

Meaningful Work: Connecting Business Ethics and Organization Studies

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Received: 30 November 2012 / Accepted: 14 March 2013 / Published online: 29 March 2013
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Abstract In the human quest for meaning, work occupies a central position. Most adults spend the majority of their waking hours at work, which often serves as a primary source of purpose, belongingness, and identity. In light of these benefits to employees and their organizations, organizational scholars are increasingly interested in understanding the factors that contribute to meaningful work, such as the design of jobs, interpersonal relationships, and organizational missions and cultures. In a separate line of inquiry, scholars of business ethics have examined

meaningful work as a moral issue concerning the management of others and ourselves, exploring whether there are definable characteristics of meaningful work to which we have moral rights, and whether there are moral duties to ourselves and others to fulfill those rights. In this article, we examine contemporary developments in both disciplines about the nature, causes, and consequences of meaningful work; we explore linkages between these disciplines; and we offer conclusions and research opportunities regarding the interface of ethical and organizational perspectives on performing and providing meaningful work.

This article grew out of a panel discussion at the Society for Business Ethics Annual Meeting in Montreal, Canada, in 2010. The authors thank the members of the audience for their feedback. The authors also thank the editors and reviewers of the *Journal of Business Ethics* for their encouraging and constructive recommendations.

Keywords Business ethics · Human rights · Meaning of work · Meaningful work · Organization studies · Positive organizational studies · Prosocial behavior

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Introduction

In the human quest for meaning, work occupies a central position. Most adults spend the majority of their waking hours at work, which often serves as a primary source of purpose, belongingness, and identity (Brief and Nord 1990; Pratt and Ashforth 2003; Rosso et al. 2010). For the past three decades, Americans have consistently identified meaningful work as the most important feature that they seek out in a job, ahead of income, job security, promotions, and hours (Cascio 2003). A rich history of organizational research indicates that meaningful work is associated with outcomes that employees value, including enhanced job satisfaction (Fried and Ferris 1987; Wrzesniewski et al. 1997), engagement (May et al. 2004), and well-being (Campbell et al. 1976). Considerable evidence also suggests that meaningful work is associated with a series of desirable

consequences for organizations, including increased job performance (Fried and Ferris 1987; Grant 2008a; Hackman and Oldham 1976), organizational citizenship behavior (Piccolo and Colquitt 2006; Purvanova et al. 2006), organizational commitment and identification (Jex and Bliese 1999; Liden et al. 2000; Cardador et al. 2011), occupational identification (Bunderson and Thompson 2009), and customer satisfaction (Leiter et al. 1998). In light of these benefits to employees and their organizations, organizational scholars are increasingly interested in understanding the factors that contribute to meaningful work, such as the design of jobs, interpersonal relationships, and organizational missions and cultures (Pratt and Ashforth 2003; Rosso et al. 2010). While considerable progress has been made in identifying the dynamics surrounding the individual experience of work as meaningful, there has been considerably less work on their cultural or moral underpinnings.

In a separate line of inquiry, business ethicists and philosophers¹ have examined meaningful work as a moral issue concerning the management of others and ourselves. They have explored whether there are definable characteristics of meaningful work to which we have a moral right, such as autonomy, fair compensation, and intellectual and moral development (Bowie 1998; Schwartz 1982), or short of that, if employees have a right of participation to shape the goals and operations of the workplace (Hsieh 2008; Moriarty 2009). Ethicists have expressed related moral concern about the potential for work and related material pursuits to detract from the “search for something more” (Ciulla 2000), “eudaimonian interests” (Walsh 1994), “the meaning of life” (Needleman 1991), and “a life well lived” (Michaelson 2008). This can take the form of concern for our own moral identity (Gini 2001; Michaelson 2011), work motivation (Michaelson 2005a, 2010), work–life balance (Gini 2003; Michaelson 2005b; Nash and Stevenson 2004), moral obligation to serve others (Care 1984; Michaelson 2009, 2011), moral opportunity to be recognized for our contributions (Sayer 2009), and even whether we have a right to refuse meaningful work in deference to money (Arneson 1987; Maitland 1989; Nozick 1974). While human rights concerns in the workplace have received considerable attention from scholars and policymakers, there is limited agreement as to what, in addition to non-exploitation, constitutes meaningful work. Accordingly, there is no real consensus as to what moral obligation individuals might have to pursue meaningful work and what moral obligation organizations might have to provide it.

¹ For simplicity, this scholarly tradition will generally be referred to as “business ethics,” even though it also includes philosophers and ethicists who do not primarily identify as business ethicists but who have written on business, work, and economics. Their study, reputations, and research methods may be influential on and familiar to many business ethics scholars.

Although meaningful work represents a topic of important concern for business ethics scholars and organizational scholars, there has been little cross-fertilization between these two disciplines in this regard. This is an unfortunate oversight, as the two disciplines can offer important insights to each other. For business ethics scholars, an organizational lens can broaden and deepen knowledge about the subjective experience of meaningful work, the variety of motivations to work and the points at which ethical considerations impact them, as well as the organizational practices that can potentially influence the meaning and meaningfulness of the work experience. For organizational scholars, a business ethics lens can shed light on critical questions about the nature and extent of a responsibility for organizations to foster meaningfulness in and at work; and the responsibility of individuals and organizations to engage in work that they perceive as significant and purposeful. Meanwhile, both literatures point to a potential dark side of meaningful work, which can be invoked to rationalize manipulative and even unethical behaviors.

In this article, we examine contemporary developments in both disciplines about the nature, causes, and consequences of meaningful work. We explore linkages between business ethics scholarship and organization studies scholarship on meaningful work, addressing a recent call for cross-disciplinary dialogue between organization studies and business ethics (Heugens and Scherer 2010). We mention some interesting points of controversy within each discipline while emphasizing potential connections across disciplines, and we suggest an agenda for future research at the intersection of organization studies and business ethics.

