

RESEARCH BRIEF

Good Jobs

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“Jobs are not big enough for people. It’s not just the assembly line worker whose job is too small for his spirit, you know? A job like mine, if you really put your spirit into it, you would sabotage immediately. You don’t dare. So you absent your spirit from it. My mind has been so divorced from my job, except as a source of income, it’s really absurd.”

— Nora Watson, in conversation with Studs Terkel²

Over the past decade, public concern has re-emerged about the prospects of a large-scale displacement of human labor—a world without work.³ Like earlier projections about the uncertain future of human work, the analyses fueling current concerns have grown from speculations about the economic implications of new technologies. The fear—or hope, depending on the telling—is of a future in which machines would substitute for the vast majority of human labor. Aware that comparable past projections were overturned by events—that previous rounds of technological change did not just destroy old jobs but created new ones—analysts argued that this time would be different because the technologies are so different.⁴ Based in artificial intelligence and data-adaptive machine learning, the new technologies—according to the speculations—have the potential to replicate more or less all complex forms of human intelligence and human motion, not simply to substitute for specific cognitive powers, actions, and routines in particular domains.⁵

Some of these projections have been optimistically married to public policies that would provide income independent of employment—a universal basic income sufficiently generous to free people to pursue their communal, craft, artistic, scientific, creative, and scholarly passions without needing income from paid employment.⁶ At the very high level of productivity resulting from digitally enabled technologies, a shrinking “realm of necessity”—as Karl Marx described the sphere of production—would be associated with an expanding “true realm of freedom,” as he characterized the devotion of time and energy to “that

development of human energy which is an end in itself.”⁷ On a less optimistic rendering, the replacement of human labor—disconnecting people from the social world of work—would result in massive economic insecurity and catastrophic inequality, with destructive impacts on democracy and civic life. Whether optimistic or pessimistic, the projections of a “jobless future” shared a common, arguably technological determinist assumption: that the path of technology and its implications for human work are more or less fixed, and that the only genuinely open question is the public policy response.

These speculations about the end of work are neither analytically compelling nor ethically attractive. They are not analytically compelling because the future course of technology and work is the result of our choices, of the decisions we make (or fail to make), including—but hardly confined to—decisions about the development and use of artificial intelligence. That development and use is not fixed by an autonomous course of technology, but by a vast range of organizational and political decisions, by researchers, firms, regulators, legislators, and non-governmental organizations. It can be developed and deployed in directions that *amplify* human capacity rather than exclusively *substituting* for it.⁸

They are not ethically attractive because work is an important form of human good.⁹ Not simply a source of income, work is a way that we can learn; exercise our powers of perception, imagination, and judgment; collaborate socially; and make constructive social contributions. To be sure, for some it is simply a means to getting income, and for some the cost of getting that income is submission to humiliating abuses of arbitrary authority, performance under unhealthy and unsafe conditions, and a repetition of simple routines that economist Adam Smith condemned: “The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects are perhaps always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. The torpor of his mind renders him not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life.”¹⁰

I observed the force of Smith’s concerns close up in research I did on the high rates of worker exit in low-wage jobs at some final assembly factories in the consumer electronics industry. I closely studied one facility where workers stay, on average, about 70 days (6%–7% turnover per week), another where the median stay is roughly 180 days, and others in between. What I found most striking in the factories is *what people spend their time doing*. One memorable conversation was with a group of workers who, unlike most at the factory, had remained for more than a year. We were trying to understand what was distinctive about these “long-stayers.” We asked whether they had a sense of pride in their “grittiness” (toughness):

that unlike others, they had stayed for a long time despite the demands of the work. One operator said: “Why would I have a sense of pride? It took me 15 minutes to learn my job.”

His work, like much of the work of the factory operators, is traditional assembly line work, designed by industrial engineers for an environment of very high-volume, high-quality production. The design goal is to make the tasks mistake-proof. So, you design jobs—say, putting in a screw, or a battery—with standard operating procedures that take 25–30 seconds; with simple, routine steps; with the device held in place by a fixture; and with the speed of your activity controlled by the conveyor belt. And, while people change stations every month or two, there is no regular job rotation. Moreover, people on the line do not talk with one another: There is no need for it in doing their work. For an industrial engineer in this setting, these features—no need for judgment, unusual dexterity, reflection, imagination, and collaboration—count as success.¹¹ These jobs, in Nora Watson’s words, “are not big enough for people.”

Design could have a different aim, however, and considering the central role of work in our lives—in the United States, an average of 34 hours a week, just above the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average—it should.¹² But making it different will require a very deliberate, public-private focus on creating *good jobs*, in part by focusing on how to shape technologies as human amplifiers, in part by thinking about how good jobs fit into a larger world of education, training, consumption, finance, firm organization, and worker representation.

