozick 1974). Nozick, in the course of investigating the nature of happiness, conducted his famous thought experiment about a machine that produces any happiness-inducing experience required by people who lie down in it, such as fame, fortune and ideal love, as well as the non-veridical experience that their experiences are of real events and not produced by a machine. Intuitively, a person in this machine is not happy. Analogously, it is highly implausible that any machine could satisfy our need for meaning. And, of course, for many of us meeting this need involves income-generating work. Consequently, unless human beings can satisfy their need for meaning in ways *not* including income-generating work, ISS poses a major ethical challenge: should we sacrifice (some of) our need for meaning in order to let technology do all the income-generating work?

Now, this is a question that can only be dealt with properly if ethical considerations and the notion of meaning are involved at length, and as such it is beyond the (justified) scope of Santos et al’s paper. Nonetheless, it might seem that the second part of their surveys reflects a more concrete counterpart of the conundrum, so to speak:

If we found a way for machines to do all jobs...:

[(1)] I would not mind as long as I had access to money.

[(2)] I would not mind as long as I had access to whatever I need.

[(3)] I would mind because I want to work. (p. 13)

This is arguably not to the case, though: the sense of ‘whatever I need’ in (2) clearly seems to be a sense of need that *excludes* the need for meaning. Or, to put it alternatively, the antecedent of the survey question (‘If we found a way for machines to do all jobs’) expresses an ISS that does not include meaning in our ‘basic needs’. So, naturally, to many people the survey here presents a very attractive scenario. Indeed, 53% of the Facebook participants and 57% of the Harvard Graduates ones selected (2) as their answer. In contrast, arguably no one would select it if it were stated that it required that they could not meet their need for meaning. Or perhaps someone would? Whether or not they would, *should* they? These are questions that future research might fruitfully address. A grumpy reader of the paper might complain that, for all its (justified) focus on income-generating work, it ought not to have had a title that forces us to ask these questions without at least acknowledging them. On the other hand, it is a great virtue of the paper that it brings this issue to the fore.<sup>2</sup>

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