

**Whose Conception of the Good Life?  
On The Morality of Self-Realization Outside of Work**

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**Zuckerman Conference, April 2011**

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Generally, we tend to associate the notion of meaningful work with self-realization. In particular, self-realization through creative work is the essence of Marx's (early) views on communism, as Jon Elster has aptly argued in his vast analysis of Marx's oeuvre.<sup>1</sup> Praise of work, even if not meaningful, has also pervaded early Judeo-Christian and reformist Christian thinking. According to these views, work is valued as a way of morally elevating oneself in the eyes of God; either because sweat is necessary as atonement for original sin or because success at work is an index of divine salvation. Whichever the reasons for valuing work, philosophers, psychologists, and preachers have restlessly argued that work is a means to self-development, happiness, and the fulfillment of religious duty.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Elster, "Self-realization in Work and Politics: The Marxist Conception of the Good Life". *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 3, 2, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> For a complete description of these effects, see Adina Schwartz "Meaningful Work" *Ethics*, 1987. Schwartz mainly rests on psychological studies that confirm the thesis that work that is not challenging "causes individuals to be made less capable of and less interested in rationally framing, pursuing, and adjusting their own plans during the rest of their time" (p. 637). Hsieh "Justice in Production", *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 16, 2008, p. 78, provides more recent references confirming similar results.

A distinguishable, although by no means homogenous, strand of philosophical thought takes work in its most meaningful and satisfying forms as required by human nature. This approach was taken by early Marx as manifested in his early revolutionary writings<sup>3</sup>. Hegel's views on work, in turn, heavily influenced Marx's early thinking on the subject of work and human nature. For Hegel, work is not any kind of activity, it is a "doing," something that permeates human life and history. According to him, it is in work that humans differ from animals because via work humans move away from a purely instinctive stage. The activities creating civilization comprise work and imply the highest development of human potentialities.<sup>4</sup> When discussing work, the early Herbert Marcuse also takes this point of departure. Work facilitates the most elevated moral and intellectual development of the individual while at the same time being the means through which humankind evolves towards progress.<sup>5</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, lastly, interprets work as the central mode of human action and attributes to it liberating characteristics.<sup>6</sup>

Despite intramural differences, the foregoing thinkers conceive of work as a way of individual as well as collective *improvement*. In their view, work corroborates our human nature because it is the locus in which the typically human capacity of self-perfection is exercised. Unsurprisingly, these authors recognize that work may not be instantly gratifying but still significant in that it uplifts the individual above necessary, instinct-propelled labor. As Marx's illustrative analogy with the music composer shows, development and exercise of the highest

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1967. It should be noted that in Marx's treatment of work the division of perspectives is not so cut and dry.

<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 188-190, 399.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Marcuse, "On the Philosophical Foundation of the Concept of Labor in Economics", *Telos*, 16, 1973.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, "Materialism and Revolution", *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, in Annette Michelson (ed). London: Rider and Co., 1955.

human faculties “is almost bound to demand the most damned seriousness, the most intense exertion.”<sup>7</sup>

This article is an attempt to strip the notion of work of its moralized connotation. One is faced with a moralized notion of work when that concept is tightly associated with the highest forms of human existence. Besides challenging some ideas about human nature which are built into this conceptualization of work, this article will point to the many other ways through which personal development or self-growth can be reached.<sup>8</sup> ‘Self-growth’ and ‘personal development’ may sound like vacuous concepts because they seem to refer to too many things at once. One can develop morally, intellectually, emotionally. In this essay, I will focus on one particular aspect of self-development, namely, self-realization understood as the utmost development of human skills and talents. John Rawls’ “Aristotelian Principle” evokes this notion. The principle states that “other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities) and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity.”<sup>9</sup> This human tendency has an important philosophical implication. Assuming that humans, under circumstances one could imagine, will generally need to develop their skills in ways that show progressive improvement over time, it may be reasonable to attribute “universal” moral value to the opportunities that facilitate that development, all else equal. (All else is not equal if facilitating opportunities for self-realization must come at the

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<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*. Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1973, p. 611.

