Work Is Meaningful If There Are Good Reasons to Do It: A Revisionary Conceptual Analysis of ‘Meaningful Work’

ABSTRACT

Meaningful work is an important ideal, but it seems hard to give an adequate account of meaningful work. In this article, I conduct a revisionary conceptual analysis of ‘meaningful work’, i.e. a conceptual analysis that aims at finding a better and more useful way to use this term. I argue for a distinction between cases where work itself is meaningful and cases where other sources of meaning are found at work. The term ‘meaningful work’ is most useful for the former cases. I then argue for the reasons account of what makes work itself meaningful: work is meaningful if (and to the extent that) there are good reasons to do it. I compare this to established accounts of meaningful work, such as subjective meaningfulness, self-realization, alienation, the unity of conception and execution, autonomy, social contribution, and Veltman’s four-dimensional account. None of these capture the distinct concern that the concept ‘meaningful work’ should capture, or they do so less well than the reasons account. This also shows that work can be meaningful regardless of whether it is good in other respects, such as in inherent interest or opportunities for self-realization.

Keywords: Meaningful work; revisionary conceptual analysis; reasons account; meaning in life

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# Introduction

What makes work meaningful? Meaningful work is an important ideal in ethics, political theory, and the social science of work. However, what this ideal amounts to seems hard to say, and in research on meaningful work, the term ‘meaningful work’ is used in many different ways: a recent review article (Martela and Pessi 2018) found 36 different definitions. This suggests that there may be potential for progress by thinking more carefully about how we use and how we should use this term. I argue this in the following, drawing on the idea of conceptual engineering (Cappelen 2018; Cappelen and Plunkett 2020), the project of critically assessing and improving the way we use concepts. Hence, I will engage in a revisionary conceptual analysis of the concept ‘meaningful work’, i.e. a conceptual analysis that aims at finding a better way to use this term. I will argue that the term ‘meaningful work’ is most useful for capturing a concern with how work itself can be meaningful. Once that is done, I propose and argue for a novel account of meaningful work that captures this concern, namely the reasons account of meaningful work: work is meaningful if (and to the extent that) there are good reasons to do it.

The argument takes the following structure. Section 1 deals with the preliminaries: what are revisionary conceptual analysis, work, and meaningfulness, respectively? Section 2 starts the conceptual analysis and identifies a particular concern for which we need and should reserve the concept of ‘meaningful work’, namely cases where work itself is meaningful. Section 3 develops and argues for the reasons account of meaningful work. Finally, Section 4 reviews seven influential established accounts of what makes work meaningful: subjective meaningfulness, self-realization, alienation, the unity of conception and execution, autonomy, social contribution, and Veltman’s four-dimensional account. The section argues that these fail to capture how work itself can be meaningful, or do so less well than the reasons account. The paper thereby provides an account of meaningful work that I believe is a promising point of departure for further systematic research.

# Preliminaries: Revisionary Conceptual Analysis, Work, and Meaning

Before getting to the actual conceptual analysis, I will say some more about what characterizes a revisionary conceptual analysis and make some remarks about each of the constituents ‘work’ and ‘meaningful’ in the composite term to be analysed.

A revisionary conceptual analysis is a conceptual analysis that aims not at describing how a concept is actually used but at revising and improving how we use it. It is driven by the idea that we can find better ways to talk about the issues that concern us by critically examining and revising our concepts and the way we use them. This type of analysis is now often referred to as ‘conceptual engineering’ (Cappelen 2018, pp. 1–6; Cappelen and Plunkett 2020, pp. 3–5). My analysis is particularly inspired by two paradigmatic forms of conceptual engineering. First, Carnap’s explication, i.e. a conceptual analysis that starts with a less exact term, the explicandum, as it is found in ordinary language or earlier scientific concept development and seeks to improve upon it to arrive at a more exact and ‘fruitful’ concept, the explicatum (Carnap 1950, pp. 3–7; Cappelen 2018, pp. 11–12). A nice way to describe this is that explications propose what would be ‘”a good thing to mean by” the term in a specific context for a particular purpose’ (Gupta 2021, para. 1.5; Belnap 1993, p. 117). Second, I draw on Haslanger’s notion of ‘ameliorative analysis’ (Haslanger 2012, pp. 223–224, 385–387; Cappelen 2018, pp. 12–14), in particular, the idea that in revisionary conceptual analysis, it can be useful to ask what ‘the point’ of having a concept is, and what particular task we want the concept to do for us (Haslanger 2012, p. 224).[[1]](#endnote-1)

The motivation for this approach is that the concept ‘meaningful work’ is currently being used in very different ways by different authors, as was noted in the Introduction. This may reflect that the concept is used for different purposes, and it is not necessarily a problem as long as everyone is mindful about the fact that when talking about ‘meaningful work’, they may not be talking about the same thing. However, arguably, it is suggestive of at least the following: no concept of meaningful work has been found good or generally useful enough for there to be convergence on it, and moreover, when there is such a proliferation of definitions, there is at least potential for confusion and verbal disputes (cp. Chalmers 2011). It may then also be possible to find one (or some) way(s) to use the concept that is particularly useful – the analysis that follows argues that this is the case.

I now move on to the two constituents of the phrase ‘meaningful work’, starting with the head noun ‘work’. We all know what work is, but as several authors note, work is nevertheless hard to define (Michaelson 2021, p. 415; Cholbi 2018, p. 1121; Veltman 2016, pp. 22–26; Muirhead 2004, pp. 4–6; Elster 1986, p. 110). However, a wide range of definitions and discussions come together in emphasizing the instrumental nature of work as an activity (Althorpe 2022, pp. 11–12; Cholbi 2018, p. 1122; Veltman 2016, pp. 25–26; Muirhead 2004, pp. 4–6; Van Parijs 1995, pp. 137–138; Elster 1986, pp. 110–111; Marshall 2013, p. 54; Marx 1964, p. 828; Oxford English Dictionary 2021). Similarly, I will here understand work as covering a wide class of different instrumental activities that includes most jobs,[[2]](#endnote-2) but also housework, care work, and voluntary work.