Meaningful Work in Organization Studies

Research on the meaning of work in organizational studies is broad and diffuse, but can be categorized into a few topics of concern relating to both who is performing the work and what work is being performed. With regard to the former, topics include research on *work values*, or what one finds important in a job (e.g., Nord et al. 1990; O’Brien 1992); *work involvement, salience, and centrality*, which refers to how important work is in one’s life (e.g., Harpaz and Fu 2002; MOW International Research Team 1987); and *work orientation* or “internalized evaluations about what makes work worth doing” (Pratt et al. 2013: 4; see also Bellah et al. 1985; Wrzesniewski et al. 1997). With regard to the latter, research has examined issues such as *job design* (Hackman and Oldham 1976) and *job crafting* (i.e., “the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work,” as defined in Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001). This literature has been reviewed on numerous occasions (e.g., O’Brien

1992; Rosso et al. 2010; Šverko and Vizek-Vidović 1995). Our focus here is on three critical issues central to organization studies research that also have clear connections to business ethics research on meaningful work: (1) What makes work meaningful?, (2) Why does meaningfulness matter?, and (3) How can meaningfulness be cultivated?

What Makes Work Meaningful?

Despite its breadth, there are a few commonalities that bind the various strands of research in this area together. First, this research tends to look at work that is “meaningful,” that is, is purposeful and significant (Pratt and Ashforth 2003) rather than just looking at how we understand work, more broadly (i.e., what work means). Building on this distinction, Rosso et al. (2010) posit “the fact that work has a particular meaning does not necessarily determine that it is meaningful,” elaborating on this observation by noting “[m]eaningfulness refers to the amount of significance something holds for an individual.” These authors go on to note “the construct of meaningfulness has a positive valence in the literature, whereby greater amounts of experienced meaningfulness are more positive,” and synthesize these observations in defining meaningful work as “work experienced as particularly significant and holding...positive meaning for individuals” (95). In this way, research on the meaningfulness of work is distinctive from much organizational scholarship: focusing on the eudemonic (well-being) rather than hedonic (pleasure-seeking) aspects of organizational life (Lepisto et al. 2013). This focus has also meant that meaningfulness is often viewed in relation to, and sometimes in contrast with, perspectives focusing solely on compensation. As a result, scholars appear to express ambivalence regarding the role of money in meaningful work (e.g., Bunderson and Thompson 2009). As we note below, a similar tension between meaningfulness and money can be found in business ethics research, where this discussion has often been more explicit.

Second, there is often an implicit logic in this literature that meaningfulness involves a sort of “fit” or alignment between the individual and the tasks, jobs, or work he or she performs. That is, to the degree that work fulfills one’s needs or matches one’s values and beliefs, then work is often seen as meaningful. To achieve this fit, one can focus on either side of the “fit” equation noted earlier: (a) the workers or (b) the work. Roughly speaking, these emphases mirror two major streams of research on meaningful work.

To begin, research tends to focus either on the individual worker and what he or she brings to work (e.g., work orientations, work values), or on the characteristics of the work itself (e.g., job characteristics model). At the heart of the worker-focused group is the notion that the individual rather than his or her jobs or tasks is critical in “judging”

the meaningfulness of work: any set of tasks, regardless of their inherent characteristics, can be perceived of as meaningful. While sometimes focusing on an individual’s beliefs, or needs, or values, this research may be categorized under the broader umbrella of an individual’s “identity” (see Pratt and Ashforth 2003; Rosso et al. 2010). Central to this subjectivist view is that how an individual views him or herself (i.e., her or his identity) strongly influences how she or he views his or her work. Alternatively, the more task-centered and more objective focus on meaningfulness explores job characteristics in work that are perceived to be meaningful or that support the individual pursuit of meaningfulness at work. This research suggests that certain job characteristics—task identity, significance, and variety—are important for work to be perceived as meaningful (Hackman and Oldham 1976). While the emphasis in job design has typically been top-down, research on job crafting suggests that employees may alter their jobs to make their work more meaningful (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001).

Why Does Meaningful Work Matter?

Another central question to organizational scholars is demonstrating why meaningful work matters. Research in this area often reflects one of two perspectives. First, some suggest that meaningfulness is a worthy end in and of itself (Kahn 2007); that is, it needs no further justification. However, perhaps because the audience of organizational scholars includes both academics and practitioners, meaningful work has also been linked to a laundry list of desirable organizational ends. As we noted previously, empirical work has linked meaningful work to important work outcomes such as job satisfaction, work motivation, engagement, and performance, citizenship behaviors, and attachment to occupations and organizations.

How Can Meaningfulness Be Cultivated?

Given its importance, scholars have turned their attention toward the “management” or cultivation of meaningfulness—whether they view this goal as an explicit managerial duty or not (Dik et al. 2013; Pratt and Ashforth 2003). For example, to better understand how organizational practices might affect the degree to which individuals view their work as purposeful and significant, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) suggest that organizational leaders need to first appeal to the identity of a worker; and via this identity, practices ultimately can influence experienced meaningfulness. That is, if “identity” is one lens through which individuals understand the work that they do (Rosso et al. 2010), then “managing meaningfulness” begins with appealing to elements of an individual’s identity. In

particular, meaningfulness can be cultivated by appealing to different “paths” through which identity is formed. One path builds from a social identity approach that suggests that “who I am” as an individual is largely determined by the groups to which I belong. The second path builds from a structural symbolic interactionist approach, or role “identity theory,” that argues that individuals’ identities come from the roles that society provides for them—roles that are both “taken” and “made” by the individuals who hold them. Drawing on both perspectives, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) argue that organizations influence meaningfulness by engaging in *meaningfulness in working practices* that change what workers actually do, and engaging in *meaningfulness at work practices* that shape the context within which the work is performed. Examples of “meaningfulness in working” practices include job design, employee involvement practices (Lawler et al. 2001), and path–goal leadership, where leaders remove obstacles from worker’s “path” and thus free them to get their work done (House 1997). “Meaningfulness at work” practices include attempts to provide visionary leadership whereby leaders imbue work with greater meaningfulness by articulating an inspiring vision and linking it to shared values (Kirkpatrick and Locke 1996; Piccolo and Colquitt 2006; Podolny et al. 2005; Shamir et al. 1993), and attempts to build community via the management or creation of specific types of organizational cultures, ideologies, or identities.