Marcuse refers to this sacrificial aspect as “the burdensome character of work” (lastcharakter), see his “On the Philosophical Foundation”.

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent analysis of many of the authors included in what I call “existentialist views of work”, see Axel Honeth, “Work and Instrumental Action” *New German Critique*, 25, 1982; and Herbert Applebaum, *The Concept of Work. Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, New York: Suny Press, 1982.

<sup>9</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971, p 426.

expense of more basic needs and rights, typically because the society is not economically fit to devote resources to all these goals simultaneously and satisfactorily).<sup>10</sup>

The essay is structured as follows:

In part One of the article I develop the argument that self-realization can be found outside of work, understanding the latter as remunerated activity. Defenses of ethical neutralism share this thesis. Richard Arneson, for example, claims that individual preferences for self-fulfillment outside of work should be seen as valuable as individual preferences for self-realization on the job. His position attacks perfectionist stances that privilege (a desire for) the activity of work over other types of human pursuits and desires. Arneson argues that the ideal of liberal autonomy implies that philosophy should not consider certain (non-harmful) preferences as less worthy simply because they do not involve work and its benefits.<sup>11</sup> Although my views are compatible with the foregoing view, my case for decoupling self-realization from work hinges on a different line of reasoning. I wish to highlight how constraining work can be, even if meaningful, because of its non-voluntary nature. All contemporary societies are structured around work. Although people may enjoy their work, and achieve self-fulfillment and status, they work to survive. Few human beings live in the proverbial Garden of Eden. It is not unreasonable to think that the limitations imposed by the necessity to work may obliterate the chances of finding self-realization in work.

In part Two of the paper I claim that self-realization is not necessarily a condition of “the good life.” In so doing, I will focus on Marx’s work on work. In particular, I will

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<sup>10</sup> At this point, the question of how to weigh basic needs against self-realization needs becomes relevant. However, for reasons of space, I cannot engage in it here. For a more complete treatment of the issue of ethical rankings of needs, see my *Self-Realization and Justice: A Liberal Perfectionist Defense of Freedom from Employment*, New York: Routledge, forthcoming, article 3. Briefly, the main argument made is that the satisfaction of self-realization needs is lexicographically posterior to the satisfaction of basic physiological needs. However, self-realization needs should enjoy moral primacy over mere preferences and desires.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Arneson, “Is Work Special? Justice and the Distribution of Employment.” *The American Political Science Review*, 84, 4, 1990.

concentrate on three Marxian assumptions: First, there is the empirical claim that for most people – under circumstances we can imagine—work is more conducive to self-realization than non-work activities. Second, there is the empirical claim that humans, invariably, experience the *need* to achieve self-realization and the way to do this is via work. Third, there is the normative claim that self-realization is constitutive of the good life. Although I share many of the Marxian emancipatory objectives hereby mentioned, I will point to what I believe is a mistaken perception of the role of self-realization in morality; as reflected by Marx’s views as well as by contemporary analyses of his conceptualization of self-realization.

### **1. Self-realization Outside of Employment**

One important explanation for the central role of employment in our society is that work is considered crucial for the community’s overall functioning. Work has always been regarded both as a means of personal subsistence and as the individual worker’s contribution to the creation of societal wealth. By doing our bit, we contribute to society’s betterment besides our own.<sup>12</sup>

From a purely individualist perspective, work has also been traditionally regarded as a source of psychological stability. Scholars as diverse as Pierre Bourdieu and Jon Elster have argued that work constitutes a framework for daily behavior because it imposes discipline and regularity. In the absence of regular employment, the argument goes, a person lacks not only a place to work and a regular income, but also coherent organization of present time – that is, a