I say “strategies,” and I will suggest some directions for thinking about ways that public-private policies can foster the creation of good jobs. However, my principal aim is not strategic, but philosophical. I want to sketch four aspects of good jobs. I will begin with some features—I will call them the *standard goods*—that make jobs good because they enhance the contribution of a job to life outside of work. I will then discuss some ways that protecting *worker voice* contributes both instrumentally and intrinsically to making jobs good. Then, third, I will introduce the notion of *purpose* both as contributing to the goodness of a job and as motivating attentive performance. Finally, I will explore how we can understand the British designer and socialist William Morris’s idea that there should be “pleasure in the work itself.” While much discussion about the creation of good jobs focuses on the first aspect, or perhaps the second, the most ambitious good jobs strategy would give attention to the third and fourth aspects as well.

To be sure, faced with wage stagnation and large numbers of low-wage jobs, there is a powerful temptation to focus on the first dimension of good jobs, and to treat the other three—especially the last—as luxury goods.¹³ I will conclude with the thought that pursuing a world in which good jobs, in the most

ambitious understanding—with a secure voice, a strong sense of purpose, and pleasure in the work itself—are broadly available may be the best way to achieve the innovation and productivity gains required to sustain the less ambitious conception of good jobs.

Discussing a future of good jobs is especially difficult right now, with many people working from home (or at a distance), most everyone working differently, and an uncertain future of physical colocation. Because of the disruptions in the routines and expectations surrounding how (and where) we do our jobs, we do not have a very concrete picture of what work will look like. Though this certainly adds additional challenges, it does not—for reasons that will become clear in the course of the discussion—fundamentally change the features of jobs that make them good.

Standard Goods

What is a good job? It is tempting to respond skeptically, to wonder whether anything general at all can be said about the idea of a good job. Isn't it obvious that the goodness of a job is relative to the person and context? People are very different from one another in their preferences, abilities, experiences, and circumstances, so what is good for one might not be so good for another. A gig job, for example, may be good for someone who does not want full-time employment and is looking for flexible hours, but much less good for someone who needs a full-time job, cannot find one, and cobbles together a few gig jobs as an alternative.¹⁴ Moreover, good jobs seem to vary with context. A good job in a low-income agricultural economy with a growing manufacturing sector is different from a good job in an urbanized service economy.

But the obvious facts of variation across persons and contexts do not so easily lead to skepticism about the notion of a good job. What we need is to identify certain general features of jobs that make them good for most people. Consider the analogous case of homes. We can identify general features of good homes—protection from the elements, safety and security, sufficient quiet to enable sleep and conversation—despite obvious variations across people and context. Generally speaking, then, a good job is a job that has features that make it reasonable for most people to want.¹⁵

And what are those features? Most contemporary conceptions of good jobs identify these four good-making features:¹⁶

Compensation: They provide a decent standard of living, sufficient to cover basic needs—say, a living wage;¹⁷

Stability: They have some predictability in hours and stability in tenure to enable the person with the job to fit it into the rest of their life;

Healthy and safe: They provide protections against harsh and dangerous working conditions; and

Growth: They offer opportunities for acquiring new skills and responsibilities that are associated with greater compensation over the life course.

These features make jobs good because they provide important benefits outside the job to the person who holds it. People are not only job-holders: They have lives outside of work. The four good-making features I have listed, then, are features that contribute instrumentally to the quality of a person's life, by making a decent level of resources available, growing over the life course, and enabling some stability of expectations around resources and time. People have reason to want jobs with these features (as distinct from jobs that lack them), because jobs with these features have effects that make the rest of their lives better. Putting aside for now any intrinsic goods associated with work—even if we think of work purely instrumentally, as a means to achieving goods associated with family, community, and other devotions (I will come to other goods later)—we still have compelling reasons to value these standard goods.¹⁸

Whether providing jobs with these standard goods benefits employers is another matter. Because the benefit to the employer is an open question, and because creating good jobs requires investments with uncertain return, good jobs are undersupplied by markets in the absence of deliberate policy. All the more so, because good jobs are not only good for the person who has them—they have social and political benefits as well. Democracy is aided, for example, by decent living standards, healthy and safe working conditions, and stability at work. A world in which good jobs are scarce is a world of low innovation and productivity growth, stagnant incomes, and rising inequality: not a safe space for a flourishing democracy. With good jobs scarce, politics focuses not on a fair distribution of advantages, but on a remedy for a sense of insult, exclusion, and humiliation. But, like benefits to workers, the democracy-enhancing effects of good jobs are not fully captured by the firms in which those jobs exist: Those benefits are good for the rest of us, beyond the boundaries of a firm. So, there are important “good jobs externalities”—both worker and broader social-political benefits from the creation of good jobs—that do not directly benefit the firms that create the jobs, but that do impose direct costs on them (compensation, human resource practices).¹⁹ Creating good jobs therefore needs to be a matter of public policy.

The kinds of public policies needed for good jobs, in the sense explored thus far, are explored elsewhere in the MIT Task Force on the Work of the Future publications. But a few directions seem important, in part because many of the benefits of good jobs are externalities for firms that provide the jobs. Moreover, providing good jobs with good compensation often requires a favorable *policy* environment—including labor market policy—for innovation and productivity improvement.²⁰ Those policies might include:

- Minimum wage laws that diminish the attractions of “low-road” strategies that do not provide good jobs;
- Social protections (including income security) that reduce incentives for workers to accept bad jobs;
- Active labor market policies that ensure appropriate skills, both cognitive and emotional, including the essential ability of learning how to learn and to collaborate;
- Support (including tax incentives) for new firms using new, more productive technologies; and
- A research and development environment (including research grants and strong public R&D labs) that assists technological innovation by incumbent firms.