Now, on to the modifier ‘meaningful’. I take it that this modifier commends the work as good or valuable in some way. Moreover, I think the point of using the particular modifier ‘meaningful’ is that it is not merely a synonym for ‘good’ but denotes a particular way in which work can be good. More specifically, I think the point of calling some work ‘meaningful’ must be that we think it can be good in the particular way that the philosophical literature on meaning in (and of) life tries to understand (cp. Veltman 2016, p. 105).[[3]](#endnote-3) Hence, the idea of meaningful work suggests that work can be a source of meaningfulness and one part of what makes life meaningful overall. Moreover, considering how much of their time adults in contemporary society spend at work, it is plausibly a particularly important arena for meaning, at least in this life phase.

From here, the analysis will proceed in two steps. The next section engages in revisionary conceptual analysis by arguing that the concept ‘meaningful work’ is most useful for honing in on a specific concern about work and meaningfulness. Subsequent sections develop and argue for an account of ‘meaningful work’ that can capture this concern.

# The Narrow Concept of ‘Meaningful Work’: Meaning of Work itself

In this section, I argue that there is a specific and significant concern about meaningfulness and work that we need the concept ‘meaningful work’ to identify. Therefore, for analytical purposes, we will, do well to use ‘meaningful work’ in a narrower way than everyday language does.

Consider the following two examples, which I think both would be called cases of ‘meaningful work’ in everyday language:

1. The work of Lab technician 1 is meaningful because working on developing a new vaccine – the project of her research group – is meaningful.
2. The work of Lab technician 2 is meaningful because she has meaningful friendships with her colleagues.

Let us start with 2). Arguably, friendships can be meaningful if anything can, and good social relationships may emerge from and be a part of working together. However, I suggest that there is a significant difference between workplace relationships as a source of meaning and the source of meaning in 1). For while meaningful friendships here seem to arise as a side-effect of the lab technician’s work, they are a source of meaning distinct from the work activity itself, as the comparison with 1) shows. Contrastingly, in 1), it is the work activities contributing to the development of a new vaccine that are meaningful.

Therefore, a first thing to note is that we can distinguish a notion of work itself from side effects and other goods available at or through work and that these are distinct, possible sources of meaningfulness. I suggest that we use a distinction between ‘meaning *of* work’ and ‘meaning *at* work’ to capture this difference: ‘meaning *of* work’ for cases where the work *itself* is meaningful, and ‘meaning *at* work’ to cover all sources of meaning apart from the work itself that may be present at a workplace and related to the work.[[4]](#endnote-4) Example 1) is an instance of meaning *of* work itself, whereas example 2) is a case of meaning *at* work.

The usefulness of the distinction is vindicated by a closer comparison of 1) and 2). First, let us note that if Lab technician 1 also has meaningful relationships at work, in addition to the meaning in carrying out lab work towards the development of a vaccine, then the work of Lab technician 1 is meaningful in at least one way more than that of Lab technician 2. And while it is surely a good thing that Lab technician 2 has meaning at work from meaningful relationships, it would presumably be better still if her work itself was also meaningful, as the work of Lab technician 1 is (we may assume that Lab technician 2 works in a lab that is not developing a vaccine, but rather something we think of as less worthwhile). Hence, there is a difference here that seems to be significant and that we cannot capture without the distinction between ‘meaning of work’ and ‘meaning at work’.

I do not think ordinary language makes the distinction between meaning of work and at work. Thus, I suggest that we call a concept of meaningful work that encompasses both meaning at work and of work ‘the broad concept of meaningful work’. A concept that limits ‘meaningful work’ to meaning of work is called ‘the narrow concept of meaningful work’. A first upshot of the conceptual analysis is that we can draw this distinction and that it may be useful for analytical purposes because the narrow concept of meaningful work identifies a particular and significant concern for which we do not already have a specific term.

I will now go one step further and argue that the most interesting questions to ask about meaningful work are about meaningful work in the narrow sense. Here is why: plausibly, a great number of things can be meaningful in life. After all, we have already seen two examples: lab technician work and friendships. Given that workplaces are multifaceted environments, it seems likely that there will be many aspects of work with the potential to be meaningful.[[5]](#endnote-5) Hence, if one asks what makes work meaningful without distinguishing between meaning *of* work and meaning *at* work, one may end up compiling a list of items that have the potential to be meaningful but that are, nevertheless, unrelated except for the fact that they may all be found at a workplace. If we are reasonably sure that these items, e.g. friendships, are meaningful, then they will plausibly be meaningful wherever they are, and it is just not very interesting to restate that they are also meaningful when taking place at or arising from work.

However, there is also the interesting possibility that *work itself* sometimes is another such meaningful thing that we can add to the list of things that give meaning in life. This is what the narrow concept of meaningful work, i.e. meaning *of* work, may help us get at. Thus, this way of using ‘meaningful work’ picks out a distinct and interesting concern. The broad concept conflates this concern with other potential sources of meaning that may be found at work. Thus, I suggest that the point of inquiring into meaningful work as a topic in its own right is inquiring into the concern that the narrow concept identifies. This is what I will do in the rest of this paper.

That concludes the first step of the analysis: identifying the best use we may have for the concept of ‘meaningful work’. This again opens up the substantive project of identifying what makes work meaningful in this narrow sense, which I take up in the next section.