Organizations can be categorized as engaging in one type, both, or neither set of practices. Organizations that engage in neither set of practices are most likely to foster worker alienation (e.g., Braverman 1974; Marx 1844/1997). Those that engage in both practices, by contrast, have the potential to foster transcendence whereby work can afford people the opportunity to feel part of something greater, thereby making their lives seem less fragmented and divided, and helping an individual feel that she is living up to one’s potential (Pratt and Ashforth 2003). In addition to engaging in meaningfulness “in” and “at” practices simultaneously, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) suggest there are practices specifically related to fostering transcendence. These practices (a) involve providing a cosmology that links individual and organizational aims with more universal ones (Ashforth and Vaidyanath 2002), (b) in an organization that fosters a sense of psychological safety (Edmondson 1999; Kahn 1990), and (c) where leaders act with integrity whereby words and deeds are aligned (Simons 2002). These authors further argue that these practices reinforce each other.

Empirical work linking management practices to members’ experienced meaningfulness is relatively rare, and studies that exist tend to be in the area of job design, such as those studies employing the job characteristics model (Hackman and Oldham 1980). In a meta-analysis, Fried

and Ferris (1987) found that each of the job characteristics in Hackman and Oldham’s model was linked to perceived meaningfulness: employees perceive jobs as meaningful when they provide task identity (completing a whole piece of work from start to finish), task significance (the work has a positive impact on others), skill variety (being to use a range of capabilities), autonomy (having discretion about when, how, and where to complete tasks), and feedback (receiving information about one’s progress and performance).

Recently, scholars have examined the design and experience of work that has a prosocial impact, protecting and promoting the well-being of other people (Grant 2007). The notion of prosocial impact as a source of meaningfulness is supported by evidence that across cultures, benefiting others is a deeply held, widely shared core value in life (Schwartz and Bardi 2001) and at work across jobs and industries (Colby et al. 2001; Ruiz-Quintanilla and England 1996). Early on, Hackman and Oldham (1976, 1980) introduced the construct of task significance to capture the extent to which a job has a positive impact on others. Although their original focus was on objective differences in job impact, subsequent research has revealed that “[a]ny job can be experienced as contributing to others’ welfare or not” (Colby et al. 2001, p. 483). Rather than making normative judgments about the inherent “goodness” of jobs and tasks that are prosocial, organizational scholars are now examining how meaningful work facilitates the behavioral pursuit and psychological experience of prosocial impact.

A core finding of this research is that employees are more motivated to pursue prosocial impact, and experience it more vividly, when they are directly connected to the beneficiaries of their work—clients, customers, patients, and other end users whose lives are affected by their efforts (Blau and Scott 1962; Katz and Kahn 1966). Recent studies suggest that when contact with beneficiaries enables employees to experience prosocial impact, they are thereby motivated to work harder and more effectively. For example, consider several field experiments that illustrate experiences of why work matters, involving fundraising callers responsible for soliciting alumni donations to a university. The donations funded student scholarships, but the callers never met the scholarship recipients who benefited from their work. In one experiment, callers who were randomly assigned to spend 5 min interacting with a single scholarship recipient increased the weekly time they spent on the phone by an average of 142 %, yielding average increases in weekly revenue of 171 % that lasted at least a month (Grant et al. 2007). Callers who did not meet the scholarship recipient—or only read a letter by him—showed no statistically significant changes in persistence or performance. Subsequent experiments showed even stronger effects: a full month after meeting a scholarship recipient, callers increased in average weekly revenue from \$411.74 to

\$2,083.52 (Grant 2008b). Further experiments indicated that contact with beneficiaries motivates these increases in persistence and performance through enabling callers to perceive their prosocial impact and strengthening their commitments to beneficiaries (Grant et al. 2007), and leaders may not be as effective in delivering the messages that beneficiaries convey about the meaning of the work (Grant and Hofmann 2011a). As expected, these effects are most pronounced among callers with strong prosocial values, who thus care more deeply about contributing to others than do employees with weaker prosocial values (Grant 2008a).

Other studies have examined the effects of connecting employees to prosocial impact outside call centers. In a field experiment with pool lifeguards, those who read stories about other lifeguards rescuing drowning swimmers perceived their work as having greater impact on and value to swimmers (Grant 2008a). This motivated them to work more hours and spend more time helping swimmers and protecting their safety. Those who read no stories about the personal benefits of the job showed no increases in perceptions of prosocial impact and value, hours worked, or helping and safety behavior (Grant 2008a). In another experiment, radiologists who merely saw a photo of a patient whose X-ray they were examining reported more empathy for the patient wrote 12 % longer reports, and showed 46 % increases in diagnostic findings (Turner et al. 2008). In two more experiments, reminding healthcare professionals of the consequences of hand hygiene for patients increased their soap and gel usage and behavioral compliance, whereas reminding them of the personal consequences did not (Grant and Hofmann 2011b). This evidence demonstrates how a mere story, photograph, or mention of a beneficiary can be sufficient to make prosocial impact more salient in an “objectively” meaningful and significant job (Grant and Parker 2009).