There are many compelling reasons for having public policies aimed at a fair distribution of income and wealth, and such policies are an ingredient in any plausible good jobs program. But such policies are insufficient unless they are joined to a larger effort focused on production and innovation as well as distribution.

While the public policy environment is important for fostering the broad availability of jobs that provide the standard goods, an incentive-compatible good jobs policy requires more than favorable public policy. If employers think that efforts to create good jobs are a substantial hurdle to their success, then a good jobs policy will fail. Thus, Zeynep Ton, Professor of the Practice, Operations Management at MIT Sloan, argues that a firm-level “good jobs strategy” requires a series of coordinated and mutually reinforcing strategic decisions: both investing in employees (good hiring, decent compensation, clear performance standards, and well-defined career paths) and developing operational strengths, including focus, cross-training, and a willingness to operate with sufficient slack to adopt to changing circumstances.

Investing in people fosters operational strengths, and the operational strengths in turn enable the investments in people. Although Ton's argument suggests (if only by omission) that the good jobs strategy does not depend on the background public policy environment, it seems more plausible to read it as presenting a firm-level complement to a public-policy good jobs strategy.

So, good jobs are good in part because they confer important benefits on people who have them, benefits of a kind that enable the jobs to fit into the rest of life. There are other features that we have reason to want in jobs, and I will come to some of those other good-making features later. But the four I have mentioned—I will call them “the standard goods”—are important. Moreover, their provision needs to be a matter of deliberate public-private strategy, both because many of the benefits of good jobs do not flow to the firms that provide them and because a good jobs strategy depends on a favorable background environment—education and training to ensure suitable skills, support for research and development to foster innovation—which firms have limited capacity to provide.

Voice

Assume that jobs have the features identified thus far as elements of a good job—they provide the standard goods. Logically speaking, that assumption is consistent with workers having no voice at work—no input, direct or indirect, into what the firm does, how their own work is done, how their safety is protected, and how much they are compensated. Voice may take many forms, from trade union protections to works councils to more ambitious forms of economic democracy—for example, the bicameral firm structure proposed by Belgian sociologist Isabelle Ferreras.²¹ Putting aside the form of representation, though assuming that voice needs to be collective, there are at least two reasons for thinking that voice and the power that grows from it are important features of good jobs: an instrumental reason and an intrinsic reason. Consider first the instrumental case for voice. The standard features of good jobs—decent compensation and health and safety—can be achieved in part through such legal guarantees as minimum wages and health and safety regulations. But the protection of those standard features is more secure when workers—who understand their interests best and are their most vigilant defenders—have sufficient voice in firms to ensure their local protection and to press collectively for their legal enactment. Firms do not give intrinsic weight to the benefits to workers that come from good jobs, which is why good jobs are undersupplied by markets. With worker voice and power, the protection of those interests is internalized to the firm's decision-making calculus.²² Moreover, absent the upward pressure of wages and other protections that come from worker voice, firms may well resist the technological innovations required for paying decent wages in favor of a low-wage, low-innovation strategy. To be sure, some forms of worker voice—classically, job control unionism, designed to protect incumbent positions—may hobble innovation.

But that provides a case for finding alternative forms of worker voice, not for implausibly claiming that good jobs and the innovation required for sustaining them will be supplied in the absence of worker voice and power.

In addition to this instrumental case for worker voice, there is an intrinsic reason for including voice as a feature of good jobs. To explain the intrinsic case, I want to first distinguish it from what I will call the “Private Government” argument. So, consider the idea that firms are currently organized as forms of *private government*. Government, because managers and executives exercise authority over employees, providing directions along with sanctions for failure to comply.²³ Private, because the governing power they exercise is not accountable to those over whom it is exercised. To be sure, employment in a particular firm is not itself mandatory, but the voluntariness of the employment relationship, such as it is, does not suffice to establish that the power being exercised is not political, nor that the power is legitimately exercised—any more than ease of exit from a jurisdiction shows that power in the jurisdiction is not political, or that the power is legitimately exercised. That legitimacy depends on some form of workplace governance that gives voice to workers. Voice is needed to make the authority consistent with their equal political capacity.²⁴

I mention this important Private Government argument for voice not to embrace it (or reject it), but to distinguish it from the case for including voice as a feature of good jobs. The point of the Private Government argument is *not* that accountable governance makes jobs better, but that it makes the authority exercised over workers legitimate, rather than a form of arbitrary rule, and provides some protection from arbitrary abuses of authority.²⁵ The issue at stake in this case for voice—perhaps for a form of economic democracy—is the justification of a form of power, not the goodness of the jobs over which the power is exercised. Legitimate power requires some form of accountability to the governed, which makes the exercise of governing power compatible with their equal freedom.