# The Reasons Account of Meaningful Work

In this section, I will develop an account of what makes work meaningful in the narrow sense identified above, i.e. the reasons account of meaningful work.

The reasons account of meaningful work is based on Višak’s (2017) reasons account of meaning in life. Višak carefully examines some of the most influential accounts of meaning in life and argues that talk of meaningfulness in these different accounts can be understood as talk of reasons for action. That is, Višak argues that the theories disagree at the surface, but on a deeper level, they are really about the same thing, namely reasons for action. Višak’s reasons account of meaning in life goes as follows:

S’s life is meaningful if and only if and to the extent that S acts overall according to normative reasons for action. (Višak 2017, p. 517)

Based on this account, I propose the following, somewhat simpler, reasons account of meaningful work:

Work is meaningful if (and to the extent that) there are good reasons to do it.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The reasons account of meaningful work is thus continuous with the ecumenical reasons account of meaning in life. In the following, I argue for the reasons account of meaningful work, first by showing how it does well in explaining some important cases, and second, by showing how it fits with the way we often discuss and disagree about what work is meaningful.

Consider first the following two cases, one classical and one contemporary, which I take to be clear cases of meaningless work.

Sisyphus: ‘The gods had condemned Sisyphus to roll, ceaselessly, a rock to the top of a mountain, from where the stone would fall down by its own weight. They had thought, and with some reason, that there is no punishment more terrible than useless work without hope.’ (Camus 1942, p. 163, author’s translation)

Care home leisure activity coordinator: ‘Most of my job was to interview residents and fill out a recreation form that listed their preferences. That form was then logged on a computer and promptly forgotten about forever. (…) A lot of the time, I would complete a form for a short-term resident, and they would check out the next day. I threw away mountains of paper. The interviews mostly just annoyed the residents, as they knew it was just bullshit paperwork, and no one was going to care about their individual preferences.’ (Graeber 2018, p. 45)

Sisyphus is a favourite case in the literature on meaning in life.[[7]](#endnote-7) The reasons account seems to provide a plausible interpretation of his predicament, namely that it consists precisely in undergoing never-ending toil for which there is no reason. This gains further support when we consider one of the standard treatments Sisyphus has been subjected to in search of meaning, namely to let the stone stay put at the top, and to let Sisyphus build a temple. Arguably, this can make the stone rolling more meaningful, at least if building a temple is a worthwhile thing to do.[[8]](#endnote-8) The reasons account provides a plausible explanation of this: as long as the stone kept rolling down, there was clearly no point to Sisyphus’ labours. Building a temple may however provide a reason why the stone should be rolled up the mountain. The care home leisure activity coordinator differs from Sisyphus in that this work actually has a worthwhile purpose, namely to provide residents with leisure they actually enjoy. However, this purpose does not provide a reason to do the tasks in which the leisure activity coordinator job actually consists, namely filling out paperwork that is then thrown away.

Let us now test the reasons account against a favourite example in the literature on meaningful work, namely *the assembly line*.[[9]](#endnote-9) At first sight, this may seem like a counterexample: what seems to be the main problem with the assembly line is its dull, monotonous, and alienating character as well as the lack of self-realization and autonomy. Hence, if this is meaningless work, this may seem better explained by other accounts of meaningful work (which I discuss in Section 4) as they fit well with what seems to go wrong here. However, I will argue that even assembly line work can be meaningful under the right circumstances. It all depends on the reasons for doing this work as the following example shows.

Consider work on the assembly line at a weapons factory. I think this typically seems like meaningless work. However, assume that a war against someone like Hitler – an existential threat to the community – breaks out. Arguably, the judgement on the meaningfulness of this work flips. Under these circumstances, this work is meaningful because there are very weighty reasons to do it, although it is presumably just as dull, monotonous, and lacking in self-realization and autonomy and so on as before.

Hence, what seems like a counterexample turns out to be a powerful case in support of the reasons account (and a powerful counterexample to other accounts as I will show in Section 4). What we observe here is that meaningfulness can be the only redeeming feature of boring or otherwise bad work. This is an important observation, and it fits with an observation made by several scholars on meaning in life, namely that what is enjoyable and what is meaningful may come apart, and there may be meaning even in drudgery and suffering (Adams 2010, pp. 76–78; Bramble 2015, p. 448; Metz 2013, pp. 60–62). Moreover, it shows that the reasons account is indeed an account of what makes work itself meaningful. One of the bad things about the assembly line is how poor it is in terms of opportunities for meaning *at* work, but in the right circumstances, this work itself may nevertheless be meaningful – this is perhaps the only good thing about a war effort at the assembly line.

Thus, the reasons account seems to do well when tested against central examples. It gives a plausible explanation of why the work of Sisyphus and the care home leisure activity coordinator is meaningless. And it explains how work on an assembly line, often considered a paradigmatic case of meaningless work, can nevertheless sometimes be meaningful.

The reasons account is open to the objection that it merely pushes the question of what makes work meaningful one step further back to the question ‘what is a good reason to work?’ In one sense this is true: a complete account of meaningful work thus also requires a further account of what a ‘good reason to work’ is. However, I also think this objection highlights a strength of the reasons account, namely that it fits well with the fact that we often discuss and disagree about what work is meaningful by giving reasons why some work should be done or disagreeing about whether there are such reasons. For example, a catholic priest may think that his work is deeply meaningful; an atheist will presumably disagree. Yet they may both agree that if there is no God, working as a priest is meaningless. The reasons account fits with the structure of this disagreement and the kind of content it turns on: the disagreement about meaningfulness tracks a disagreement about whether the world is such that there are reasons to be a priest. I believe disagreements about what work is meaningful will be fairly common in liberal societies where people have different conceptions of the good life. The reasons account accommodates this fact in a plausible way. Hence, it also seems that the reasons account is underdetermined about when work is meaningful in just the right way. A lesson from this is that we can discuss both the merits of the reasons account on its own and the merits of completing it with one or another account of reasons to work.

