

AN INTRODUCTION TO
BUSINESS
ETHICS

Third Edition

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DISCUSSION CASE: Great Jobs and Meaningful Jobs

In the opinion of many people, Pat Tillman had a fantastic job. As a star safety for the Arizona Cardinals of the National Football League, Tillman had the money, fame, and influence that many believe are characteristics of a perfect job. Drafted out of college in 1998 by the Cardinals, Tillman turned down a five-year, \$9 million contract offer from the St. Louis Rams in 2001 to re-sign a three-year, \$3.6 million contract with the Cardinals. It was reported at the time that his motivation for accepting the smaller contract was loyalty to the Cardinals' organization. One year later, Tillman voluntarily quit the Cardinals' team to enlist in the U.S. Army. Tillman never spoke publicly about that decision, but friends explained that he felt a sense of duty to support his country after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. On April 22, 2004, Tillman was killed during a battle in Afghanistan.

Pat Tillman undoubtedly was an exceptional individual. Few people would walk away from such a job to enlist in the military and risk their own life. Yet, Tillman's story is similar to those of people who continue working at unglamorous jobs when they no longer need to do so. One reads of lottery winners who remain working at ordinary jobs even when they could afford to retire, or of retirees who accept low-paying and seemingly lackluster jobs. Many other individuals leave lucrative jobs in business to become teachers or to take other social service positions. Rather than pursuing high-paying jobs in business, many college students volunteer to work in social service positions upon graduation. Clearly, people have many reasons for pursuing the type of work and the specific job they do choose. Yet, the common assumption is that most people work because they need to earn money to survive.

During the early decades of the twentieth century economists and other social scientists debated an issue that might seem quaint today. With the growing productivity of the industrial revolution moving many societies from the age of scarcity to an age of abundance, the question among social scientists was what would happen when workers reached the point where they obtained life's basic necessities? The fear of many economists was that people would stop working as much and that this would lead to a decline in productivity which, in turn, could lead to an economic downturn. The assumption was that once necessities and a few luxuries were obtained, workers would seek to reduce time spent at work. This same debate surfaced again in mid-century when technological advances and increased automation once again suggested that increased productivity might lead to an abundance of leisure time.

The facts, of course, are that nothing at all like this happened. The evidence suggests that consumer demand is unlimited and does not distinguish between necessities and luxuries. Contrary to some early theories, it appears that workers increased their commitment to work in order to keep up with an increasing demand for goods and services. Rather than decreasing the amount of time spent working, it seems most workers continue or increase work time in order to obtain what previously would have been considered luxuries.

Some observers think we are facing similar questions today. Economist Juliet Schor's 1991 book *The Overworked American* claimed that Americans are working more but enjoying it less. Schor's thesis was that the never-ending cycle of consumerism in which happiness is defined as satisfying consumer wants and in which the economy required an expanding pool of unfulfilled wants (how else would the economy continue to grow?) means that people are working more but enjoying life less.

Schor's conclusions about the amount of time Americans are working were challenged by several observers. The empirical data seemed ambiguous, depending in part on how one defines work (wage-earning labor only, or housework and other necessary activities). Yet there is more agreement on her conclusions about happiness. Americans report that they *feel* as if they are working more (even if in fact they are not) and report that they are less happy than their parents were.¹

As we enter the first years of the twenty-first century it has become commonplace to hear talk once again about a "new economy," "greater productivity," and the "changing nature of work." This new economy was heralded by an unprecedented period of economic growth and prosperity fueled, in part, by increased worker productivity and technological advancements. The changing nature of work refers to movements away from an industrial model of long-term employment toward an economy with a smaller workforce and greater job volatility and mobility. The movement is stereotypically captured in such images as a middle-aged assembly line factory worker being replaced by a young webpage designer. Of course, it is easy to over-generalize such claims. While true for many people in, and parts of, Western developed economies, neither economic prosperity nor job mobility is true for all workers in these societies. It certainly is not true for most workers throughout the world for whom agricultural work remains the primary type of work done.

Nevertheless, it is still fair to say that the model of work that dominated economic thinking throughout most of the twentieth century is giving way to a broader understanding. "Work," perhaps especially in the decades after World War II, was understood primarily based on what we might call the industrial model. As an activity, work existed as a long-term relationship within a single firm. Employees received steady and stable employment, secure wages and benefits, and opportunities for promotion within the firm. Employers received the benefits of increased productivity created by a stable and competent workforce. This model of work thus served the purposes of both employees and employers reasonably well.

In such a workplace, the activities of work tend to be highly structured and routinized. The workplace can be highly bureaucratic with rules and expectations well-developed and spelled out. Such determinate rules characterized both the daily activities of work and the requirements for promotion and advancement within the firm.

In the last decades of the twentieth century attention was paid to a type of work that came to be called *contingent work*. This phrase referred to a wide

variety of jobs and workers who didn't fit the more traditional industrial model. These jobs were more temporary, often part-time, and often filled by more entrepreneurial and freelance workers. The category of contingent work includes temporary workers (often supplied by temporary employment agencies), independent contractors and consultants, day laborers, and regular part-time or on-call workers. By 1995, such workers comprised almost 30 percent of the entire U.S. workforce and included almost 35 percent of all women workers.

In addition to such contingent work, the massive layoffs and corporate downsizing that occurred in the 1990s were an indication of further changes in the contemporary workplace. No longer could long-term employees assume that there would always be a job available for them as long as they performed their jobs adequately. This seemed to come as a particular shock to hundreds of thousands of middle-aged, white-collar workers who lost their jobs as a result of corporate downsizing. Similar issues have arisen more recently when an increasingly global economy has resulted in jobs being outsourced to lower-paid foreign workers. The rules and expectations of the workplace are clearly changing.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Could you ever envision a point in your own life before retirement where you would be willing to trade wages and income for more leisure time? Besides taking time away from work to raise a family, what other reasons might lead you to consider such a decision? Do you know anyone who has done this?
2. What factors other than wages would influence you to change jobs? To take a job? To quit a job? Other than wages, what are the three most important aspects of any job you would seek?
3. If not for wages, why work? If you were granted extra time in each day would you choose to spend any of it at work?