Like the Private Government argument, the intrinsic argument for voice as a feature of good jobs is not focused on the ways in which voice provides protections for the standard goods. Unlike the Private Government argument, however, the central concern is not with legitimate authority but with ensuring another feature that we have reason to want in a job: that it does not involve an insulting or demeaning subordination to arbitrary authority. Arbitrary authority may be exercised gently and generously, but it remains arbitrary if it is not answerable. While the standard goods account focuses on features of jobs that ensure that work fits into the rest of life, the intrinsic voice argument aims to ensure that those goods are not received in exchange for submitting to an insulting form of arbitrary authority. What makes the authority arbitrary is that there is no recognized representation of the people over whom it is exercised,

no institutional requirement that their interests and judgments be taken into account. They may be taken into consideration, but whether or not they are depends upon the discretionary judgments of the authorities. Because of this dependence on the arbitrary discretion of an authority, a job that lacks voice has a demeaning quality. There is an insult to the dignity of the job holder.

Voice, of course, does not mean winning; it is not the same as self-direction; and it does not mean that there is no power or authority. It simply means that the exercise of power is required to take into account the interests of those over whom it is exercised. And that accountability is a form of respect, which is a feature that we have reason to want in our work.

Purpose

Voice and standard goods are important. But something is missing that is arguably essential to a good job, namely, that a good job involves work that serves, and is understood by the person doing the job, as serving a valuable purpose. To be clear, a job that provides the standard goods serves the purpose of improving the person's life. But the relevant purpose is not a goal served by having the job, but by doing the job.

Doing something worth doing—and that the person doing the job recognizes as worth doing—is in itself a feature that we have reason to want in our work. Work requires time and effort, and there is something deeply dispiriting in thinking of what we spend so much time and energy doing as being unworthy of our efforts. Purpose also provides a basis for the kind of identification with the activity of work that is arguably needed to motivate the attention and effort needed to do the job well. What is essential is that the work is reasonably understood by the person doing it as a worthy expenditure of their time and energy. Because they recognize it as worthy, the motivations for the work are more *autonomous* than with jobs—no matter how good they otherwise are—that strike the person doing the job as lacking a real point. And more autonomous motivations appear to give better results for quality of work, health (less exhaustion, burnout), and stability of employment.²⁶

The alternative to a job that serves a worthwhile purpose (as understood by the person with the job) is what anthropologist David Graeber calls a “bullshit job.” Graeber distinguishes the more familiar idea of a “shit job” from a bullshit job. Shit jobs (that are not bullshit jobs) are at the low end of the spectrum on the features that define good jobs. They are poorly compensated, unstable in schedule, unhealthy, with few opportunities to learn and advance. Still, people doing these jobs understand that they are doing something useful, making a contribution. They may hate the indignities associated with the job, but at the

same time have a sense of pride in working with grit and diligence and in contributing to an important goal. In contrast, a bullshit job may have the standard elements of a good job. But it is “a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case.”²⁷ A bullshit job is a job that serves no worthwhile purpose, and is seen as such by the person with the job—though the person must, on Graeber’s telling, enact the obligatory pretense, which is a source of added misery. Graeber estimates that 37%–40% of all jobs are bullshit, and that 50% of non-bullshit jobs are spent on pointless activities. While his estimates seem extravagant, he underscores the distinctive importance of purpose as an element of a good job and a source of motivation.

Notice that a job can serve a worthwhile purpose—a purpose sufficient, in the eyes of the worker, to justify the existence of the job, thus to motivate performance—even though the work required by the job is not *intrinsically* motivating.²⁸ The model of intrinsically motivating activity is play: an activity a person engages in for its own sake, not because it serves some ulterior aim.²⁹ But lots of activity that is not intrinsically motivating—indeed, may be tedious and exhausting—might nevertheless be pursued for good reason because it serves a worthy purpose. Consider the labor that went into creating Central Park. Arguably the country’s greatest public good, the Park was designed to serve democratic purposes, to “translate democratic ideas into trees and dirt.”³⁰ The work of translation was often tedious and physically demanding. Much of the construction work on the Park was not intrinsically motivating, and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted—who directed the construction project—was a demanding task master. Nevertheless, the work served a large purpose, and to that extent the jobs involved in creating it had an important good-making feature.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that an otherwise bad job—poorly compensated, unhealthy, unsafe, voiceless—is made good by serving a worthy purpose. The remarkable Tijuca Forest in Rio de Janeiro was planted by slave labor in the 1860s and 1870s: Those were not good jobs, no matter the purpose.³¹ The idea instead is that another feature that contributes to a job’s being good—having features we have reason to want in a job—is that it serves a worthwhile purpose. Moreover, people are more likely to perform those jobs well if they see the job as contributing to a worthy purpose.

Pleasure in the Work Itself

In his important utopian novel, *Looking Backward: 2000 to 1887*, Edward Bellamy imagines the world in 2000, more than 100 years after the book was written.³² Bellamy's powerfully influential utopia describes a world of highly coordinated economic activity, subject to national control, with prosperity secured through improved coordination and reduced waste, not through technological innovation. The members of Bellamy's utopia work from age 21 to 45, and everyone has jobs that provide the standard goods and serve a worthy purpose, though there is no voice.