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<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Becker, “The Obligation to Work” *Ethics*, 91, 1980; Stuart White, *The Civic Minimum: On the Rights and Obligations of Economic Citizenship*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; AB Atkinson, “The Case for a Participation Income”, *The Political Quarterly*, 67, 1996 ; Norman Care, “Career Choice”, *Ethics*, 94, 1984.

system of concrete expectations and goals. Regular employment, it is thought, provides the anchor for the spatial and temporal aspects of daily life.<sup>13</sup>

It has been argued that understanding work in purely economic terms, i.e., as remunerated activity, is oblivious to the many other (rich) dimensions that the concept can take.<sup>14</sup> Oftentimes, a definition of work based on economic gain is contrasted with a psychological definition centered on the attitudes that the worker entertains towards her work. This understanding does not look at financial reward but at the kind of activity implied by the type of work in question, i.e., meaningful, routine-like, creative, degrading, or intellectually demanding. The attitudinal approach to work centrally looks at the person's attitude towards employment. It is interested in examining what type of cognitive and emotional response the work elicits, i.e., satisfaction, alienation, frustration, sense of challenge.<sup>15</sup> This approach has the advantage of identifying social conditions that prompt negative reactions towards work as well as conditions that prompt (or would) prompt positive reactions toward it (making work meaningful in the eyes of the individual).

According to motivation psychologists, it is intrinsic motivation --motivation independent of any external reward but solely stirred by enjoyment of the activity in itself-- which renders an activity meaningful for the subject.<sup>16</sup> Intrinsic motivation can coexist with extrinsic motivation. High pay and prestige are surely clear sources of job satisfaction. However, the crux of

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<sup>13</sup> Jon Elster "Is There (or Should There Be) a Right to Work?" in Amy Guttmann (ed) *Democracy and the Welfare State*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production", in Randal Johnson, (ed) *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*. New York: MacMillan, 1916, p.206.

<sup>15</sup> For a clear example of this approach see Gregory Pence "Towards a Theory of Work" in Kory Schaff (ed) *Philosophy and the Problems of Work*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001. This attitudinal treatment of work is common to all theorists of meaningful work in varied but similar ways.

<sup>16</sup> Jack Nelson and David Walker "Pleasure and the Intrinsically Desired", *Analysis*, 35, 1975; Alan Waterman "When Effort is Enjoyed: Two Studies of Intrinsic Motivation for Personally Salient Activities" *Motivation and Emotion*, 29, 2005.

contemporary theories of meaningful work is that intrinsic motivation should be preponderant over extrinsic motivation if we care about true and deep life satisfaction.<sup>17</sup>

In my treatment of work and society, I wish to argue that conditions other than the nature of the job are involved in determining how limiting work can be for the individual. Employment may be limiting independently of whether it is intrinsically enjoyable. People may work in a way that is challenging and profoundly satisfying, but they may still be limited by the necessity to make a living through work. For the majority of people, concern for securing survival takes away from one important aspect of human development, usually overlooked by advocates of meaningful work, namely, freedom from compulsion. This compulsion is not akin to direct interference. Instead, it is based on a subtler coactive dynamic motored by avoidance of unbearable costs (the material costs of being out of work).

This coactive dynamic is also psychological. Employment to secure survival prompts a series of behavioral adjustments necessary to minimize risk of failure in the “survival race.” The “employment game” is no example of biological evolution, but it shares with the latter one characteristic: failure to live up to prevalent conditions risks extinction. In a society centered on employment as a guarantor of personal identity, status, and income, those outside of the orbit of work become social pariahs devoid of self-respect, social esteem, and without the means to a decent livelihood. Nietzsche describes the psychological adaptation that survival conditional on employment fosters: “Living in a constant chase after gain compels people to expend their spirit to the point of exhaustion in continual pretence and overreaching and anticipating others [...]. The anxieties and behavioral adjustments that being a participant in the employment world, either as an employee or as an employer, causes are the most obvious source of mental fatigue.