5.1 INTRODUCTION

As described in chapter 1, philosophy asks us to step back from our everyday lives to reflect on and examine our decisions. Why do we do the things we do? Chapter 1 began with the very self-reflective question: Why study business ethics? But such questioning can be extended further. Why are you taking the courses that you do? Why are you enrolled in school? To answer such questions, many students would reason as follows. I am taking this course because it is required for my major. I am enrolled in this major because I hope to get a good job when I graduate. I want a good job so I can make a lot of money. I want to make a lot of money so that I can be happy.

Most, if not all, of our everyday thinking fits this means-ends reasoning pattern. We do something (enroll in a course, major in a certain subject, accept

a particular job) as a means to some other end (a college degree, a job, money, happiness). Our own thinking about work typically fits this model as well. We work as a means to an end. But can work itself ever be an end, rather than only a means? What is, and what ought to be, the nature of work, and what values are served by working? What are the responsibilities for business as a place of work?

Previous chapters have considered "business" in a very general sense. Beginning with this chapter, we will look more closely at the ethical responsibilities of specific operations of business institutions. Perhaps most importantly for most of us, businesses are the places where we work. Along with producing goods and services, providing employment is the most important social function of business. In chapters 5, 6, and 7, we will examine a wide range of ethical issues that arise within the workplace.

We are all familiar with stories about people who win multimillion dollar lottery prizes and then claim that they intend to continue working at their present job. Most of us find these stories fascinating because such an attitude goes against the common wisdom that we work only to get paid. This more common attitude was captured some years ago by the *Chicago Tribune* columnist Mike Royko:

Why do you think the lottery is so popular? Do you think anybody would play if the super payoff was a job on the night shift in a meat packing plant? People play it so if they win they can be rich and idle . . . like I told you years ago—if work is so good, how come they have to pay us to do it?²

Many people think of work with this type of ambivalence. Work is a very important part of our lives and it is not something that we easily would, or could, abandon. Yet, the very idea of work seems to suggest drudgery and toil, something to be avoided whenever possible. Work seems a necessary evil.

From the earliest times one can trace a continual human fascination with the nature of work. This fascination is often divided between glory and contempt. Work can be exalting, uplifting, fulfilling and degrading, tedious, troublesome. In *Genesis*, work was seen as a curse and punishment for original sin, yet humans were also called forth to work the land, to subdue the earth, to till and keep the garden.³ The Greek philosopher Aristotle recognized work as necessary for the good life, yet he also disparaged work because of this very necessary, and therefore "slavish," nature.⁴ Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Benjamin Franklin all acknowledged the drudgery of work, yet each emphasized how this very toilsome nature can be put to work for a higher cause.⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau's romantic view of the self-reliant craftsman developing human creativity was tempered by a recognition that within society mankind is "everywhere in chains." For Karl Marx, labor had the potential to express our very humanity but, in modern capitalist societies at least, labor is alienated from this end.⁶

The two sides of this ambivalence raise distinct questions for business ethics. Work can provide opportunities for valuable, meaningful, and uplifting human activity, and work can be dehumanizing, degrading, and oppressive. To

the degree that work can be uplifting, business ethics is challenged to articulate the vision of good work and the good workplace. To the degree that work is a burden that we all must endure, business ethics is challenged to articulate and defend the conditions under which work can be made fair, just, and humane.

This present chapter will examine a variety of theories about the meaning and value of work. How we conceptualize work has a significant impact on how we structure and organize the workplace. In the following chapter, we will examine a variety of workplace rights. Employee rights would offer protection of important human interests within the context of a situation in which those interests are jeopardized by the necessity of work.

5.2 THE MEANINGS OF WORK

Our understanding of the nature of work can have a significant impact on ourselves as individuals and on the institution of the workplace. Psychologically, the very attitude with which we face each day can be greatly influenced by our understanding of work in general, and of our own work in particular. For employees, the meaning and value found in work can contribute significantly to self-esteem as well as physical and mental health. For managers, how employees think about work will influence everything from performance and productivity to employee turnover, and from wages and benefits to absenteeism. As testimony to the importance of such questions, one need only look at the prevalent discussion of topics such as job satisfaction and worker morale in the field of business management.

So, what does *work* mean? At first glance, we should recognize that we use "work" with a variety of meanings, both as a verb and as a noun. As a verb, work refers to activities that involves perseverance, discipline, toil, usually performed with a degree of seriousness and concentration. The verb *to work* is contrasted with being idle, relaxing, playing. Sitting here at my computer, I might be working on a book, or I might simply be playing on the Internet. This afternoon, I may go out to play a round of golf, or I might go to the practice range to work on my game.

As a noun, work can refer to particular accomplishments (e.g., a work of art), any general undertaking or task (e.g., homework), or a job or employment. Our focus in this textbook on business ethics will be on work done in exchange for wages, "work" in the sense of a job or employment.

But even with this focus, it is important not to ignore the variety of work. People work as executives in large corporate institutions, on assembly lines in a factory, temporary or full-time jobs, and they work several jobs. People work for government agencies, as artists and craftsmen, in construction or teaching. Some work for corporations, others are self-employed, most work for small businesses; some commute or travel continuously, others work at home. Particularly when we are considering the value and significance of work, it is crucial that we not operate with too narrow of a focus.