There is seemingly less evidence for meaningfulness “at” practices. Field research has shown, however, that socialization and community building can influence members’ identities (Greil and Rudy 1984; Pratt 2000). Moreover, Pratt and Rosa’s (2003) study on network marketing organizations illustrate how practices that blend work and family, such as those that incorporate sales peoples’ own goals for their family members (e.g., sending one’s children to very good schools) into their work-related goal-setting, does influence the meaningfulness derived from work. Thus, there is reason to believe that organizations can foster meaningfulness via this path as well.

Meaningful Work and Business Ethics

If research about meaningful work in organizational studies is focused primarily on what makes certain tasks or work

meaningful to a particular worker in a particular workplace, business ethics research on meaningful work includes exploring what all work and workplaces should have in common to make it possible for workers to perform and provide meaningful work. Here, we are focusing primarily on prescriptive or normative ethics research in deliberate contrast to organization studies as a descriptive or empirical discipline, acknowledging that these distinctions can be problematic to defend though practical for explanatory purposes (Donaldson 2003; Trevino and Weaver 1994).²

In this section, we explore the same three questions about meaningful work through this normative lens: (1) What makes work meaningful?, (2) Why does meaningfulness matter?, and (3) How can meaningfulness be cultivated? As we shall see, these questions are equally important to ethics in general and to business ethics in particular, and while the answers explored by ethics scholars are more often complementary than contradictory with those of organizational scholars, they are rarely redundant with them.

What Makes Work Meaningful?

In philosophical ethics, all questions of meaningfulness reduce to whether or not they contribute to a life that has an ultimate claim to meaningfulness. Work is one “critical” element of the good life (Beadle and Knight 2012). Like work, and sometimes through work, life can deliver intermediate goods, such as happiness, rightness, and well-being—but the question of meaningful life also involves final ends in virtue of which these intermediate goods retain their enduring value (Eagleton 2007; Flew 1963; Metz 2002, 2007; Nozick 1981; Seachris 2011; Tiberius 2008). Unfortunately, there are no universally accepted philosophical conclusions about what constitutes meaningful life, casting doubt on the possibility of universal foundations for what constitutes meaningful work. However, human beings have offered numerous proposals to answer the meaningful life question, which philosophers generally classify into supernaturalist theories (further divided into God- or soul-centered theories that posit some form of spirituality as the final end) and naturalist theories (subjective or objective appeals to scientific reason) (Metz 2002). Supernaturalist theories are perhaps quite often the implicit basis for subjective judgments about a universal basis for attributing meaningfulness to work, sometimes comprising an apparently sincere motivation for human

² This is not to say that all organization scholars use exclusively empirical research methods and all business ethics scholars use exclusively normative research methods. Within the ethics and business ethics literature, our focus on normative research allows for some comparisons and contrasts with organization studies research that we believe to be especially interesting and potentially fruitful.

industry. At other times, supernaturalist claims have been invoked to rationalize questionable work practices—as in colonialist history when the work of missionaries has been accompanied by capitalist exploitation.

Subjective naturalist claims about meaningful work are inherently unverifiable, which does not render them unimportant, but they beg the question of ultimate meaning. Nozick (1974), who devotes a brief sub-heading in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* to meaningful work, somewhat condescendingly suggests that contemporary interest in the topic is the result of excessive social–psychological anxiety about self-esteem. His treatment of meaningful work is intended to dispel the alleged illusions, first, that meaningful work is generally possible, and second, that meaningful work is particularly important. On the first point, he offers as examples some jobs (symphony orchestra member, army draftee) that limit expression of individual identity and yet also do not automatically injure self-esteem, implying also that there are some jobs that may not seem at all meaningful that are nevertheless necessary (Hsieh's (2008) conundrum of “unavoidable work”). On the second, he demotes meaningfulness to a place among the “overall package of benefits” (249) that a job provides, conceding that workers might “make a trade-off of some wages for some increase in the meaningfulness of their work” (248) but also asserting that there are workers who “will not take lower wages in order to get it” as there may be consumers who are or are not willing to pay more for goods “from factories whose work tasks are segmented meaningfully” (249). Advancing this line of argument, Maitland (1989) sets forth a “Nozickian argument,” claiming that prescribing a set of rights in the workplace infringes upon individual workers' choice to forego certain workplace rights for such preferred goods as higher compensation.

Objective naturalist answers to the meaningful life question purport to offer firmer ground for why we do what we do beyond catering to individual self-esteem and in doing so bear a promising connection to subjective explanations of why we do what we do through work. For example, Metz (2005) summarizes several objective naturalist perspectives, maintaining that meaningful life “is a function of: reward (Robert Audi), self-understanding (David Velleman), narrativity (John Martin Fischer), morality (Laurence Thomas), and achievements (Larry James, Berit Brogaard, and Barry Smith).” Audi's notion of reward consists of “intrinsically good elements that are typically but not necessarily pleasurable” (331). Work is one way through which we affirm social fit, through market feedback and/or the sense that we serve social objectives bigger than our own aims, allowing us to make narrative sense of our lives. This fit yields satisfaction in the form of extrinsic rewards (such as “recognition and esteem” Sayer

2009) and intrinsically gratifying achievements (such as the pursuit of “eudaimonian interests” Walsh 1994). Through work, we understand our own ideals, capabilities, and limitations that foster a sense of identity through which we may exercise morality to make a prosocial contribution.

Why Does Meaningful Work Matter?

In ethics research, there have been contrasting lines of inquiry into meaningful work as, on the one hand, a worker's potential moral aspiration, and on the other hand, an employer's potential moral obligation. In a world that remains rife with slave labor and decent work deficits (International Labor Organization (ILO) 2006), business ethics research has focused more of its meaningful work attention on the obligation for employers to meet basic moral conditions for meaningful work. Both sets of concerns share the sense that the necessity of work often distracts us or detracts from the possibility of meaningful life, requiring us to set aside such intrinsically meaningful priorities as family, education, and dreams to pursue instrumental goods—or, on the other hand, deluding us into believing those instrumental goods, such as money and social status, are meaningful ends in themselves.