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<sup>17</sup> See Pence, “Towards a Theory of Work”; Schwartz, “Meaningful Work”; Care, “Career Choice”, Russell Muirhead, *Just Work*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.

What the fear of dismissal is to the employee, the fear of bankruptcy is to the employer [...]. Some, it is true, are big enough to be above this fear, but to reach a great position of this kind they have generally have to pass through years of strenuous struggle, during which they had to be actively aware of events in all parts of the world and constantly foiling the machinations of their competitors.”<sup>18</sup> One could agree with Fromm that in societies driven by the “*sell (your services or product) or perish*” logic, each person puts himself or herself for sale, metaphorically speaking. To the extent that their economic survival hinges on their success in the competitive market, they could be said to abide by the following slogan: “I am as you desire me.”<sup>19</sup>

Elegant theories of meaningful employment have been developed in utter abstraction from the fact that society is structured in such a way that people invariably have to seek full-time employment to secure a livelihood.<sup>20</sup> Has any of the meaningful work theorists stopped to think that the mere necessity to work may limit the freedom to indulge in callings and intrinsically desired activities? For one thing, work in society exists in response to the needs and demands of the community, and it is far from clear that most of those demands will be for intrinsically valuable activity. Bertrand Russell reminds us of this structural aspect of social life when he says that “[t]he individual, in our society, works for profit; but the social purpose of his work lies in the consumption of what he produces. It is this *divorce* between the individual and the *social purpose* of production that makes it so difficult for men to think clearly in a world in which profit-making is the incentive to industry” [emphasis added].<sup>21</sup> Individual reasons for working --

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.p.59. Russell adds that “the result of all this is that when sound success comes [if at all], a man is already a nervous wreck, so accustomed to anxiety that he cannot shake off the habit of it when the need for it is past”.

<sup>19</sup> Erich Fromm. *Man for Himself*. New York: Rinehart, 1947.

<sup>20</sup> Care’s, “Career Choice” and Pence’s “Towards a Theory of Work” are examples of this endeavor.

<sup>21</sup> Bertrand Russell, *In Praise of Idleness*. London: Routledge [1935] 1994, p.22.

either monetary or psychological -- are not the reasons why society demands such work.<sup>22</sup> Work exists, in general, because there is demand for it. It is highly unlikely that social needs will be coextensive with all the high-order personal needs of the worker.<sup>23</sup> People could have jobs which are intrinsically meaningful only if society provided, artificially, the opportunity to get employed in this way for everybody. But is this overall desirable? At this point we cannot avoid mentioning the insurmountable practical difficulties of providing the settings and strictures necessary for each meaningful job to exist. In light of this fact, isn't it more sensible to think that many meaningful activities may have to be left for outside of the job? (although many others will perfectly exist within it). And if this is the case, there is no reason to despair. There are ways in which society can organize itself to facilitate this new scenario. If we relax the necessity to work via citizenship grants, for example, the freedom to engage in intrinsically enjoyable pursuits will be much greater for the individual.<sup>24</sup>

Welfare and autonomy are two central goods associated with self-realization, as Elster has aptly argued.<sup>25</sup> It is not unreasonable to think, however, that these goods can be achieved outside of the sphere of employment. What the literature on leisure studies has come to call "Serious Leisure" is a locus of welfare and autonomy. Serious leisure is understood to be "the systematic pursuit of a core activity, outside the job, that is highly substantial, interesting, and

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<sup>22</sup>There are exceptions to this logic such as policies destined to stimulate employment, which do not necessarily respond to any pre-existing needs for certain activities, but rather, to the need for creating work as a source of livelihood in times of unemployment and economic recession.