For example, social programs such as Social Security and unemployment insurance, and many public policies concerned with marriage and divorce, have systematically undervalued or ignored the value of housework and child care. Since the women who typically filled such roles were not engaged in work for wages, their status under Social Security and tax law was dependent upon their husband's employment. Women who were engaged full-time with child care and homemaking were described, and often disparaged, as not working. Alternately, when women are employed in the workforce, social expectations can hold them responsible for the "work" of child care and household duties. Women, but not men, are expected to be the "super mom" who works a full-time job and still manages a household.

Even when we use "work" to refer only to those activities performed in exchange of wages and compensation, we find an assorted and distinct range of meanings. "Work" can suggest a job, profession, career, trade, labor, occupation, vocation, or a calling. In an important study of American culture and values, sociologist Robert Bellah and his co-authors of *Habits of the Heart* offer some insightful observations concerning various meanings of work and their relations. The authors distinguish between a job, a career, and a calling.⁷ Each is distinguished by the degree to which the identity of the person filling the role is determined by the role itself.

What does it mean to say that one's identity is determined by work? Consider that "What do you do?" is a very common first question we ask when introduced to someone. People identify themselves to others by their work. "I am an accountant." "I manage a small business." "I am a college professor." "I work for the state social service department." What we do determines who we are. When you tell me that you are a computer programmer, you have identified yourself in terms of your work. We come to know others by knowing what they do. But we also come to think about ourselves, we develop our own self-image, in terms of our work. Sometimes our work can contribute to a strong positive self-image as when someone introduces herself as "I am vice president for marketing at a large international corporation." Sometimes our work, or lack thereof, contributes to a low self-image. "I'm unemployed" or "I work the night shift at the meat packing plant."

In *Habits of the Heart*, a *job* is described as work in which self-identity is independent of the activity. A job is simply a role that one steps into and out of as a means for earning money. "I just happen to work a job at this fast-food restaurant, but tomorrow I may change jobs and take a job working construction." Jobs have no meaning other than the instrumental value as a means for earning wages.

A career involves a developing relationship between the self and the activity. One might say that "after graduation I intend to begin my career in public relations" or "I am pursuing a career in real estate." A career suggests an ongoing activity that is defined in terms of wider social institutions that establish standards of achievement and advancement. One develops throughout a career, not in the sense of moving from one job to another, but in the sense of

mastering various stages and advancing to new levels. This sense of development means that careers involve social status and self-esteem in ways that jobs do not. With careers, we hear echoes of the traditional crafts system in which one progresses from apprentice to master and with this progression one gains in status and self-esteem.

A calling also returns to an earlier tradition of work in which a person's identity and activities were "morally inseparable." Who you are was determined fully by what you do. Traditionally, the professions, artisans, and farming were understood this way. "I am a minister," "I am a musician," "I am a farmer" tells us a great deal about both the person and their work. Perhaps less common today than in years past, individuals thought of themselves as "called" to a life of medicine, military service, or teaching.

This categorization is not intended as absolute or exhaustive, but rather as a helpful way to understand the complexity of work. Work has the potential to be intimately connected to our deepest values, for better or for worse. When the time comes to reflect back upon your entire life and judge its worth, what work you did and how you did it will play a significant role in deciding how worthwhile your life has been. The meaning and value of work, both actual and potential, will therefore have important implications for the structure and operation of the workplace.

5.3 THE VALUE OF WORK

Before reviewing various theories of work it will prove useful to consider some of the values that work can hold. "Why work?" and "What is work good for?" may seem obvious or trivial questions to some, but upon slight reflection we can discover a wide variety of values associated with work.

Clearly work has significant value as the means for attaining an income and, through that income, many other ends that we need and desire. One works in order to buy food, pay the mortgage, buy clothing, pay for a child's education. I am fortunate to have a job that also provides health and life insurance, educational benefits, and a retirement program. Work has high instrumental value; by working one is able to attain many other goods. Because it is necessary for obtaining so many other goods, work can be said to have an exceptionally important instrumental value.

The extent of the instrumental value of work can be understood when we ask if we would continue working if we attained all the other goods. If more efficient substitutes can be found for some activity with only instrumental value, we have no reason to continue the activity. For example, if I work only to make money and I inherit a fortune, I would stop working.

To determine if there are other values in working, I often ask my students what they would do if they won a multimillion dollar lottery. During one class, a student answered that he would spend all his time playing golf. I asked if he would simply *play* or if he would *work* on his game to improve. He admitted that he would likely get bored if he continued shooting high scores and

never improved his game. He readily acknowledged that he would be willing to work on his game with the goal of eventually shooting par. He would work on his golf game, but he would not continue to work for a living.

I then asked students to think about why someone such as Bill Gates continues to work. The day I write this, *Fortune* announced its 1999 estimate of Gates's fortune at more than \$90 billion. Surely this is enough wealth to do whatever he wants, yet he continues to work full-time for Microsoft. Why? To the cynic who suggests that Gates works only to continually increase his wealth, I point out that Gates (as virtually all people of enormous wealth do) gives away significant amounts of money. If financial greed was his only motivation for working, he could stop giving his money away and work less.

Clearly there is more to work than simply earning money. As the golfing example suggests, people will work to attain many ends including, but not limited to, the feelings of satisfaction that come from achieving challenging goals. When employment can provide these others goods, people will continue working even if they no longer need the income. Thus, the instrumental value of work involves many goods other than wages and benefits. Think about why people do the work required to run a marathon, to teach a child with learning disabilities, to care for a dying patient, to run their own business, to be a police officer.

What goods, other than wages and benefits, come from working? While we cannot hope to be exhaustive, we can offer a general categorization of some goods. First, work is a means to attain goods other than income. Many of these goods have value that cannot be priced and therefore cannot be achieved solely through the money earned by working. There are what we might call various *psychic* goods associated with work. These include feelings of personal satisfaction and self-worth, of achievement, self-esteem, happiness. Work also can be an expression of a person's deepest attitudes and character. Many work because, simply, that's the type of person they are; for many people, their character is made manifest through work. People are industrious, motivated, earnest, active, and creative. A creative and industrious person not working is as unlikely as a lethargic and lazy person enthusiastically heading off to work.