Nevertheless, early retirement is their great good fortune. The world of work that Bellamy describes is dreary, modeled on military service. In a review of Bellamy's book, designer and novelist William Morris forcefully complains about the lack of any enjoyment in their work.³³ As Morris puts it, "The true incentive to useful and happy labor is and must be *pleasure in the work itself*."³⁴ Unlike Bellamy, Morris—to paraphrase the remarks from Nora Watson I quoted at the start—thought that work could be made large enough for the human spirit, not simply activities we do for a living, even for decent compensation and in service of a worthy purpose.

What could that possibly mean: to find pleasure in the work itself? John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* suggests a useful principle—he calls it "the Aristotelian Principle"—that can help us here. The idea is that: "Other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity. The intuitive idea is that human beings take more pleasure in doing something they become more proficient at it, and of two activities they do equally well, they prefer the one calling on a larger repertoire of more intricate and subtle discriminations."³⁵ The greater complexity is more engaging and enjoyable, thus more powerfully motivating, because it provides greater chances for experiences of freshness, enables people to find their own distinctive ways of doing the job, creates greater possibilities for creativity, and provides possibilities for a sense of evolving mastery in the face of a challenging task—the possibilities we often associate with demanding crafts and professions.

The Aristotelian Principle is a psychological principle, part of an account of human motivation, about what kinds of activities people enjoy and prefer. It is not directly an account of value, of what makes an activity good. But it has some affinity to the ideas of self-realization that figure traditionally in perfectionist ideas about the human good.³⁶ What is important is that, if we accept something like the Aristotelian Principle—attaching enjoyment and motivation to complexity—then our ideas about good jobs and about the kinds of

opportunities that should be available take a distinctive shape. The Aristotelian Principle helps us to explain why, among other things, “meaningful work and social cooperation” are important goods.³⁷

Without the Aristotelian Principle, it is easy to think about fair opportunities as a matter of people from different social classes having equal chances to attain positions of economic reward. Much of the philosophical discussion about equal opportunity focuses, in this way, on equal access to fungible resources. But the Aristotelian Principle—and associated ideas about the possibilities of enjoyment in the activity itself—suggests a different way to think about the opportunities that good jobs provide. What is important is not simply fair access to positions for people from different social classes, but that those positions offer the kinds of complexity that makes the activity itself more interesting, engaging, and enjoyable.

So, what characteristics suggested by the Aristotelian Principle, with its emphasis on complexity in activities, are reasonable for people to want in the opportunities available to them?

First, variety. One of the features of work that makes it complex, thus more intrinsically engaging, is that it involves different tasks. Even if each task is not especially complex itself, the sheer variety of tasks (say, in systems of job rotation) creates complexity. A person needs to adjust to a different task or responsibility, which requires a break from routine and a redirection of attention.

Second, the exercise of judgment, as distinct from the execution of a routine. To take a very plain example, consider the contrast in production between work in repair rooms and work on a Fordist assembly line. The work of assembly is, by design, reduced so far as possible to a mistake-proof, simple routine; similarly for the work of testing components and products. The work of repair cannot be, however. Some diagnostic effort is required, including an ability to identify corner cases, as well as judgment about the best strategies for repair. And a person can extrapolate from the setting of manufacturing to issues of medical diagnosis. Even in discussions about how artificial intelligence will transform diagnoses, an essential role remains for the diagnostic judgment of medical professionals (as well as, of course, their judgments about treatment), working in collaboration with AI diagnostics. This element of judgment is an essential part of the value of work that Matthew Crawford explores in *Shop Class as Soulcraft*. It is captured in his idea that “the standards of craftsmanship issue from the logic of things rather than the art of persuasion,” that the craftsman defers “to the objective standards of his craft” and “want[s] to get it right,” and that this requires “ongoing judgment or deliberation”—the “kind of judgment that comes with experience.”³⁸

A third element is suggested by a remark from Adam Smith about the evolution of the division of labor: “In the progress of the division of labour, the employment of the far greater part of those who live by labour,

that is, of the great body of people, comes to be confined to a few very simple operations, frequently one or two. But the understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments. The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur.”³⁹ Smith’s remark points to the idea that an activity is more complex if it calls for a mix of *reflection and imagination*: both reflection on the routines that now define the activity and an imaginative consideration of alternatives that might represent process improvements. This mix of reflection and imagination is different from the element of judgment because it calls for a kind of practical imagination, which we exercise both in identifying hurdles in the current ways of doing things and in exploring alternative directions of improvement. These qualities are formalized in *design thinking*—human-centered design—in the work of brainstorming, which explores a wide range of solutions to a problem, and rapid prototyping, which involves testing low-fidelity versions of the solution. While brainstorming and rapid prototyping have their home in product design, they readily extend to a wide range of problem-solving activities, and thus to work quite generally.

Finally, activity has a special complexity when it requires *social collaboration*: a pooling and coordination of different kinds of knowledge, disciplinary expertise, skill, and sensibility. In collaboration, we need to consult with the other collaborators, settle on a common course of action, and make regular practical adjustments in our routines. And this means that the activity depends not only on capacities for judgment, reflection, and imagination, but also on an attentiveness to other people—both a cognitive and an emotional attentiveness—and a willingness to listen, persuade, adjust, accommodate, and insist.