This concludes my presentation of and positive argument for the reasons account of meaningful work. I will now proceed to compare the reasons account to several influential existing accounts of meaningful work and argue for favouring the reasons account.

# Comparison to Existing Accounts of Meaningful Work

This section discusses several other common and influential proposals about what aspect of work makes it meaningful, namely: subjective meaningfulness (it feels meaningful), self-realization, alienation, the unity of conception and execution, autonomy, and making a social contribution to the greater good. Although I ultimately reject each of these as an account of what makes work meaningful, I also try to show how each is related to meaningful work in some way. I also discuss Veltman’s (2016) recent, four-dimensional account of meaningful work. The rejection of these alternative accounts completes the case for the reasons account.

## Subjective Meaningfulness

The perhaps simplest approach to meaningful work is that meaningfulness is a subjective experience and that work is meaningful if and only if it feels meaningful for the worker.[[10]](#endnote-10)

However, understood as claiming that a subjective experience of meaningfulness is sufficient for work to be meaningful, subjectivism is easy to reject. People may experience anything as good or meaningful, and there is a range of well-known counterexamples that push towards objective definitions of values and ideals of this kind. Counting blades of grass is not meaningful work no matter how one feels about it.[[11]](#endnote-11) An evil person might feel that carrying out evil projects is meaningful, but that does not make this meaningful work. Pure subjectivism about meaningful work is therefore not plausible.

What may have more plausibility is the idea that subjective experience is a necessary condition, jointly sufficient for meaningfulness together with a further objective condition. Susan Wolf’s (2010) highly influential account of meaning in life has this hybrid or ‘bipartite’ subjective and objective form, captured in the slogan: ‘meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness’ (Wolf 2010, pp. 9, 18–21). Wolf has influenced several authors on meaningful work, including Yeoman (2014), Veltman (2016), and Michaelson (2021). I will discuss the latter just below, but first, it is worth considering some criticisms of Wolf’s account from the philosophical literature on meaning in life.

Consequentialists about meaning in life have forcefully criticized the claim that subjective experience is necessary for meaningfulness (Bramble 2015; Smuts 2013). First, they doubt Wolf’s intuition that subjective appreciation of a source of meaning is really necessary for meaningfulness. It seems to make just as much sense to say that there may be meaningfulness, the person is just not aware of it (Bramble 2015, p. 447). Smuts shows how it seems possible to realize that one’s life has been meaningful all along without one’s knowing (Smuts 2013, pp. 546–47).

This is supplemented by a conceptual argument: when we worry that our lives are meaningless, we are worrying that our lives lack a particular kind of value, not a particular feeling (Smuts 2013, p. 548). Indeed, as Bramble (2015, p. 448) aptly puts it: ‘A depressed person already knows he is depressed; he is wondering precisely whether he is right to feel this way’. Moreover, most people think that depressed people can be wrong about their lives being meaningless. However, on Wolf’s bipartite view, this becomes a conceptual impossibility: the mere fact of lacking feeling means that one also lacks meaning (Bramble 2015, pp. 447–448).

To see how these points carry over also to meaningful work, let us briefly examine Michaelson’s (2021) recent ‘Normative account’ of meaningful work, which is inspired by Wolf’s bipartite account of meaning in life. I will discuss the following reconstruction of Michaelson’s account of meaningful work:[[12]](#endnote-12)

Meaningful work

1. is experienced as meaningful by the worker, and
2. perceived as socially worthwhile by others, and
3. there are good, objective reasons this work should be done.

As we will now see, Smuts and Bramble’s criticisms of Wolf’s account of meaning in life carry over to this tripartite account of meaningful work. The first criticism is that meaning seems to be independent of whether or not it is experienced and that it is possible to realize that one’s life has been meaningful all along. This seems to hold for the meaningfulness of one’s work just as much as for meaning in life: we can discover that our work has been meaningful all along, even if we were disillusioned while doing it. Second, consider the conceptual argument that worries about meaningfulness seem to be about the absence of a value, not the absence of a feeling. Again, the consideration seems to apply with the same force to meaningful work: when we worry about whether our work is meaningless, we are worried that our work lacks a particular value, not a particular feeling. Presumably, we typically have this worry because the work appears meaningless to us, and we want to know whether we are right to feel this way. Finally, Michaelson’s second, non-objective, intersubjective or ‘social’ condition is not any more plausible than the subjective condition his account shares with Wolf. Just as worries about meaningfulness are not really about how one feels, they are also not really about what others think. Work may be meaningful, even if one knows that others think it is not. Thus, Wolf-inspired hybrid or bi-/tripartite accounts of meaningful work are no more plausible than similar accounts of meaning in life.

This also means that the only part of Michaelson’s ‘Normative account’ that survives scrutiny is the third condition in the reconstruction, which resembles the reasons account of meaningful work argued for above. Of course, it is most desirable that people have meaningful work and appreciate this too. However, this does not imply that there is any subjective – or for that matter any intersubjective – condition on work being meaningful. For the reasons account, this means that what we understand by ‘good reasons for work’ has to have an objective basis.

Thus, we can reject subjective (and intersubjective) conditions on meaningful work, but a range of other proposed objective bases for meaningfulness still merit consideration. I will proceed to discuss these below.