Work can also have social meaning for many people. With work comes social status, honor, respect, companionship, and camaraderie. Aristotle described humans as social beings, and work can be a major activity through which our social nature is expressed. Consider the many reasons why someone might choose to be a teacher rather than an accountant, or a social worker rather than work in sales. Sometimes work can be associated with an entire lifestyle such as work in farming and in the military.

A personal story illustrates one way in which work can have deep social meaning and value. My wife is the fourth generation of her family to own and operate a small business. She had been successful at a previous job in a large corporation. She seemed well poised to advance up the corporate ladder when her father reached retirement age and sought to sell the business. The business had been started by her great-grandfather and had been open for nearly one hundred years. Rather than allowing the business to close or be sold to a stranger, she chose to leave her corporate career and purchase the family business.

In terms of mere instrumental value, this work decision had many costs: a lower salary (alas), much longer hours, more headaches and stress, and greater responsibilities. But this work also provides other important values, not the least of which is the fact that she is carrying on a legacy begun by her great-grandfather. This is what we might mean by the "social value" that work can have. Bill Gates's dedication to the company he founded likewise can explain why he continues to work when he has no financial need to do so.

Finally, some work is more valuable and worthwhile to society than others. Many people choose to work as nurses, day-care providers, social workers, police, or military personnel because these are positions in which they can make an important contribution to their community. These are important jobs that any stable community must fill. For many people, this alone is reason enough to pursue such work. Other work, such as the performance of artists and musicians or work in crafts or agriculture, is valuable either in its own right or for the product that results. Much of this work is valuable not only for the product, but for the quality of the product.

For example, I have a friend who is a potter. His work is extraordinarily dirty (he works with wet clay all day) and sweaty (as he stokes a roaring fire within his kiln). The hours are very long and the pay very modest. Yet, he produces some of the most beautiful and exquisite pottery imaginable. He also produces it in an environmentally sensitive and sustainable way. His work has significant value because of what is produced and how it is produced. This work is a significant part of his identity. These values far transcend the income he receives from this work.

In a classical essay, Douglas McGregor defended a management theory (what he called Theory Y) that recognized the many diverse values attained through work. Among these, McGregor mentioned survival, security, acceptance by others, association with others, friendship, self-esteem, status, respect, creativity, and self-development.⁸

Perhaps this is a good point at which to reiterate an earlier distinction. Work can refer both to an *activity* performed with diligence and perseverance and it can refer to *employment*. While there are values involved in any diligent activity that we might call "work," the values described above are also attainable through, and sometimes only through, employment. But if this is so, if work can be so valuable, why, as Mike Royko asks, "do they have to pay us to do it?"

We might venture a preliminary answer. Some jobs can hold so much value that people would do them for little or no pay. Some jobs provide their holders with significant meaning and worth. Others can be made valuable depending upon their circumstances. Working conditions such as the structure of the job, salary and benefits, its privileges and responsibilities, job security, its institutional setting, and its social status can add to or detract from a job's value. But for many people, work is necessary to make a living, and because it is necessary, the possibility of attaining other values often gets lost in the pursuit of income.

So what might be the goal of an ethical workplace? If work is so important for so many reasons, should every person have a moral and legal right to a job? Is it possible to provide all workers with meaningful, worthwhile, and highly

valued jobs? If not, are there steps to be taken to make work more rather than less meaningful? Does business have a responsibility to provide employees with meaningful work, or is business's responsibility complete when it pays a fair wage for a fair day's work?

These questions take on added significance when we recognize three common aspects of the contemporary work scene. First, few workers have significant choices and alternatives open to them in the workplace. Given the significant instrumental value that work has as the means of making one's livelihood, few people are in the position where they put their job in jeopardy. This means that people may be put in situations where they must accept less than ideal working conditions.

Two further points concern what seem to be emerging trends in the contemporary economy. People today seem more likely to work many jobs over their lifetimes than they were in the past. Job mobility is more a fact of work-life today than it was for our parents and grandparents. Sometimes this is a matter of choice, but often it is the result of factors over which employees have no control. This suggests that at least some of work's values, income stability and self-esteem among others, may be at greater risk today than in times past. A second trend is the growth in what is sometimes called *contingent work*. More jobs today are temporary, part-time, or subcontracted out to third parties. In some cases this can be a value-added component to work, as when an individual is able to work part-time while also going to school or providing child care. But just as often this can mean that the values and benefits of work are more conditional and uncertain. Many of the social values of work, such as camaraderie and social status, can be lost or unavailable to part-time and temporary workers.

Before we turn to business's responsibilities in this regard, let us consider some major theories of work.

5.4 CONVENTIONAL VIEWS OF WORK

Journalist and social observer Studs Terkel's 1974 book *Working* chronicled the state of blue-collar work in America. The book opens with a statement that captures what we shall identify as the conventional view of work.

This book, being about work is, by its nature, about violence—to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is above all (or beneath all) about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us.⁹

Work is seen as something that must be endured. It is difficult, arduous, laborious. The very words *work* and *labor* carry this negative connotation in ordinary language. Certainly this conventional view accurately characterizes work for many people. The essence of this conventional view is that work is something to be avoided whenever possible and endured when we must.

We can distinguish two trends within this conventional viewpoint. One perspective, with roots traceable to classical Greek thought, holds that there are higher and more meaningful human activities than work. Work is to be avoided so that one can pursue these more valuable and refined goods. The good life for humans would be a life of contemplation and a life spent enjoying the higher pleasures of art, politics, and culture. Perhaps a view such as this was implicit in the assumptions of those social scientists studying leisure and affluence mentioned in the discussion case at the start of this chapter. Once workers attained sufficient affluence to fill all their needs, they would reduce the amount of time spent working so that they could pursue more valuable and refined cultural goods.