Because of the demands of attentiveness, this social dimension of work adds complexity—the need for intricate distinctions and subtle discriminations. And we all know, sometimes painfully, the ability to collaborate is an activity that clearly has paths of improvement.

So, those are some elements of good jobs that are intrinsic to the activity of working. In some respects, they may have a utopian flavor, though they are strikingly absent from Bellamy’s utopia. Bellamy thought of his utopia as addressing the “labor question,” as if the labor question were all about compensation and coordination across firms—about establishing a coordinated “industrial army.”⁴⁰ To be sure, he imagines a world that follows the “principle of providing every one the kind of occupation he or she is best adapted to.”⁴¹ But the heart of Bellamy’s utopia is an ideal of efficient production for mass consumption. Indeed, he “deliberately excludes descriptions of the act of labour from his book,”⁴² which is why William Morris found it so wanting.

Two Concluding Thoughts

I want to conclude on a note of hesitation, and then offer a hesitating response to the initial thought.

I have been taking a “workerist” view about the idea of a good job, exploring some features both instrumental and intrinsic goods—that we have reason to want in our work. Some work has these qualities—and lots of work does not, or has them to an insufficient degree. The full account of good jobs can guide our thinking about the deficiencies in the work opportunities available to people.

But work is not simply for workers. Most of the work we do is about providing goods and services to other people. So, the standards for work and work performance cannot be understood exclusively in terms of characteristics that make the work good for the people who do it. In the case of work that issues in products (as distinct from services), it is important to make things that people want to have (need to have, we hope), that enable them to do things that are worth doing and that they could not otherwise do, and that are intuitive to use and well designed. We honor the user by making something great for them.

And maybe it is hard to do that in ways that people producing it find engaging or, at least, as engaging as they have reason to want. And maybe it is hard to provide decent compensation for all the jobs that are needed to provide those goods and services.

I take that to be obvious, though it is not a necessary truth. It is not a necessary truth because there could be a perfect fit between the work people find most engaging—that they think is most worth doing, and in the ways they find most worth doing things—and the work that makes the best things, provides the best services, and makes and provides them in the quantities that everyone needs. It could be a perfect fit, and an assumption of this kind is at work in Marx’s idea of a world in which people contribute according to their ability, receive according to their needs, shrink the realm of necessity, expand the realm of freedom, unleash the forces of production, have jobs with a social and scientific character, and exert themselves as subjects.⁴³

But that fit seems like an implausibly utopian thought to me—implausibly utopian because it offers us a story on which all good things fit together too neatly: We have the fullest realization of our powers and the transcendence of scarcity. So, we need to think about how to balance good jobs, in the full sense that I have described here, with the availability of the goods and services that good jobs are supposed to make, especially in view of the fact that firms are under pressure to provide those goods and services and not under comparable pressure to ensure good jobs. The balance here has an individual side as well. People

may be prepared, quite deliberately, to trade purpose, voice, or pleasure in the work itself for great compensation (or other standard goods). Making this trade need not be seen as sacrificing important goods for the sake of money, but perhaps rather as trading some important goods—working with a sense of purpose or pleasure—for other important goods that greater compensation can buy. When Ford introduced the “five dollar day” in early 1914, more than doubling compensation for workers, turnover on newly introduced assembly lines had reached 370% a year. By 1915, turnover was down to 16% for the year. The work had the same purpose, and there continued to be no pleasure in the work itself. But decent compensation—an essential element of a good job—was sufficiently attractive to hold workers in place.⁴⁴

My one hesitation about this skeptical conclusion—and it is only a partial hesitation—comes from a mix of the discussion of purpose and of the Rawls-Morris-Watson thoughts about “pleasure in the work itself,” both of which have implications for worker motivations.⁴⁵ Imagine a world of AI-amplified work in which people collaborate in problem-solving teams—with robots as augmentation, not substitution—and in which jobs typically have the kind of non-routine variety, judgment, and imagination that is now confined to the most productive parts of the economy. The work is highly productive, because of its technological foundations, because people who do it are motivated in part by its purpose and by pleasure in the work itself, and because the team collaboration provides a setting for continuous improvement achieved through learning by doing. This would be a world in which large numbers of jobs are nearly as engaging as the jobs of the contributors to the work of the MIT Task Force on the Work of the Future, and in which this heightened productivity provides the basis for the decent compensation that is as essential to good jobs as the pleasure in the work itself.

In short, what the discussion of purpose and pleasure may suggest is that the best way to achieve jobs that sustain the productivity and innovation needed for the standard goods is to aim ambitiously—through the kinds of public and private policies mentioned earlier—for jobs that are good in all the ways explored here.