## Self-realization

Self-realization at work is perhaps the most common contender for what makes work meaningful in the philosophical literature. By self-realization, I here understand the development of a person’s skills and talents (cp. Elster 1986, p. 101).[[13]](#endnote-13) However, I will argue that self-realization does not make work itself meaningful. First, it is easy to provide examples of self-realizing work that seems meaningless. For example, we can think of a graphic designer working in advertisement. Here, she may have room to use and develop her talents, so it is self-realizing. However, it does not make her work very meaningful if, say, her talents are used to generate demand for useless products. Moreover, we can recall that the meaningful assembly line shows that neither is self-realization necessary for work to be meaningful.

This calls for an explanation of why self-realization is nevertheless so central to many conceptions of meaningful work. My suggestion is that these accounts have failed to distinguish between meaning at work and meaning of work itself, and while self-realization is not what provides the latter, it is an important source of the former. Just like social relationships, the self-realization of the worker is not a part of work itself, but rather a possible side-effect of those kinds of work that involve using one’s skills at the right level of challenge (Elster 1986, p. 100). Moreover, it does seem plausible that self-realization is a source of meaning in life, regardless of whether it is achieved at or outside of work. Hence, at least in some jobs, self-realization is an important source of meaning at work, and when work is meaningful in the broad sense, this may often be so because it provides self-realization. However, self-realization is not what makes work meaningful in the narrow sense.

## Alienation

Alienation is often associated with meaningless work, typically with reference to Marx (e.g. Roessler 2012, pp. 87–88). While these conditions have similarities and may be related, I will argue that we should resist defining meaningful or meaningless work with reference to alienation.

For a clear account of alienation, I will turn to some influential Marx critics. Elster, Plamenatz, and Wood distinguish two main concepts of alienation in Marx (Elster 1985, p. 74; Plamenatz 1975, p. 141; Wood 2004, p. 50) whereof the one referred to as ‘spiritual alienation’ (Elster 1985, p. 74; Plamenatz 1975, p. 141) is the relevant one in the context of meaningful work.[[14]](#endnote-14) Elster (1985, p. 74) defines spiritual alienation as follows:

Spiritual alienation may be seen either as a lack of a sense of meaning, or as a sense of a lack of meaning.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Meaningless work and spiritual alienation are thus related to each other. However, Elster’s definition clearly suggests that we cannot use alienation to define meaningless work. For alienation is here explicated as a lack of (a sense of) meaning, and defining meaningless work as alienated work would then be circular. Moreover, the definition suggests that meaninglessness leads to, or perhaps is constitutive of, alienation, and not the other way around.

There is a second reason why I think it is mistaken to define meaningful work with reference to alienation. As stated in Section 1, the ideal of meaningful work implies the presence of something good and highly desirable. That is, describing work as ‘meaningful’ implies something more than just the absence of a bad such as alienation. However, in the word pair alienation/non-alienation, non-alienation is merely the absence of the bad of alienation. Therefore, perhaps the bad of alienation supervenes (partially) on the absence of the good of meaning, but the absence of the bad of alienation seems analytically distinct from the presence of the good of meaningfulness.

Hence, it seems plausible that meaningless work and alienation are closely related but not that alienation has a place in a definition of meaningful work.

## Autonomy

Several philosophers claim that meaningful work is autonomous work (Althorpe 2022, pp. 6–8; Bowie 1998; Roessler 2012; Schwartz 1982).[[16]](#endnote-16) The reasons account would concur with this in at least one specific sense of autonomy, namely in the sense of autonomy as the exercise of agency according to reasons (e.g. Korsgaard 2009, pp. 81–84, 108). Roessler (2012) and Schwartz (1982) both emphasize autonomy as the exercise of agency in their accounts of meaningful work. For Roessler (2012, p. 86), autonomy is a matter of choosing one’s work freely, having influence on how work is done and organized, and using one’s abilities in ways that are complex and interesting.[[17]](#endnote-17) Similarly, for Schwartz (1982, p. 635), autonomy is about rationally forming and acting on a plan for one’s life in contrast to simply reacting to circumstances. In the context of work, autonomy contrasts with routine work consisting in pre-specified actions in which workers have ‘almost no opportunity for formulating aims, for deciding on means for achieving their ends’ (Schwartz 1982, p. 634).

However, although agency is important in its own right, it is also rather empty before the agent makes us of it. People may use their agency in more and less meaningful ways, and we are quite familiar with this. In the context of work in particular, one can easily choose to do work that is not meaningful. For example, producing stultifying entertainment is not meaningful work – even if one has chosen this job and has large discretion in it, and it involves complex tasks. Hence, it seems that agency itself does not make work meaningful; rather, meaningfulness will depend on how one uses that agency.

It is nevertheless highly plausible that autonomy and meaningful work will typically go together. For if people value meaningful work, we can assume that they will typically choose meaningful work when given an autonomous choice over what work to do and how to do it. Thus, autonomy may be used to choose meaningful work, but it is not in itself what makes the work meaningful.

## The Unity of Conception and Execution

Meaningful work has been associated with the unity of conception and execution (Murphy 1993, pp. 8–9, 227; Walsh 1994, pp. 241–244). The idea is that work becomes meaningful when the theoretical conception of how work is to be done and its practical execution are taken care of by the same person. However, it seems easy to give counterexamples. For example, creating instruments that are to be used for an evil purpose, say for crimes or unjust warfare, is not meaningful just because the same worker conceives of the instrument and makes it as well. Conversely, the meaningful assembly line suggests that in some cases work which consists of executing simple tasks may also be meaningful. Hence, the unity of conception and execution seems neither sufficient nor necessary for work to be meaningful.