This *classical interpretation of work* conceives of humans as intellectual beings, yet work is physical. Humans are free beings, work is a necessity. Work thus involves a constant diminishing of human nature and human potential. In the classical world, work was left to slaves. Cultured and civilized people avoided work as undignified.

The Roman philosopher Plutarch portrays this classical view in the following quotation:

Gentlemen enjoy the contemplation of the sculptor's masterpieces, but he would never himself use hammer and chisel and get covered with sweat and dust.¹⁰

Twentieth-century philosopher Yves Simon echoes Plutarch's sentiments on the relative value of work:

The rise of the working class in modern history has led to the glorification of work and the reduction of virtually all human activity to a species of work, while leisure becomes identified with idleness . . . give work its due but recognize that true culture thrives on immanent activities of contemplation and joy that transcends both social utility and time.¹¹

Another twentieth-century philosopher, Hannah Arendt, opens her influential book, *The Human Condition*, with similar sentiments.

In the modern age . . . laborers are about to be freed from the fetters of labor, and this society no longer knows these higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which this freedom would deserve to be won.¹²

The second version of the conventional model is much more common in the contemporary world. What we'll call the *hedonistic interpretation* understands work as a necessary means for obtaining life's pleasures. One works so that one can buy those things that will make you happy. Work is the price we have to pay in order to get both the necessities of life and the many other things that make life enjoyable and pleasurable. Whereas the classical interpretation defends a very specific content for human happiness, the hedonistic interpretation allows individuals to choose whatever ends they desire. Happiness for the classical model is the enjoyment of various cultural activities. Happiness for the hedonistic model is simply getting whatever one wants. While the classical model would see the hedonistic version as disreputable, they both agree that the drudgery of work prevents humans from obtaining happiness.

The hedonistic model's emphasis on happiness as want-satisfaction makes this view quite compatible with the assumptions of neoclassical economics. Individuals are free to choose their own preferences and the goal of economic activity is to satisfy preferences. Individuals exchange their labor in the market as a means for obtaining satisfaction. Work, for the most part, is simply a means to obtain our ends. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that in a world greatly influenced by neoclassical economics, the most common view of work shares its assumption about human happiness. It is also perhaps not surprising that a workplace structured and administered according to the principles of neoclassical economics—a workplace in which employees work simply to earn wages and employers treat them simply as means to productive ends—is a workplace that gives rise to feelings of resentment and disaffection. From that perspective, work has no value in its own right; it is simply a necessary price that must be tolerated to achieve other ends.

5.5 THE HUMAN FULFILLMENT MODEL

The second approach we shall call the *human fulfillment* school. From this perspective, work is the primary activity through which people develop their full potential as human beings. In some ways, this is the opposite of the classical model. Both perspectives would agree that the good life involves the development and flourishing of the human potential. But while the classical model views work as hindering the development of human potential, the human fulfillment school views work as a primary means for this development.

Thus the philosophical roots of this school also lie with the classical Greek philosophers who argued that humans had a natural potential, or *telos*, and that the good life was a life spent developing or fulfilling that *telos*. This general approach is called a *teleological ethics*, and it is a tradition that was carried on through the great Christian philosophers of the medieval period. The contemporary slogan of the U.S. Army to "Be all that you can be" reflects the same ethical attitude. Humans have a potential that they don't always fulfill; the good life is a life in which this potential is actualized. The human fulfillment school believes that work can be the process through which this potential is fulfilled.

But what is this "potential" that can be fulfilled through work? Again, let us return to the distinction between work as any general activity requiring perseverance, diligence, and concentration (work as opposed to play) and work as employment. Let us also come at this question by asking what is lost if we do not work. First, let's consider what type of person we would become if we never engaged in activities requiring perseverance, diligence, and concentration. We can then turn to the question of what happens to individuals when they become unemployed.

Consider the student golfer example mentioned earlier. What happens to a person who plays at golf but never works to improve his game? While some people might continue to play and enjoy the game, this student admitted that he would get bored, frustrated and eventually lose interest. The golfer becomes apathetic, passive, lethargic, and the game of golf would lose its value. Generalizing

from this example, we might say that diligence, perseverance, and concentration improve whatever talents and abilities to which we apply them. Our intellectual skills are improved when we focus our attention, think through what is required for performing a task. Diligence, perseverance, concentration are character traits, what philosophers would call virtues, that contribute to the improvement of human well-being. You are improved as a person when you have the ability to approach tasks with such a temperament. Conversely, people who do not work at any task risk becoming lazy, careless, and apathetic. Developing good work habits contributes to a character that is capable, competent, effective, and skillful. Parents, for example, seek to instill such good work habits in children to provide them with important lifelong skills. One study by psychologists George and Caroline Valliant concluded that "the willingness and capacity to work in childhood is the most important forerunner—more important than native intelligence, social class, or family situation—of mental health."¹³

But what about work as employment? Certainly unemployment has costs far beyond the loss of income. The psychic costs of unemployment are well-documented. Loss of self-esteem and self-respect, stress, anxiety, depression, isolation, and apathy are common consequences. The social costs of unemployment are also high. Employment has largely disappeared from the poorest neighborhoods in most large cities. The results of chronic unemployment can literally destroy a community.¹⁴

Conversely, work can provide the worker with the opportunity for such psychological goods as high self-esteem and self-respect as well as both stable mental and physical health. Work can also provide workers with social goods such as friendships, companionship, a sense of belonging, and a sense of purpose.

The human fulfillment model suggests that these psychological and social benefits are more than merely subjective and personal preferences. These are not simply goods that an individual chooses to value. The character traits developed and the ends achieved through work are connected to living a fulfilled and meaningful human life. They are connected to attaining the human *telos*.