<sup>23</sup> It is easier to match material and sociality needs with society's needs, but it is much more difficult to match self-realization needs to what society needs overall, since intrinsic motivation is not necessarily attached to socially useful functions and activities. Many strands of Utopian thinking ignore this fact (most notable, Fourier),

<sup>24</sup> Discussion on the shape and form of citizenship grants is abundant in the egalitarian literature on justice. Examples of policy proposals that could decouple -- to different extents--income from employment are the Basic Income and the Participation Income. The former is proposed as a universal, unconditional grant based on citizenship status (or residency). The latter is proposed as a universal, conditional grant (some sort of socially useful work is expected from the beneficiary). See Phillippe Van Parijs, *Real Freedom for All. What (if Anything) Can Justify Capitalism?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; and A.B Atkinson, "The Case for a Participation Income." *The Political Quarterly*, 67, 1, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Elster, "Self-Realization in Work and Politics..."

fulfilling and where, in the typical case, participants find a career in acquiring and expressing a combination of their special skills.” Elster could respond that in serious leisure, self-discipline must play a much larger role than in employment. Employment is undertaken out of a necessity, so, it is much more difficult to abandon it because we get tired of it. Additionally, the strictures that employment imposes are usually much harder to escape since they regulate great part of our daily hours. In simple words, because work is compulsory in a way that leisure is not, the individual is much more protected against weakness of will or plain laziness when working than when trying to excel at some pursuit outside of the job sphere. Self-discipline is needed in leisure but not so much in work. There, fear of deprivation keeps weakness of will and laziness at bay, if only partially. There is some truth to this conclusion, but it is not to overshadow the fact that the individual may commit herself to an activity in many ways, for example, by paying in advance to enjoy access to it, by linking parts of her reputation to it, or simply because it is pleasurable and free of obligatoriness. However paradoxical, psychology shows that the absence of high-performance expectations – like those coming from a boss or a teacher-- can actually foster motivation to engage in an activity that lends itself to some sort of excellence.<sup>26</sup> Under the right conditions, people have been shown to develop an interest in undertaking pursuits that are inherently challenging and that liberate them from boredom or routine.

A wealth of literature on Leisure Studies is dedicated to examining the ways in which the population can be educated into enjoying and understanding meaningful forms of leisure, by which it is usually meant activities that require more seriousness, and have more intrinsic value,

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<sup>26</sup> Nelson and Walker “Pleasure and the Intrinsically Desired”, Waterman “When Effort is Enjoyed: Two Studies of Intrinsic Motivation for Personally Salient Activities”

than mere consumption and mass entertainment.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, active public action devoted to making people familiar with art, culture, and other (not necessarily intellectual) valuable pursuits may in all likelihood increase the possibility that citizens will be able to use their time smartly, in detriment of vacuous idleness.

Aristotle has much to say on the question of habituation as a mechanism to incentivize excellence.<sup>28</sup> Of course, we do not have to adhere to Aristotle's intellectualist view of excellence, nor do we have to accept his exclusionary conception of society--which derives from his hierarchical understanding of human nature. By noting the appeal of Aristotle's views on habit as a promoter of virtue, we neither have to agree with his ideal of a tightly regulated society, that is, a society ruled by the most specific and pervasive laws aiming at shaping the social mores and costumes of the citizens. However, we can take from him the idea that social institutions may have the power to foster, to some extent, certain cherished attitudes and behaviors. Education, to take one simple example, fulfills this function in liberal democratic societies today (or it is supposed to). At a minimum, public education aims at instilling in citizens a sense of civism necessary for the ideological support of democratic life. Accepting that human motivation can be encouraged and propitiated constitutes a more realistic view than simply assuming that human beings will inevitably act in accordance with the precepts of a moral position, which seems unwarranted, many times.

Aristotle offers this touch of realism, despite his otherwise unrealistic intellectualism. He claims that a virtue (or a desired trait) can be fostered by exercising the qualities that lead to it. In other words, habit leads to the acquisition of the desired feature of character. Aristotle says:

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<sup>27</sup> The literature is immense, as reflected in sources such as the *Journal of Leisure Studies*, and *Leisure*, as well as in a wealth of Sociology and Social Psychology journals. A seminal piece in this literature is Robert Stebbins, "Serious Leisure: A Conceptual Statement", *Pacific Sociological Review*, 25, 1982.