This makes it natural to ask why meaningful work is associated with the unity of conception and execution in the first place. A closer look shows that the link seems to go via other goods, especially self-realization. For Walsh, the unity of conception and execution makes work what he calls a ‘eudaimonian activity’ (Walsh 1994, pp. 241–243), which is ‘a form of meaningful activity that involves the development of skills and capacities’ (Walsh 1994, p. 243). Hence, as I understand Walsh, it is either the self-realization and/or the eudaimonia (flourishing) that is meaningful, and the unity of conception and execution gives rise to these goods. Murphy (1993, p. 8) similarly emphasizes the importance of the ‘the dialectic of conception and execution’ for developing skills and links meaningful work and self-realization (Murphy 1993, pp. 226–227). Moreover, Murphy (1993, p. 8) also finds something unfree in work that ‘executes the thought of another’. I find it very plausible that the unity of conception and execution is conducive to self-realization, autonomy, and flourishing. However, the first two have been discussed above, and I will return to flourishing in Section 4.7. None of these is what makes work itself meaningful. What seems more plausible is that the unity of conception and execution is important for meaningful work indirectly, through autonomy, or for meaningful work in the broad sense, through self-realization.

## A Social Contribution to the Greater Good

Another common view is that contributing to the greater good (Bailey et al. 2017, p. 417; Martela and Pessi 2018, pp. 6–7; Steger et al. 2012, pp. 325–326) or making a social contribution (Althorpe 2022) is (a part of) what makes work meaningful.[[18]](#endnote-18) I think this is both the most intuitive and also the most promising alternative suggestion: work that makes a social contribution and promotes the greater good typically seems meaningful as well. However, note that this is coherent with and can be explained by the reasons account: promoting the greater good can be a good reason to work – as in the case of the meaningful assembly line. I will now argue that the reasons account also has three significant advantages over the social contribution account.

First, the notions of ‘making a social contribution’ or ‘contributing to the greater good’ are quite vague notions. On closer consideration, we see that some social contributions seem more meaningful than others. Think of jobs that consist in serving the best off. Presumably, at least some of these jobs make the lives of the best off go better, but arguably, they are not as meaningful as jobs that help people in genuine need – if they are meaningful at all. We thus need a way to discriminate between social contributions and say why some of these are more meaningful than others. The reasons account provides a basis for doing so: it seems plausible that there are stronger reasons to do some good things than others. For example, there are stronger reasons to help people in need than to help the best off do better. In this way, the reasons account may be a refinement of the greater good account.

A proponent of the social contribution account may suggest that this means that there may be no difference between a refined version of the social contribution account and the reasons account. This may be correct, but I think the reasons account has two further advantages. The first is that the reasons account has the advantage of being continuous with an account of meaning in life and of fitting neatly with how we discuss and disagree about whether some work is meaningful or not. The second advantage, which is also the perhaps strongest reason to be sceptical of the social contribution account, is that it seems that work can be meaningful without it contributing to the good of anyone else in any way. Think of work we do for our own and only our own good, such as building ourselves a house, growing our own vegetables, and so on. The social contribution account will have to say this work is meaningless, but this seems wrong. In contrast, the reasons account can concur that some people may have a reason to grow their own vegetables or build a house for themselves and that when this is so, this work is meaningful.

I think the social contribution account seems convincing because a lot of meaningful work is meaningful by contributing to the good of others in some way. However, this may just reflect the fact that in our society most work is done to satisfy the needs and wants of others – whether as a part of society’s division of labour or that in the household. The reasons account lets us explain both why some contributions to the good of others seem particularly meaningful and some perhaps not meaningful at all and also that work can sometimes be meaningful without contributing to the good of others.

I have now discussed six different aspects of work that are often considered to be what makes work meaningful. I have argued that none gives a satisfactory account of what makes work itself meaningful, and I have tried to show how each is rather related to meaningful work in some other way. Importantly, this is not a rejection of self-realizing work, autonomous work, non-alienated work, or contributive work as ideals. On the contrary, what I am suggesting is that these are important ideals in their own rights, and we do them justice by treating them as such rather than conflating them under the heading of meaningful work. Meaningful work is a further ideal in its own right.

I will end the discussion of existing accounts with a brief discussion of a recent, multi-dimensional account of meaningful work, namely that of Veltman (2016).

## Veltman’s Four-dimensional Account of Meaningful Work as Central for Flourishing

Veltman (2016) offers the perhaps most comprehensive recent treatment of the subject of meaningful work. Her ‘central argument’ is that meaningful work is ‘integral to human flourishing’ (Veltman 2016, p. 1), and after a comprehensive discussion, she arrives at a four-dimensional account of what makes work meaningful. Veltman’s study is very extensive, and I have no intention of attempting a full discussion here as this would require a paper of its own. What I will do is to show some ways in which her analysis may have been more fruitful if it had used the concept ‘meaningful work’ in a more a more rigorous way and how it may have yielded more interesting findings if it had made the distinction between meaning of work and meaning at work. More generally, the discussion below is meant to illustrate and support one of the main claims of this paper: the literature on meaningful work may in general benefit from using this concept more carefully and rigorously.

After a comprehensive discussion, Veltman settles on the following ‘four primary dimensions’ as her account of what makes work meaningful:

1. Developing or exercising the worker’s human capabilities, especially insofar as this expression meets with recognition and esteem;
2. Supporting virtues including self-respect, honor, integrity, dignity, or pride;
3. Providing a personal purpose or serving a genuinely useful purpose for others, and especially producing something of enduring value; or
4. Integrating elements of a worker’s life, such as building or reflecting personal relationships and values or connecting a worker to an environmental or relational context with which she deeply identifies. (Veltman 2016, p. 117)