The human fulfillment model acknowledges that not every job contributes to the development of human potential. However, the proper kind of work and the right kind of workplace can contribute to this development. This model also claims that individuals and work exist in a reciprocal relationship. Individuals exercise control over their jobs, but jobs also influence and shape individuals. Thus, under this model, the challenge for business ethics is to articulate the type of work that can foster the full development of human potential.

Contrast this with the hedonistic model of work. From that perspective, work is simply a means to further human ends. Work's value is merely instrumental and a worker's guiding question is "What will this work do for me?" The human fulfillment model challenges us to ask further questions: "What will this work do to me? What kind of person will I become through this work?" Even work that does good things for me (by providing an income) may do bad things to me (e.g., by lowering my self-esteem, harming my mental and physical health, etc.).¹⁵

In developing this point, economist E. F. Schumacher details how work can do bad things to workers and hints at what the corresponding good work would be. Bad work is "mechanical, artificial, divorced from nature, utilizing only the smallest part of man's potential capabilities; it sentences the great majority of workers to spending their working lives in a way which contains no worthy challenge, no stimulus to self perfection, no chance of development, no element of Beauty, Truth, or Goodness. . . ."¹⁶

The idea that there exists a human potential (or *telos*, in the language of classical philosophy) that can be either drawn out or repressed by work has its roots in Karl Marx's concept of alienation. In general terms, alienation is the result of work that prevents the full development of human potential. In such situations, humans are separated, or alienated, from their true selves (their potential). Part of Marx's critique of capitalism was based on the claim that under capitalist systems of production, workers inevitably faced a life of alienation. Marx suggested that workers face several types of alienation that occur within capitalist systems: from the products of their work, from the creative process of work itself, and from their very essence as social creatures.¹⁷

In his early writings especially, Marx understands humans as social beings who both create and express themselves through their labor. Through work, humans create not just products, but also the very social world in which they live. Work is essentially a social activity and, as social beings, humans have the opportunity to express this humanity through work. Because these social structures also shape and influence human attitudes, beliefs, and values (what work does to people), work also serves to create our own character. According to Marx, in capitalist economic systems—particularly in the division of labor, assembly line production characteristic of industrial capitalism—workers are alienated from the products of their labor, from the activity of work, and from their fellow humans. Workers (or *human resources* in the contemporary phrase) and the products of their labor are treated as mere means to the end of profit. Workers are separated from what they produce, they lack control over both the products and the productive activity itself, and they exist as mere cogs in a machine.

A similar view of work was presented in 1981 by Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical Letter, *Laborem Exercens*.¹⁸ Integrating some themes found in Marx with more traditional Catholic theology, the Pope claims that "work is one of the characteristics that distinguish humans from the rest of creatures. . . . Only humans are capable of work, and only humans work." Citing the *Genesis* story in which humans are created "in the image and likeness of God" and in which humans are called forth "to subdue the earth," the Pope argues that work is an essential part of human nature. These Biblical passages suggest that humans are meant to be co-creators (made in the image of God the creator) in shaping the earth and using it to maintain their life on earth.¹⁹

Once again, this perspective emphasizes the fact that humans and their work exist in a reciprocal, dialectical relationship with each side influencing and shaping the other. Humans create work in order to attain their needs and wants; but work also shapes humans. In the words of commentator Gregory Baum, "It is through labor that people create their world, and it is through the same labor that

in a certain sense they also create themselves."²⁰ Humans "must transform a portion of nature through labor to have food and shelter. In order to improve the conditions of survival, people must invent a division of labor, a social organization, and a system of authority. Labor creates society." But in doing so, humans are creating the social and cultural world that socializes them, creates their consciousness, attitudes, beliefs, values, and interests. In this sense, through labor humans are creating themselves by determining what kind of person they become.²¹

In summary, then, what are the human potentials that work can help fulfill? From this brief discussion, we can mention four. Through work we exercise our freedom and autonomy in making choices and directing our lives. Work also provides the occasion for developing our talents and exercising our creativity. Through work, humans create their own society and culture and thereby create their own identities. Finally, work is an expression of our nature as social beings; it prevents us from falling into a solipsistic and egocentric life.²²

Philosopher Al Gini offers this summary of the human fulfillment model:

Descartes was wrong. It isn't *Cogito ergo sum*, but, rather, *Laboro ergo sum*. We need work, and as adults we find identity and are identified by the work we do. If this is true then we must be very careful about what we choose to do for a living, for what we do is what we'll become. To paraphrase the words of Winston Churchill—first we choose and shape our work, then it shapes us.²³

5.6 THE LIBERAL MODEL OF WORK

What we will call the *liberal* model of work can be thought of as occupying a middle ground between the conventional model and the human fulfillment school. Like the conventional model, liberals hold that individual workers should be free to choose the ends of their work. People choose to work for many reasons and may willingly accept undesirable jobs simply as a means to earn money. Liberals deny that there is some single human end that all work should serve. Nevertheless, like the human fulfillment school liberals recognize that humans can be significantly influenced by their work and argue that we should make ethical assessments of work on the basis of how work affects workers. Liberals part company with the fulfillment school when they specify the grounds on which that assessment is made. The human fulfillment school makes that judgment on the basis of some vision of what makes a good, meaningful human life. Liberals make that judgment in terms of how work affects a worker's ability to make free and autonomous decisions about their own life.

Philosopher Norman Bowie provides a good example of a liberal theory of work. Bowie explains his own Kantian theory of meaningful work as a middle ground between those who think the value of work is to be left to the whim of workers and those who defend an "objective normative definition" of meaningful work.²⁴

I have always believed that one of the moral obligations of the firm is to provide meaningful work for employees. However, just what constitutes meaningful work has been a contentious matter. Is "meaningful work" to be defined

as nothing more than what the employees say it is? Or would the term "meaningful work" be given an objective normative definition which would permit managers to provide it even if the employees do not agree? A standard problem with the [former] approach is that it is subjective and individualistic. . . . Why should management have a duty to provide each employee meaningful work as he or she defines it? On the other hand, a standard problem with the objective approach is that it has been difficult to find a justification for any objective normative definition that can be given.²⁵

Let us consider Bowie's arguments. If we conclude that the meaning and value of work is whatever the worker determines it to be, as at least the hedonistic version of the conventional model would hold, then we cannot say that workers have any right to, nor management any duty to provide, meaningful work. Such an open-ended conception of worker rights would render the concept meaningless by failing to distinguish rights from mere desires. It also would imply a range of management duties that would be impossible to fulfill.