<sup>28</sup> See his Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, Book II, 1 an 2.

“[v]irtues ... we acquire, just as we acquire crafts, by having first activated them. For we learn a craft by producing the same product that we must produce when we have learned it; we become builders, for instance, by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions.”<sup>29</sup> In the backdrop of the foregoing assumption, one could argue that the human motivation to use one’s talents meaningfully (instead of wasting one’s life away in front of the TV, for instance) could be incentivized by placing individuals in the right type of social and educational environment. Education and wide-spread social initiatives that offer citizens the actual opportunity to put those aptitudes to practice could “habituate” them into cherishing the exercise of valuable skills and talents. This is not as simple as it sounds, but it is a beginning.

The importance of education in instilling a capacity to enjoy meaningful leisure is highlighted by Bertrand Russell: “The wise use of leisure, it must be conceded, is a product of civilization and education. A man who has worked long hours all his life will become bored if he becomes suddenly idle. But without a considerable amount of leisure a man is cut off from many of the best things. There is no longer any reason why the bulk of the population should suffer this deprivation; only a foolish asceticism, usually vicarious, makes us continue to insist on work in excessive quantities now that the need no longer exists.”<sup>30</sup>

Russell calls attention to a fascinating phenomenon here, namely, endogenous preference formation. It is reasonable to think that people’s lack of desire to experience meaningful leisure may be explained by the lack of past experiences involving the enjoyment of this good. It remains to be seen whether the availability of leisure would cause some to desire it after

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<sup>29</sup> p. 19

<sup>30</sup> Bertrand Russell, *In Praise of Idleness*. London: Routledge, [1936] 1994, p.18.

perceiving it as a realistic option. Russell appears to think that the real possibility of meaningful leisure will have a lasting effect on people's preferences. He says: "[t]he pleasures of urban populations have become mainly passive: seeing cinemas, watching football matches, listening to the radio, and so on. This results from the fact that their active energies are fully taken up with work; if they had more leisure, they would again enjoy pleasures in which they took an active part."<sup>31</sup> He later proceeds to say that in a society where working hours were reduced to four per day, "[t]he work exacted [would] be enough to make leisure delightful, but not enough to produce exhaustion. Since men will not be tired in their spare time, they will not demand only such amusements as are passive and vapid."<sup>32</sup> Russell's claims echo an established piece of knowledge in the leisure studies literature, namely, that the type of work one spends most of the day performing directly determines the type of leisure that one is capable of finding enjoyable.<sup>33</sup> Human nature is malleable (within limits) with respect to habit, which means that people, in principle, can be educated into making intelligent use of their free time.

Philosophically speaking, however, it has to be admitted that it is possible that people will prefer idleness to self-realization, even after education in favor of a preference for the latter. But there is nothing normatively threatening about this possibility. Those people will not be aiming at self-realization on the job either, unless one can say that self-realization should be forced, for example, by way of a compulsory public program of meaningful employment. But this scenario contradicts the autonomy ingredient to self-realization that Elster finds so fundamental, namely the requisite that only the individual is to decide if she will, and in which particular way,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.23

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.24

<sup>33</sup> Many studies confirm this, as cited in Hillel Ruskin (ed), *Leisure*. Ne Jersey: Associated University Press, 1984.

exercise her aptitudes and talents in ways that tend to eventuate in high-quality performances (if successful).

## **2. The Existentialist View of Work**

In this section I will describe more fully the view that associates work with self-realization. This position is to be contrasted with a formalistic view of work as remunerated activity. Provided the conditions for meaningful work are present, work can never constitute a constraint, under the existentialist view, since it is part of our human constitution to desire and perform it.<sup>34</sup> According to the existentialist view, work is a process of human improvement via the development and deployment of our distinctively human skills and capacities.