Concern for individual moral autonomy and self-realization arise from historical economic theory, including the work of Adam Smith and Karl Marx, about markets and organizations that have an inherent tendency to dehumanize. The very idea that there could be such a thing as meaningful work moves beyond the notion of work as merely a means to the ends of economic productivity and shareholder value creation. It is widely known that even as Adam Smith celebrated the productivity benefits of division of labor, he worried that material wealth came at the potential cost of the autonomous pursuit of a meaningful life. “The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations,” he warned, “has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention... and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become” (1776/1993, p. 429). Marx's (1844/1997) view about the alienation of labor arising from the separation between the ownership of capital and the means of production is also well known. Against this background, work posed an obstacle that could prevent us from achieving our higher aspirations toward self-realization.

Bowie (1998) identifies six Kantian “characteristics of meaningful work:” work that is “freely entered into,” “allows the worker to exercise her autonomy and independence,” “enable[s] the worker to develop her rational capacities,” “provides a wage sufficient for physical welfare,” “supports the moral development of employees,” and “is not paternalistic.” This perspective on meaningful work, arguably broader than some perspectives on job design and providing a moral

basis for job crafting, is grounded in the logic of deontology, particularly the proposition that one should always treat persons as an end and not merely as a means. But it is also arguably grounded in objective naturalist theories of meaningful life, and like those theories ties to psychological notions of meaningfulness in the organization studies literature. Whereas the meta-physical basis for meaningfulness raises moral questions about the individual obligation to engage in meaningful work, the practical concern for workplace ethics raises moral questions about the institutional obligation to provide meaningful work to employees.

Recalling Smith's and Marx's arguments, Schwartz (1982) observes that social and political philosophers in the twentieth century were largely unconcerned with the practical existence of jobs that engage workers in "blindly pursuing ends that others have chosen" (635). She argues that mindless work impacts not only the worker's autonomy within the workplace but also restricts the worker's intellectual capacity so dramatically that autonomy overall—including its exercise in non-work contexts—is radically stunted. For Schwartz, the practical resolution to the lack of worker meaning that attends industrialization is not to be found in simply increasing the variety of mindless tasks performed (i.e., "job enlargement" in organizational studies) while maintaining industrialization's hierarchical division between deciding and doing, but rather in expanding work in a more democratic fashion so as to fully engage the worker in both deciding and doing.

How Can Meaningfulness Be Cultivated?

Business ethics research on workplace participation explores a moral basis for engaging the worker in deciding and doing. This question of worker participation in workplace governance and operational methods is the focus of recent work undertaken by Hsieh (2008) and Moriarty (2009, 2010). Hsieh reviews a variety of work on "what justice requires of economic production" at three levels: "the individual worker, the economic enterprise, and society as a whole." He begins by examining the relation of the individual to the "content of work," revisiting the autonomy- and self-realization-based concerns discussed above before raising the prospect that some work is unavoidably unpleasant and yet equally necessary. Like some other ethicists, while acknowledging the subjective nature of the individual experience of work, Hsieh insists that there are aspects of the organization of work that might be common to what he calls "justice in production," addressing ethical issues in the economic organizations and markets. Regarding how to account for the necessity that someone must perform unavoidable work while preserving justice, Hsieh references Walzer's (1983) three alternatives: compensation, conscription, and participation. Hsieh focuses particularly on the third

alternative, whether it refers to participation in organizational governance or in the economic system itself. Such participation can occur on at least two levels: the ability to challenge management decisions (what Hsieh 2005 calls "workplace republicanism" and Michaelson 2011 characterizes as a weak moral claim) and the right to be part of the decision-making process (a stronger moral claim). While participation in organizational governance on either level more or less alleviates several ethical concerns resulting from the potential imbalance of power between organization and individual—such as the relative cost of entry and exit and the potential for arbitrary interference—Hsieh acknowledges that individual participation does not necessarily resolve the basic problem that the content of the work itself, and thus its meaningfulness, might not change in significant ways as a result of a change in the structure of organizational governance. Similarly, at the level of society, even if collective control of the means of production by citizens were to entail messy if genuine progress toward justice in production, it would be unlikely to alter the persistent challenge that the direct experience of productive labor often feels as though it has been imposed by forces other than one's own volition.

If employee participation in the workplace enhances the potential for meaningful work which in turn is an important feature of the just society's promotion of the potential for its citizens to experience meaningful life, then it is reasonable to wonder whether employee participation is special relative to that of other stakeholders, such as customers, suppliers, and others. Moriarty (2010) contends that non-employee stakeholders also have claims as strong as those of employees to workplace participation, since workplace institutions impact the interests and autonomy of non-employee stakeholders as they do employee stakeholders. This conclusion on behalf of non-employee stakeholders does not in principle diminish the rights of employee stakeholders in decision-making; however, it might be seen to dilute the central importance of the employee in deciding what is meaningful work and to raise the question, "Meaningful to whom?" That is, if non-employee stakeholders have a voice in deciding what economic enterprises should do and how they do it, the perceived social value of what such enterprises do might be taken to signify a sort of non-subjective meaningfulness. Meaningful work might be meaningful in virtue of its meaningful value to the subject but it might also be meaningful in virtue of its social value.