Endnotes:

- 1 Faculty, Apple University; Distinguished Senior Fellow in Law, Philosophy, and Political Science, University of California, Berkeley. I am grateful for conversations about good jobs and comments on earlier versions of this essay to Elizabeth Anderson, Kwame Anthony Appiah, David Autor, Deborah Chasman, Isabelle Ferreras, Ro Khanna, David Mindell, Joel Podolny, Joel Rogers, Charles Sabel, and T.M. Scanlon.
- 2 In Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (New York: The New Press, Kindle Edition), pp. 769, 773.
- 3 Martin Ford, *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future* (Basic Books, 2015); Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies* (Norton, 2014); Daniel Susskind, *A World Without Work* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020).
- 4 For earlier discussion, see National Commission on Technology, Automation and Economic Progress, *Technology and the American Economy*, US Department of Health, Education and Welfare, February 1966; Wassily Leontief, “Technological Advance, Economic Growth, and the Distribution of Income,” *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Sep., 1983), pp. 403–410.
- 5 For a brief history of “automation anxiety,” see David Autor, *Polanyi’s Paradox and the Shape of Employment Growth*, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w20485>.
- 6 As distinct from a Universal Basic Income that provides a decent minimum of income security. Most Universal Basic Income proposals are designed for income security, not for ensuring people the resources they need to pursue their projects independent of work-related compensation. See Philippe van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght, *Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp. 10–11.
- 7 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3 (Progress, 1971), p. 820.
- 8 I am not arguing for this conclusion here, but assuming it for the purposes of focusing on the notion of good jobs. For general discussion of the idea of a humanistic AI, focused on amplification, see Tom Gruber, *Humanistic AI*; Daron Acemoglu and Pascual Restrepo, “The Wrong Kind of AI? Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Labor Demand,” *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 2020, 13(1), 25–35; Philipp Tschandl et al., “Human-Computer collaboration for skin cancer recognition,” *Nature Medicine* 26 (August 2020): 1229–1234, emphasizing the amplification that clinicians with the least experience gain from AI-based systems.
- 9 See John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, Part II, Sep. 14, 1981.
- 10 Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Random House, 1937), Book 5, Chapter 1.
- 11 Ken Moon, Patrick Bergemann, Daniel Brown, Andrew Chen, James Chu, Ellen Eisen, Gregory Fischer, Prashant Kumar Loyalka, Sungmin Rho, Joshua Cohen, “Manufacturing Productivity with Worker Turnover” (on file with author); Ken Moon, Prashant Kumar Loyalka, Patrick Bergemann, and Joshua Cohen, “The Hidden Cost of Worker Turnover: Attributing Product Reliability to the Turnover of Factory Workers” (on file with author).
- 12 OECD (2020), *OECD Employment Outlook 2020: Worker Security and the COVID-19 Crisis*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1686c758-en>, Hours worked (indicator). doi: 10.1787/47be1c78-en.
- 13 On the high numbers of low-wage jobs, see Martha Ross and Nicole Bateman, “Meet the Low-Wage Workforce,” Brookings Institution, November 7, 2019.
- 14 On the different hopes and expectations of workers in the “gig economy,” see Juliet B. Schor with William Attwood-Charles, Mehmet Cansoy, Lindsey “Luka” Carfagna, Samantha Eddy, Connor Fitzmaurice, Isak Ladegaard, and Robert Wengronowitz, *After the Gig: How the Sharing Economy Got Hijacked and How to Win It Back* (University of California Press, 2020), chap. 1.
- 15 Several of the features that I will identify as adding to the goodness of a job broadly correspond to features of jobs identified by the Oldham-Hackman “job characteristic” theory: in particular, skill variety, task significance (purpose), and autonomy. The differences in part reflect the fact that my aim is evaluative, whereas theirs is to predict certain personal and work outcomes, including internal motivation, job satisfaction, and performance quality. For discussion of the theory, see Greg R. Oldham and J. Richard Hackman, “Not What It Was and Not What It Will Be: The Future of Job Design Research,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 31(2–3): 463–479 (2010).