Of course defenders of this hedonistic model, especially those sympathetic to the more libertarian versions of free markets, would conclude that this means only that workers have no right to meaningful work. Bowie's belief that business has a moral obligation to provide meaningful work is, from that perspective, simply mistaken. The meaning and value of work, like all the conditions of work, should be left to the free choices that emerge from individual bargaining between employee and employer.

Liberal approaches to work, such as Bowie's Kantian theory, reject this view as too impoverished an understanding of human freedom. Individuals may well choose to work tedious, difficult, depressing, low paying, even dangerous jobs. But if there are few alternatives available, we shouldn't honor this as a "free" choice. Bowie would argue that the more people are compelled to work, the greater the responsibility to ensure that workplace conditions are as humane as possible. In such cases, the very necessity of work obligates us to investigate what work does to workers. What kind of people are being created in the workplace?

Unlike the human fulfillment model, however, liberals do not believe that there is some substantive, objective norm to determine the kind of person everyone should be. Even if there were, Bowie asks, would managers be permitted—or required—to "create" such people even if employee do not agree? Should we design workplaces that force people to be creative, or sociable, or that force them to fully develop their talents and abilities? Who would decide such matters?

This conclusion mirrors the reluctance that liberal political philosophy has always had about concepts such as the human *telos* or common good. Liberal theories of justice argue that individual freedom is a fundamental and necessary element of social justice. Liberals have always rejected classical political theories that specify some common, specific, and particular way that all people should live. Even if we could specify what that life should be, it would seem that the only way to achieve it would be by forcing individuals to live lives other than the ones they choose. On the other hand, most liberals also reject the subjective and relativistic implication of more libertarian versions. It is not

good for humans to do just anything they want. Some ways of living are morally better than others.

Liberals resolve this tension by reference to such general characteristics and goods as autonomy, rationality, and physical and mental health. Sometimes called *primary goods*, these are goods that are necessary in order to achieve whatever other goods an individual chooses to pursue. Consistent with the assumptions of the conventional model, work may simply be valued as a means for attaining whatever ends an individual chooses. However, if in the process of work these primary goods are destroyed or undermined, individuals have little chance of attaining their other ends. Thus, the liberal model argues that individuals have certain rights in the workplace and that these rights function to protect certain central and primary goods.

What are these goods to be protected by worker rights? Philosopher Adina Schwartz defends a classical liberal answer when she argues that highly routinized jobs in which workers passively and blindly fill roles determined by others fail to respect the autonomy of individuals. Failing to recognize such jobs as unjust

... is fundamentally at odds with the widely held view that a just society respects all its members as autonomous agents. If we care about the free development of all members of society ... we must demand that no one be employed at the sorts of jobs that have just been described. We must also advocate a certain alternative to the current arrangement of industrial employment and must ask for government measures to effect this rearrangement.²⁶

5.7 BUSINESS'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR MEANINGFUL WORK

This brief overview of differing theories concerning the nature and value of work can now provide us with a helpful way to conceptualize the ethical responsibilities that business has to make work meaningful. The classical model would argue that, to the degree that work is necessary and physical, work cannot be made meaningful and therefore employers have little responsibility to make it so. To the degree that work can be intellectual, leisurely, and free, work can be meaningful; but it would be unlikely that employment and wage labor can ever attain these conditions.

The hedonistic approach argues that work is meaningful when it is used to attain the goals of the worker. Following Bowie's critique, however, it would be difficult to hold a business responsible for such an open-ended goal. Surely workers might desire many things that a business cannot—perhaps should not—provide. At best, the hedonistic theory would encourage employees and employers to bargain over workplace conditions, wages, and benefits. This contract model might provide workers with the best chance for attaining workplace happiness but, presumably, business's only responsibilities would be those freely accepted within the contract.

The boundary between the human fulfillment school and the liberal model offers more fruitful directions for thinking about the responsibility to provide

meaningful work. In effect, liberals argue that business has a range of responsibilities derived from such primary goods as autonomy, rationality, and physical and mental health. The range of employee rights and responsibilities that we will survey in chapters 6 and 7 is an admittedly liberal conception of employee rights and employer responsibilities. This list might include such rights as participation (voting), due process, healthy and safe working conditions, fair wages and benefits, training and education, and privacy. Such goods might be said to be primary in the sense that they are necessary for any realistic opportunity to exercise autonomous, rational, and free choice.

Remember that Bowie argues that anything more substantive than this minimal list might involve employers forcing employees to accept conditions that they choose not to. Bowie argues that employers cannot have the responsibility to make employees better people, particularly against the wishes of the employees themselves.

But now consider the example offered by Adina Schwartz. Imagine that workers preferred to work highly routinized, unchallenging, and boring jobs. Do employers have a responsibility to eliminate such jobs, even if there are some employees who would be willing to fill them? Two options are open for liberals at this point. They could argue that as long as no one is forcing employees to work such jobs, as long as they are free from external constraint, employers have no responsibility to eliminate such jobs. This answer would reduce the liberal position to a narrower libertarian understanding of freedom in the workplace. But it also would accept the ethical legitimacy of employment conditions that tend to frustrate the very fundamental values—autonomous and free choice—that liberals hold dear. Social conditions of routinized, unchallenging, boring jobs tend to suppress the human faculties of rational and autonomous choice. On the other hand, if liberals argue that employers do have a responsibility to eliminate such jobs, then they acknowledge that employee choice alone is not the final factor for determining what constitutes an ethical workplace. This is to acknowledge that the conditions that create an ethical workplace are those that tend to encourage and advance the human good, at least as understood in minimal terms of the ability to make reasoned and autonomous choices. This conclusion opens the door to a wider discussion of those conditions necessary or conducive to the good of employees. Such conditions can be identified as a liberal theory of employee rights and employer responsibilities. Chapter 6 considers several of these potential rights.