Hsieh's and Moriarty's research on workplace participation, like Bowie's research on meaningful work characteristics, centers on the employer–employee relationship, including the employer's obligations to the employee and the employee's ability to influence the employer to realize meaningful work within the organization. These business ethicists are naturally interested in the governance and practice of organizational institutions, generally within the

limitations of a free market economic system. The analysis of ethicists like Nozick and Schwartz examines the condition of the worker within an economic system that influences opportunities for and obligations regarding meaningful work. Whereas Nozick suggests that the worker has enough bargaining power in a free market system in which she is able to trade meaningfulness for money to not require state assistance, Schwartz and others raise the question as to whether meaningful work is a right and in turn whether a moral economy requires employers to uphold that right. Building upon the meaningful work concerns raised by Schwartz (1982) and others, Arneson (1987) examines several arguments regarding whether the perceived right to meaningful work demands state action to defend it. Arneson begins his analysis left of Nozick on the political spectrum and is comparatively put off by the scenario in which workers accept high wages as compensation for jobs that are “dirty, exhausting, subject to close supervision, devoid of challenge or interest,” yielding the question: “[I]n this hypothetical market socialist economy would there be a reasonable ethical basis for further state regulation to achieve ‘self-realization through creative work’ for all?” (518). To a certain extent the work of moral economists brings us back full circle to the concerns raised about division of labor by both Smith and Marx and examines whether their shared concern about meaningless work demands state intervention in the market. Walsh (1994) tries to strengthen the case for the institutional obligation to provide meaningful work by positioning it as a “distributive good” to which persons have rights, and Sayer (2009) describes work as a feature of “contributive justice,” the rewards of which persons have a right to seek. Taken together, these authors explore whether certain features of meaningful work transcend the subjective experience of it such that there might be a basis to consider meaningful work to be among those goods amenable to just distribution. However, Arneson (1987) concludes that there are not “convincing market failure considerations motivating state action to supply meaningful work.”

In general, among ethicists and business ethicists, there is thus agreement that there are certain broad and basic moral conditions that institutions must meet so as not to *deprive* workers of the opportunity to pursue meaningful work. However, there remains considerable room to explore to what extent institutions—including organizations and economic systems—must further *support* individual workers’ *aspirations* to engage in work that is meaningful to them. Moral economists, ethicists, and meaning of life theorists broadly agree that work is one means by which we might pursue and achieve the good life. For example, Care (1984) argues that one of the goods that we seek to achieve through work is “self-realization,” Breen (2007) characterizes work as a potential “emancipatory practice” through

which human beings can flourish, Sayer (2009) considers work to be a source of internal goods or of external “recognition and esteem,” and Walsh (1994) characterizes meaningful work as “work which realizes ‘eudaimonian interests’.” However, the idealism expressed in these aspirations is countered by the realism that work often stands in the way of human flourishing.

While research in business ethics does not necessarily divide into meaningfulness in versus meaningfulness at work practices, we can view discourse around participation and work characteristics may fall roughly into the former category. As in organizational studies, our links enhancing meaningfulness via the work context are more speculative, but we believe they are nonetheless very promising. We see two potential venues for meaningfulness at work practices. First, organizations that engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) may facilitate meaningfulness at work. Whereas organization studies research on prosocial impact focuses primarily on employees’ experiences and behaviors, CSR research in business ethics has traditionally focused on organizational obligations to make the world better (or not to make it worse). Positive corporate social performance is increasingly seen as an important adjunct to superior financial performance. Business ethics perspectives on corporate conscience (Goodpaster 2007) and organizational integrity (Paine 2003) align with theories of prosocial motivation, and more generally to logics of fit underlying theories of meaningful work in organizational studies, by noting that workers generally seek to work for organizations with which they perceive their moral values to be in harmony. Indeed, research on CSR suggests that employee perceptions of CSR can increase organizational commitment (Brammer et al. 2007), while employees’ level of interaction with CSR can increase perceptions among other stakeholders of the legitimacy of that commitment (Bolton et al. 2011). Furthermore, Burton and Dunn (2005, p. 457) have advocated for a caring approach to management that “focuses on relationships, responsibilities to stakeholders other than the firm itself, consensus building and communication, and trust and cooperation” (see also Dobson and White 1995; Wicks 1996; Wicks et al. 1994).

Second, and more generally, we argue that the most common unifying (though not necessarily universal) theme across different answers to the meaningful life question is the idea that “a moral life will be at least part of what can make a life meaningful” (Dahl 1987, p. 1). Individual regard for leaving a legacy, continuing a tradition, pride in craftsmanship, building caring relationships, and being provided a continuing challenge may also be grounded in essentially meaningful dispositions (Dunn 2010)—conditions which, in turn, that can be enabled by organizational practices.

Conclusions and Research Directions

Our discussion of the business ethics and organization studies scholarship on meaningful work reveals some similarities between the two disciplines. In both cases, there has been significant recent interest in the topic, though despite growing interest over the past three decades, in neither case has meaningful work entered the mainstream disciplinary core. However, in a current economy where jobs are scarce in many markets and employers face ever more challenges of finding the right person with the right skills in the right place and time, the interest that the disciplines share in job characteristics as moral and motivational forces promises to make meaningful work an increasingly important pragmatic issue. In this vein, the disciplines share an interest in the working subject's relationship to and perception of her work as a key element of identity of self-esteem, while also recognizing the potential value of work that contributes to social well-being. Our discussion also reveals that these two disciplines are not simply addressing the same topic using different words. Rather, they are examining complementary aspects of common issues using alternative approaches to analysis. In particular, noting the risk of over-generalizing, research on organizational studies have focused more on the experiences of the worker while business ethics has focused more on the moral obligation of the organization housing those workers.