This must be a list of sources of meaning at work and not an account of what makes work itself meaningful, as it consists largely of elements that are not a part of work itself, such as other people’s responses to work (recognition and esteem), desirable side-effects (self-respect, honour, etc.), social relationships, and connections to aspects outside of work. Section 2 argued that if one does not distinguish between the meaning of work itself and meaning at work, one may fail to identify the former, most interesting sense of ‘meaningful work’ and instead end up merely compiling a list of possible sources of meaning in life that are sometimes found in the workplace. Veltman’s list here seems a case in point: it lists a range of things that are plausibly often sources of meaning in life, or at least otherwise valuable, whether found at work or not, but it has little to say about what is specific about how work may be meaningful.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Hence, the distinction between meaning of and at work is one way of using concepts carefully and rigorously that I think could have made Veltman’s discussion more fruitful. I will now show that her discussion also seems to do what I warn against at the end of Section 4.6, namely to conflate the notion of ‘meaningful work’ with good work in a more general sense, or with other good things we may want form work apart from its being meaningful. One of Veltman’s main claims is that meaningful work is integral to a flourishing life (Veltman 2016, pp. 1, 10–16, 41). She starts her argument with a ‘cumulative case for the centrality of work in a flourishing life’ where she lists 20 ways in which work impacts the lives of workers (Veltman 2016, pp. 4–10). In light of the list, she concludes that a person is ‘unlikely to fare well’, i.e. flourish, if he does not have good work (Veltman 2016, p. 10). It is hard to disagree; the claim seems plausible in its own right, and Veltman’s list lends strong support to it. However, it is also striking that many of the elements on this list do not seem to be about work and meaningfulness specifically but rather about how work in general impacts life in general. To mention just a few: (1) is that work matters for income and standard of living, (2) is that work takes up a lot of time, and (3) is that the kind of work one does influences character and intelligence. Moreover, Veltman slips from saying that work matters for flourishing (p. 4), over saying that ‘good work’ matters (p. 10), to saying that ‘meaningful work’ matters (p. 12).[[20]](#endnote-20) Therefore, it is not clear whether the cumulative argument tells us something about the importance of ‘meaningful work’ in the sense that Veltman later develops or just about how having work that is good in different ways may make life go better in different ways. I think more could have been learned from Veltman’s thorough discussion if ‘meaningful work’ and other notions of good work had been kept more clearly distinct. More generally, I think it is hard to make progress about a concept as elusive as ‘meaningful work’ without thinking very carefully about how we use concepts and how it will be most helpful to use them.

# Conclusion

I will end by summarizing the most important points for which I have argued in the above:

1. Research on meaningful work can benefit from more careful and rigorous use of terms and concepts and from revisionary conceptual analysis.
2. We should distinguish between meaning *at* work and the meaning *of* work itself. ‘Meaningful work’ is needed as a concept to pick out the latter concern and is most useful for this specific use.
3. Established accounts of meaningful work tend to identify sources of meaning at work, or other concerns or ideals with some relation to meaningful work, or which are important in their own right, but they do not tell us what makes work itself meaningful. We should avoid conflating different good things we want from work under the heading ‘meaningful work’.
4. The reasons account is a more promising account of what makes work itself meaningful: work is meaningful if (and to the extent that) there are good reasons to do it.

A complete account of meaningful work may have to await a more complete account of what it means that there are good reasons to do some work, about which I have not said much here. What I hope to have shown is that it is plausible that the meaning of work itself depends on whether there are reasons why this work should be done, regardless of the specific account of such reasons that one adopts. I therefore think the reasons account is a promising point of departure for further research on the many outstanding questions about the important ideal of meaningful work.

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1. I think some previous authors on ‘meaningful work’ have also conducted conceptual analyses that have at least to some degree been revisionary in nature (although the idea of conceptual engineering had not yet been elaborated as it is today). For an example, see Walsh (1994) who explicitly attempts to develop a concept of meaningful work relevant to distributive justice (Walsh 1994, p. 241). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I say most jobs because – as Graeber (2018) documents – the modern economy also contains numerous pointless jobs or ‘bullshit jobs’, to use Graeber’s term. These are instrumental to earning a wage for the workers who do them, but the activities these jobs carry out may not be instrumental to achieving any purpose (e.g. Graeber 2018, p. 45). However, note that the fact that it is unclear whether an activity counts as work does not mean that we cannot assess it using an account of meaningful work. For ‘bullshit jobs’, we may say that it is clear that they are not meaningful work (on the account developed below) although it is not obvious whether they even count as work. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For one overview, see Metz (2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I think Walsh (1994, p. 246) may be on to something like this distinction when he distinguishes between work which is ‘meaningful under the action description’ and ‘incidental benefits’ of work – where friendships fall under the latter, i.e. meaning at work. Moreover, the distinction is terminologically similar to Pratt and Ashforth’s (2003) distinction between ‘meaningfulness in working’ and ‘meaningfulness at work’, but it is quite different in content. Pratt and Ashforths’ ‘meaningfulness in working’ covers meaning that arises from work tasks, whereas we will see below that the notion of ‘meaning of work’ is narrower, and does not cover e.g. meaning from self-realization, which presumably arises from doing work tasks. On the other hand, ‘meaning at work’, as I use it, is broader, as it is meant to cover all kinds of sources of meaning at a workplace and not just those related to organizational membership, which fall under Pratt and Ashforth’s ‘meaningfulness at work’.

   Finally, in a similar way, Althorpe distinguishes between ‘what might make work *itself* meaningful’ and ‘meaningful activity that *just so happens* to occur at work’ (Althorpe 2022, pp. 9–10, italics in original). In explaining this distinction, Althorpe makes the astute observation that what it takes for different activities and relationships such as friendships, marriages, sport rivalries, and work to be meaningful seems to vary with the nature of each such activity or relationship. Althorpe suggests that these may be meaningful in distinct ways that we can discuss independently of questions about what he calls ‘fundamental meaning’, or the sense of meaningfulness that we have in mind when we talk about ‘meaning in life’. I thus read Althorpe as suggesting that we isolate a notion of what makes work itself meaningful by focusing on a distinct kind of meaningfulness that may characterize work.