This chapter has examined various models for understanding the nature and value of work. These models provide a framework for evaluating business's responsibilities to employees, as well as the rights and responsibilities that employees owe to the businesses that provide jobs. The nature and value of work also has implications for what we, as citizens in a democratic society, can expect of both private business and government regulation of the workplace. Work provides individuals with the means for satisfying their basic needs and desires. Work can provide good things, or bad things, *for* us. But work can also do good things, or bad things, *to* us. How the workplace gets structured, how we understand the rights and responsibilities of both employers and employees,

will determine the ethical status of what work does both for, and to, us. In chapters 6 and 7 we will look in more detail at the ethical rights and responsibilities that exist in the workplace.

REFLECTIONS ON THE CHAPTER DISCUSSION CASE

It might seem unreasonable to draw any conclusions from the example of Pat Tillman. This is a very unusual case. After all, very few people ever become professional football players, and of those few only one quit to join the army. Nevertheless, this case does remind us that there can be more to one's career than money and fame. The case is also interesting for a little noticed aspect. Tillman turned down a higher-paying job with another business out of a felt loyalty to his present employer. While the decisions to join the army and accept a lower-paying job are understandable, it would be worth asking if they were reasonable. Why would a rational person do such things?

More generally, this case raises questions about great jobs and meaningful jobs. From all appearances, Tillman had a great job that he left for one he found more meaningful. These concepts are worth pursuing. What are some "great" jobs? Would being a star in the NFL be a great job? Can you list some other jobs you would consider great? Are there any similarities? What makes a job "great"? What are some jobs that you would describe as "meaningful"? Why might serving in the military be meaningful? What makes a job "meaningful"?

This is also a good opportunity to reflect on your own career choices. What job do you see yourself working in five years? In ten years? In forty years? Were there any overlaps between your list of great jobs, meaningful jobs, and jobs that you are likely to hold? If not, why not?²⁷

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Explain at least three different meanings of the word *work*. Do any of these meanings include some value component?
2. How would you distinguish a *job* from a *career* from a *calling*?
3. What are the two different trends within the conventional view of work?
4. How does the Greek philosophical notion of a *telos* relate to the human fulfillment theory of work?
5. How can work become meaningful under the liberal model of work?
6. How might a defender of the liberal model criticize the human fulfillment model of work?

ENDNOTES

¹This case was based on several sources. See Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Benjamin Hunnicutt, *Work Without End: Abandoning Shorter Hours for the Right to Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988);

Stanley Lebergott, *Pursuing Happiness: American Consumers in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and the classic David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1969).

²Mike Royko, "Silver Spoon Fits, Why Not Wear It?" *Chicago Tribune* (November 11, 1985), sec. 1, p. 3. Quoted in *It Comes with the Territory*, A.R. Gini and T. J. Sullivan, eds. (New York: Random House, 1989).

³Genesis, 1, 28; 2, 15; 3, 17-19.

⁴Aristotle, *Politics* 1256 a 30, 1253 b 25.

⁵An interesting and helpful overview essay on work is "Work: The Process and the Person" by Gini and Sullivan, chapter 1 of *It Comes with the Territory*, op. cit., pp. 1-36. For a more in-depth treatment of the ethical and philosophical issues concerning the nature and value of work, see Al Gini, *My Job, My Self: Work and the Creation of the Modern Individual* (New York: Routledge, 2000) and Joanne Ciulla, *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work* (New York: Times Books, 2000). These insightful books provide excellent resources for further thinking about work.

⁶For Rousseau, see especially *Emile*. For Marx, compare "Estranged Labor" in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, translated by Martin Milligan (New York: International Publishers, 1964), and "The German Ideology," edited and translated by Loyd Easten and Kurt Guddat, in *Writing of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

⁷*Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, by Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven Tipton (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 65-66.

⁸Douglas McGregor, "The Human Side of Enterprise," originally published in *The Management Review* 46, 11, 1957, reprinted in *Leadership and Motivation: Essays of Douglas McGregor* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966).

⁹Studs Terkel, *Working* (New York: Pantheon Book, 1974), p. xi.

¹⁰Plutarch, *Lives* (New York: Modern Library, 1932), p. 132.

¹¹Yves Simon, *Work Society, Culture*, edited by Vukan Kuic (New York: Fordham University Press, 1971), p. 78.

¹²Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 5.

¹³George E. Valliant and Caroline O. Valliant, "Natural History of Male Psychological Health: Work as a Predictor of Positive Mental Health," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 138, 1981, 433-440, as quoted in Robert Lane, *The Market Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 247.

¹⁴The downward spiral of unemployment, poverty, and crime characteristic of many cities is forcefully portrayed in William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1997).

¹⁵For two insightful discussions that rely on the distinction between what work does for and to individuals, see E. F. Schumacher, *Good Work* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980), and the American Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All* (Washington: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986).

¹⁶Schumacher, *Good Work*, p. 27.

¹⁷Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, edited with an introduction by Dirk J. Struik. Translated by Martin Milligan (New York: International Publishers, 1964).

¹⁸*Laborem exercens*, reprinted in Gregory Baum, *The Priority of Labor* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982). I rely on Baum's excellent and extensive interpretive commentary for much of this section.

¹⁹*Laborem exercens*, in Baum, pp. 95-102.

²⁰Baum, p. 65.