- 16 See Daron Acemoglu, *It's Good Jobs, Stupid*, Economists for Inclusive Prosperity, Research Brief (June 2019); Dani Rodrik and Charles Sabel, *Building a Good Jobs Economy* (April 2019); Zeynep Ton, *The Good Jobs Strategy: How the Smartest Companies Invest in Employees to Lower Costs and Boost Profits* (Houghton-Mifflin, 2014). Rodrik and Sabel emphasize open-endedness in the notion of a good job, and make it part of the case for the kind of “dynamic governance arrangements” they favor.
- 17 For discussion of the idea of a living wage, see Richard Anker and Martha Anker, *Living Wages Around the World: Manual for Measurement* (Edward Elgar, 2017). A living wage calculator for the United States is available at <https://livingwage.mit.edu>.
- 18 These remarks on reasons for wanting at least a decent standard of compensation treat the interest in compensation as exclusively instrumental, in service of a better life outside work. But there are non-instrumental reasons, too. Thus, I have reason to want at least a decent standard of compensation because that standard is *appropriate to or fitting for* doing full-time work, perhaps a basic requirement of natural justice. The failure to pay at that appropriate level denigrates the work and the person doing it. See Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, sec. 45 (May 15, 1891). I am steering clear of notions of appropriateness, fittingness, and natural justice because they raise large philosophical complexities, beyond the scope of this essay. But I do not wish to deny their importance.
- 19 Rodrik and Sabel, “Building a Good Jobs Economy,” pp. 4–6; Oren Cass, *The Once and Future Worker: A Vision for the Renewal of Work in America* (Encounter Books, 2018), p. 88.
- 20 For a recent discussion, see Nicholas Bloom, John Van Reenen, and Heidi Williams, “A Toolkit of Policies to Promote Innovation,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 33, 3 (Summer 2019): 163–184.
- 21 Isabelle Ferreras, *Firms as Political Entities: Saving Democracy Through Economic Bicameralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). On current challenges for worker voice in the United States and possible ways forward, see Steven Greenhouse, *Beaten Down, Worked Up: The Past, Present, and Future of American Labor* (New York: Anchor, 2020), esp. chap. 21. Oren Cass proposes that worker voice can be advanced by “coops,” which have exclusive bargaining rights, though they cannot require dues payments. See Cass, *The Once and Future Worker*, chap. 6.
- 22 On the instrumental benefits of voice (specifically, unions) for compensation (a “union premium”), see Henry S. Farber, Daniel Herbst, Ilyana Kuziemko, and Suresh Naidu, “Unions and Inequality Over the Twentieth Century: New Evidence from Survey Data.” NBER Working Paper No. 24587 (May 2018). On health and safety, see David Weil, “Are Mandated Health and Safety Committees Substitutes for or Supplements to Unions?,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (April 1999). On works councils, see Joel Rogers and Wolfgang Streeck, “The Study of Works Councils: Concepts and Problems,” in Rogers and Streeck, eds., *Works Councils: Consultation, Representation, and Cooperation in Industrial Relations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 3–26.
- 23 Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1986); Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk About It)* (Princeton University Press, 2019); Ferreras, *Firms as Political Entities*.
- 24 This Private Government argument turns on the idea that firms involve a form of government. An alternative line of argument for an entitlement to voice begins from the idea that firms are a form of cooperative activity governed by rules, and argues that participants in cooperative activity are entitled to a voice in the rules that govern the activity. I am indebted to Isabelle Ferreras for discussion of this issue.
- 25 I am grateful to Elizabeth Anderson for confirming that she understands her own version of the Private Government argument this way.
- 26 For an illuminating discussion of the relevant literature, see Edward L. Deci, Anja H. Olafsen, and Richard M. Ryan, “Self-Determination Theory in Work Organizations: The State of a Science,” *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 4 (2017): 19–43.
- 27 David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, pp. 9–10. Consider, too, Matthew Crawford's remarks on his experience as executive director of a Washington, DC think tank. “I was always tired, and honestly could not see the rationale for my being paid at all—what tangible goods or useful services was I providing to anyone? This sense of uselessness was dispiriting. Matthew B. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (Penguin, Kindle Edition, 2009), pp. 4–5.
- 28 The distinction between intrinsically and autonomously motivated work is essential to “self-determination theory.” According to the theory, autonomously motivated work lies on a spectrum, with intrinsic motivation as just one point on the spectrum. The essential feature of autonomously motivated action is that the agent has what they regard as good reasons for pursuing the action: They do not think that they are doing it only because they are required to by others. See Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, *Self-Determination Theory*. I am grateful to James Phills for drawing my attention to self-determination theory.

- 29 Labor, as Marx says, “cannot become play.” *Grundrisse* (Vintage, 1973), p. 712.
- 30 The phrase comes from Calvert Vaux, co-designer of Central Park, quoted in Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991).
- 31 José Drummond, “The Garden in the Machine: An Environmental History of Brazil’s Tijuca Forest,” *Environmental History* 1, 1 (Jan. 1996): 83–104.
- 32 Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 33 In an illuminating discussion of Morris, Rosalind Williams says that he objected to the “regimented dullness of Bellamy’s imagined future society.” She goes on to say that Morris was essentially an “engineer,” who brought together (in effect) industrial design, product design, and industrial engineering. See Rosalind Williams, *The Triumph of Human Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), chaps. 8, 9.
- 34 William Morris, *Commonweal*, 22 June 1889. On the debate between Morris and Bellamy, see Tony Pinkney, “Edward Bellamy’s Review of *News from Nowhere*.”
- 35 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition (Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 374.
- 36 Rawls, p. 431.
- 37 Rawls, p. 373.
- 38 Matthew Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (New York: Penguin, 2009), pp. 18–20, 36, 39.
- 39 Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p. 734.
- 40 Bellamy, p. 39.
- 41 Bellamy, p. 151.
- 42 Matthew Beaumont, “Introduction,” Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, p. xv.
- 43 *Critique of the Gotha Program; Capital*, p. 820; *Grundrisse*, p. 612.
- 44 Stephen Meyer III, *The Five Dollar Day: Labor Management and Social Control in the Ford Motor Company, 1908–1921* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1981). An extreme case might be an “effective altruist” who works in finance in order to maximize the resources that they can give to alleviating poverty. See Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), pp. 3–4.
- 45 See also Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *The Knowledge Economy* (London: Verso, 2019).