   As is clear from Section 1, I disagree: I think the point of calling some work ‘meaningful’ is that it makes our lives more ‘meaningful’ in the same sense that we have in mind when when we talk of ‘meaning in life’. More generally, I think it is plausible that having a meaningful life just is having a life characterized by the presence of sources of meaning in life such as meaningful work, meaningful relationships, meaningful hobbies, and so on. It is worth pointing out that one may consistently think (i) that work, friendships, and so on are distinct sources of meaning in life, (ii) that meaning arises in different ways for different sources of meaning, and (iii) that the meaning that arises in each case may still be the same kind of value or goodness as what we have in mind when we talk of having a ‘meaningful life’. In contrast to Althorpe, I therefore suggest that we hone in on what makes work itself meaningful, not by assuming that the kind of meaning involved is different, but by concentrating on what makes the activity of working itself meaningful, as distinct from other sources of meaning in life that may be present, or realized as side-effects, while one engages in work activity. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Gheaus and Herzog (2016) identify four ‘goods of work’, and Arneson (1987, pp. 528–529) lists 17 things people may want from work. Some items on these lists are also candidate sources of meaning. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. I use the notion of ‘a good reason’ rather than Višak’s ‘normative reasons for action’ in order to avoid importing assumptions about the normative status of these reasons and to be neutral between different accounts of acting for a reason, which will express the notion that an act is favoured by reason(s) in different ways. In the preliminaries, I assumed that meaningfulness is a form of good, and I will not discuss how it relates to the right here.

   Michaelson’s (2021) recent ‘Normative account’ of meaningful work is also formulated as being about reasons. I discuss this particular account in some more detail below in Section 4.1, see also note 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. E.g. Taylor (1970), Wolf (2010, pp. 16–25). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Taylor (1970, pp. 258–259). Taylor goes on to argue that although meaningfulness here ‘makes an appearance’, the activity is not really meaningful. So, admittedly, I am using Taylor against himself here, see Taylor (1970, pp. 259–265). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Discussed, e.g. in Schwartz (1982) and Veltman (2016, Chapter 3). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For examples of authors who explicitly state that what they mean by meaningful work is a subjective experience, see Pratt and Ashforth (2003, p. 311), Allan et al. (2014, p. 545), and Martela and Pessi (2018, p. 3). This approach is clearly more popular in the social sciences literature on meaningful work than among philosophers, perhaps because counterexamples of the kind given in the next paragraph are so familiar to the latter. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The grass counter has become a go-to example of a meaningless pursuit (e.g. Smuts 2013, p. 536). For the sake of context, however, it is worth mentioning that the example is from Rawls (1999, p. 379), who thinks we have to concede that this may actually be the good for some person – but I assume he chose this example because of how profoundly meaningless this seems. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Michaelson formulates his ‘Normative account’ of meaningful work as follows:

    Meaningful work is purposeful activity that *one has good reasons* to experience *as* meaningful, *that others have good reasons to* perceive as socially worthwhile, *and that is independently meaningful – i.e., the meaningfulness of which is at least partly independent of whether it is individually experienced or socially perceived as meaningful and worthwhile* (Michaelson 2021, p. 422, italics in original).

    I think Michaelson’s overall presentation and discussion of the ‘Normative account’ (Michaelson 2021, pp. 421–422) sometimes suggests that an independent, objective standard is sufficient to make work meaningful, and other times suggests that (reasons for) subjective experience and social perceptions are also needed, cf. the cited definition and his reliance on Wolf’s bipartite account of meaning in life (and note that there are presumably other good reasons for having a specific experience or perception than how things really are). On the first interpretation, the Normative account and the reasons account could be made identical in substance if good reasons to work are what provide the independent standard of meaningfulness. The discussion here focuses on the interpretation closest to Wolf’s account, namely that Michaelson adds an intersubjective or ‘social’ condition to the subjective and objective conditions on meaningfulness familiar from Wolf’s account of meaning in life, and the reconstruction aims to present this interpretation. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The following authors suggest that self-realization thus understood, or a similar notion, is what makes work meaningful: Murphy (1993, pp. 225–228), Bowie (1998, p. 1083: 'develop rational capacities'), Roessler (2012, pp. 87–88), Veltman (2016, pp. 118–119: 'develop and exercise human capabilities'), and Martela and Pessi (2018, p. 7). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. The other concept of ‘social alienation’ refers to Marx’s well-known idea that ‘the products of men gain an independent existence and come into opposition to their makers’ (Elster 1985, p. 100). This seems more like a concern about a special form of domination or powerlessness (Elster 1985, pp. 103–105) than a concern with meaninglessness. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Cp. Wood (2004, p. 8). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Other authors assert some other relation between meaningful work and autonomy, e.g. Yeoman (2014, p. 249) asserts that autonomy is one of three goods by which meaningful work is constituted. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. The latter part seems more like self-realization as I have discussed this in Section 4.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. I think the most sophisticated philosophical discussion of this view is that of Althorpe (2022). Althorpe argues for a tripartite account of meaningful work with one subjective condition, as familiar from Wolf (2010), and two objective conditions: complexity, which resembles autonomy as discussed in Section 4.4, and making a social contribution. The two former conditions have been rejected above, which leaves the social contribution condition discussed here. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. At the same time, it is worth nothing that ‘serving a genuinely useful purpose for others’, which is a part of dimension (3), seems to correspond to the social contribution account. Thus, this part of dimension (3) is close to right about what makes work itself meaningful in the same way that the social contribution account is. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Similar remarks can be made about the later discussion of how work matters for human well-being (Veltman 2016, pp. 50–61). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)