That said, this analysis has also revealed important differences in the approaches of these two disciplines. For example, organization studies research often begins with the assumption that meaningful work is a good thing, whereas normative ethics seeks to establish a philosophical basis for why it is good. Both then struggle with the important question of how good of a thing meaningful work is relative to other economic, organizational, and ethical priorities. In sorting out this question, ethics research may bring certain empirical assumptions about what workers are willing to trade in return for meaningful work, assumptions that may be examined by organization studies researchers. It is also important to note that there are still other disciplines that also have much to say about meaningful work that are touched on very little or not at all in our analysis: human resource management, spirituality in the workplace, welfare economics, moral economy, and leadership, among many others. We hope this article stimulates further cross-disciplinary inquiry through the unifying theme of meaningful work. In this section, we offer answers to some central questions about meaningful work that are informed by the similarities and differences between organization studies and normative business ethics research on meaningful work.

What is Meaningful Work (Revisited)?

Organization studies scholarship has offered significant insight into job characteristics, work orientations, and other psychological factors that lead workers to consider their work to be meaningful (or not meaningful). These findings contribute important knowledge about, among other things, what motivates workers and how to manage meaningfulness. This research, by consequence, offers considerable insight into meaningfulness as it is experienced “on the ground” within the daily work-life of individuals.

Business ethics pulls back to offer a more aerial view. As we have seen, one way in which business ethics perspectives on what is meaningful work complement organization studies perspectives is by setting out particular characteristics of meaningful work that are morally obligatory for the employer. These characteristics substantially resemble some features of what working subjects may desire and experience through meaningful work. However, as basic conditions for meaningful work, these normative job characteristics may fall short of guaranteeing work or the workplace is genuinely *full of meaning* such that it excites subjective perceptions of meaningful work. Thus, one way in which bringing together these disciplines helps to advance our understanding of meaningful work is to suggest that it often requires the confluence of normative meaningful work conditions and the subjective volition to make meaningfulness out of those conditions. As Ciulla (2000) has explained, meaningful work has an “objective” dimension (working conditions) and a “subjective” dimension (workers' perceptions), and our analysis further suggests that these dimensions mutually influence each other.

However, this is not to say in every case that a subjective perception of one's work as meaningful requires that objective conditions of meaningful work be met, nor is it to say that meeting those conditions guarantees the experience of meaningful work. On the one hand, industrial society is replete with examples in which those objective conditions are evidently met and yet the subjective experience of work is, to invoke Terkel's (1974) famous phrase, “a Monday through Friday sort of dying.” On the other hand, human history offers many admirable stories of evidently meaningful work achievements that have arisen from dire conditions (for example, military peacekeepers and civil rights workers often work in dangerous and materially deprived conditions). While it might be said that overcoming such odds might enhance the experience of meaningfulness, more often than not we would suppose that meeting objective conditions of meaningful work supports the opportunity for the working subject to experience meaningful work. We contend that meaningful work always requires some degree of objective autonomy to

pursue one's subjective aspirations for meaningful work; however, the amount and trade-off between these objective and subjective dimensions of meaningful work may vary from situation to situation and subject to subject.

Are Managers Morally Obligated to Provide Meaningful Work?

As discussed above, organization studies research reveals the potential for managerial practices to connect to worker identity and experienced meaningfulness. However, there always hangs in the air the prospect that any given individual's estimation of the significance of their work can be manipulated by the astute and practiced manager who sees worker commitment merely as a means to achieve organizational purpose, leading "some organizational theorists...to question whether healthy outcomes for individuals and society are achieved when meaning becomes a form of normative control" (Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009, p. 492).

These ethical implications of managerial practices to foster meaningfulness in and at work have not been fully explored. One such practice concerns the role of compensation. Multiple scholars from both disciplinary approaches address compensation in relation to meaningful work. Is meaningful work something separate from pay or should it be viewed as one source of meaningfulness? Alternatively, does meaningful work have market value, and if so, does the market fairly appraise its value? Should meaningful work be considered a form of compensation to be appraised among an overall package of benefits? Is greater monetary or other material compensation a fair counterbalance for a deficit in meaningfulness?

Beyond compensation, what is the extent of ethical obligation, if any, that organizations may have for creating the conditions for meaningful work? Is it enough to simply create workplaces that are not alienating, or should organizations attempt to foster meaningfulness in or at work, or both (i.e., foster transcendence)? Where moral rights and practical preferences diverge, is it more important for managerial practices to address employees' rights to meaningful work conditions or to cater to employees' preferences about job design and task significance? While all these issues have been addressed by those writing against the backdrop of a normative frame, organizational researchers are not in the habit of offering such moral claims.

And while theoretical research has recognized and warned others about the potential dark side of these practices, little empirical research has directly examined this question. For example, what line exists between communities and cults? Are even well-intentioned meaningfulness-fostering practices nonetheless manipulative? Finally,

even if such research was conducted, it is not clear whose subjective perspective is most critical when making such assessments and whether employee workplace participation has the potential to mitigate concerns about managerial manipulation. Organizational researchers and social commentators have tended to apply their own cultural value systems when judging the practices of organizations, while largely ignoring the cultural perspectives of the workers themselves (Lepisto et al. 2013). This is particularly ironic when operating from the subjective perspective that views meaningfulness as largely "being in the eye of the beholder."

Our answer to the question of whether managers are morally required to provide meaningful work begins with acknowledging that it is not necessarily possible for managers to satisfy every working subject's volition for meaningful work. Allowing every individual to decide what work they most wish to do without regard for market value would reverse the productivity benefits of capitalism. We agree that there are certain normative conditions that must be met to ensure non-exploitation. Beyond those conditions, there can be happy confluences between, for example, an individual's prosocial motivation and an organization's purpose, but there can also be trade-offs between meaningfulness and market value. While managers can and should leverage such confluence of aims, we share concerns raised earlier that such coincidences can cross the line into manipulation and even deception. Would it be morally preferable for management to paint an exaggerated picture of prosocial impact or to pay workers more in exchange for less meaningful work? Neither alternative is ideal, of course, but we worry that a society in which individuals are systematically motivated to trade meaning for money is all the more impoverished.

Are Workers Morally Obligated to Pursue Meaningful Work?

Normative business ethics challenges the assumption that meaningfulness is in the eye of the beholder, asserting that the worker's subjective perception of the meaningfulness of her work is not a sufficient condition for work to be considered meaningful. Meanwhile, we may be loath to impose a moral obligation on to each individual to pursue meaningful work. Who is to judge, the question often goes, the desire of the clerical worker to put in an honest day's work at a job that she can forget about when she goes home? Perhaps she finds meaningful life in some occupation outside of work: volunteering, playing in a garage band, or being with her family (Pratt et al. 2013).

In this vein, Michaelson (2009) notes that "the standard conception of meaningful work says surprisingly little about the moral obligation of the individual—to anyone but

the individual herself—to pursue meaningful work” (29). He suggests (2011) that a wasted life can be not only a personal moral failure but often also a managerial failure to the extent one falls short of an opportunity to provide meaningful work for one’s employees. On the foundation of Kant’s conception of moral worth, Michaelson suggests meaningful work ought not be considered good merely on the arbitrary basis of the work being preferred by the worker, for if this were the case, there would be cause for grave moral concern as nefarious acts, such as those of terrorists, could be construed as meaningful endeavors. Beadle and Knight (2012) argue that “a substantive notion of intrinsically meaningful work is defensible” and that subjective perceptions of meaningfulness may in some situations reflect “disordered desire.” Extending this logic, the worker who considers her labor to be moral, and on this basis concludes her work is meaningful, has made a subjectively accurate assessment—but one that would not in any objective sense satisfy the claim that all such work is meaningful.

This concern is raised in research that explores the motivating and buffering effects of prosocial impact in jobs that require employees to do harm, not only good. Molinsky and Margolis (2005) introduced the concept of “necessary evils” to capture tasks that require employees to harm others in the interest of a perceived greater good or purpose (e.g., a surgeon who cuts someone open to save that person’s life). Evidence suggests that prosocial impact provides employees with a utilitarian justification for doing harm, enabling them to thereby rationalize the harm in light of a greater good (Grant and Campbell 2007). Similarly, research on moral credentialing and compensatory ethics shows that when employees perceive their actions and identities in prosocial terms, they feel greater license to deviate from established ethical norms (Monin and Miller 2001; Zhong et al. 2010). This evidence highlights that prosocial impact is a double-edged sword: it has the potential to both discourage unethical behavior as well as provide a moral justification for this behavior. Prosocial impact may be a core element of meaningful work for many, but it may also contribute to moral disengagement (Bandura 1999) and ethical fading (Tenbrunsel and Messick 2004) as employees perceive the beneficial ends as justifying means that are harmful or ethically questionable.

There may be more than one right answer to the question of whether workers are morally obligated to pursue meaningful work. However, that does not mean that there cannot be objectively wrong subjective responses to what constitutes meaningful work. One kind of wrong answer to what constitutes meaningful work might be work that in serving one’s own interests brings about greater harm to the interests of others. Another possible wrong answer might be work that simply fails to help others. And, a third

(potentially more contentious) wrong answer to what constitutes meaningful work may be work that neglects one’s responsibility to oneself to try to live a meaningful life.

Unanswered Questions

As our discussion implies, much of the empirical research that has been conducted on meaningful work has focused on North American and Western European workers or, in the few cross-cultural studies that exist, on advanced economies. Meanwhile, much of the normative research on the objective dimension of meaningful work is concerned with working conditions in emerging markets. Questions that are important to the study of meaningful work today include how does the meaning of meaningful work vary across cultures and economic conditions? Are there universal job characteristics—as prescribed by ethicists or described by organization scholars—that are common to meaningful work across cultures and economic conditions? How do long-standing cultural and philosophical attitudes about work and values influence contemporary decisions about career choice and market valuation of different careers? Do other factors—such as gender, age, and family or other economic and non-economic responsibilities— influence attitudes about the importance of meaningful work? And, given the connection observed in both business ethics and organization studies research between meaningful work and worker identity, how do cultural factors influence individual identity and managerial efforts to connect to worker identity? These research opportunities seem to be important not only to the individuals and organizations of the present but also to the way in which work values will evolve in the future. The increasing economic power of the world’s most populous markets means not only that billions of new people might have an increasing measure of choice in the work they do but also that billions of others might yet remain behind, toiling in poor working conditions with little hope for meaningful work that can contribute to meaningful life.

The goal of living a meaningful life does not discriminate economically or in any other way, even if the freedom to pursue one’s goals may do so. We sometimes conflate economic progress with progress toward general well-being (Sen 1999), but as Nussbaum (2011:1) and other proponents of the human development and capabilities approach argue, “Leaders of countries often focus on national economic growth alone, but their people, meanwhile, are striving for something different: meaningful lives for themselves”. To the extent that meaningful work can contribute to, or detract from, meaningful life, the recognition that economic growth is neither sufficient nor

altogether necessary for meaningful life suggests that meaningful work could serve an essential function for many or most at the intersection of economic well-being and general well-being—particularly today. One might ask where meaningfulness ranks among other work-related priorities, when so many people are materially desperate for any work at all. Building off our earlier assertion, meaningful work might matter more now than ever in a world coming to terms with a new economic order and changing ethical values that may determine the form of employee participation and preferences and the content and conditions of work for future generations to come. That is to say that, in any society where work is unavoidable and necessary, meaningful work—and research at the intersection of organization studies and business ethics—can be an important catalyst to preserve and promote a just society that supports meaningful lives for its citizens. We are optimistic about the potential for meaningful work to yield not only cross-disciplinary enrichment among business ethics and organization scholars but also cross-cultural dialogue on the conditions of work for the powerless and the values of work shaped by the powerful.

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