Karl Marx, one paradigmatic exponent of the existentialist view, understood self-realization as “the full and free actualization and externalization of the powers and the abilities of the individual.”<sup>35</sup> When we say that an individual fully realizes herself we might mean that she brings to actuality *all* the powers and abilities that she possesses. However, this understanding is idyllic because it overlooks the economies of scale that characterize self-realization.<sup>36</sup> It is more realistic to conceive of self-realization as the improvement of one given capacity, or set thereof, to its utmost level. Marx was too unrealistic because he thought that individuals could excel at too many endeavors simultaneously. The common saying “Jack of all trades and master of none” certainly ringed hollow to him.

The concept of self-realization is based on the ideal of excellence. Only activities that can be carried out more or less well are subject to being evaluated through the spectacles of excellence. Talking with friends or going shopping, for example, are not activities that can be

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<sup>34</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, p. 135-7.

<sup>35</sup> Jon Elster, “Self-realization in Work and Politics...” p.101.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

evaluated according to how well or badly they are performed; they are simply performed. Playing the guitar, writing a novel, and solving math problems are all instances in which the deployment of a skill can be evaluated according to some performance standard. The concept of self-realization is excellence-based because it implies that only those activities that may be performed well or badly by the individual are conducive to it.<sup>37</sup> Of course, a person can be indifferent towards her ineptitudes. It does not follow from the fact that the individual cannot perform a certain activity well that she will experience a lack of self-realization. She has to care about that activity in the first place. By the same token, someone with a capacity to perform well at something may find self-realization through such capacity difficult to obtain if she does not identify with her talent (this is a possibility clearly overlooked by theorists of meaningful work).

However perfectible a given skill is, there is an area of evaluation in which performance is sufficiently high so as to allow us to say that the individual is aiming for, or achieving, excellence while engaging in an activity. Additionally, the activity should not be so difficult as to produce frustration despite effort. This suggests that the *point of excellence*, that is to say, the performance level at which the agent reaches, or aims at reaching, self-realization may vary from individual to individual.<sup>38</sup>

The existentialist view of work makes three different assumptions related to the concept of self-realization that should be disentangled. First, there is the empirical claim that for most people – under circumstances we can imagine—work is more conducive to self-realization than

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> There should be a “threshold-point” of excellence, however, which draws a line between bad performance and minimally good performance from a non-agent centered perspective, for any objective evaluation to be possible, eventually.

non-work activities. Second, there is the empirical claim that humans, invariably, experience the *need* to achieve self-realization and the way to do this is via work. Third, there is the normative claim that self-realization is constitutive of the good life. In Marx, we can find traces of each one of these assumptions. For the sake of argument, I will concentrate on him as the paradigmatic exponent of the existentialist view of work.

Regarding the claim that humans need to experience self-realization through work, Marx writes: “[in unalienated labor] I have the direct enjoyment both of being conscious of having satisfied a human need by my work, that is, of having objectified man’s essential nature, and of having thus created an object corresponding to the need of another’s man essential nature”.<sup>39</sup> By resorting to the idea that man’s *essential nature* is fulfilled by work, Marx assumes that humans have the unavoidable necessity to engage in it. Since work, according to Marx, is conducive to self-realization, it follows that it is in our human nature to experience the need to realize ourselves.

That Marx thought work was invariably conducive to self-realization is clear when he says that via work the individual engages in “the absolute working out of his creative potentialities”<sup>40</sup> and that by working, the individual propitiates “the full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so called nature as well as humanity’s own nature.”<sup>41</sup>

For Marx’s understanding of work to be intelligible, it must rest on a divide between instances in which human nature is enhanced, on the one hand; and instances in which human nature is devalued, on the other, because it is not empirically plausible that all work is conducive to self-improvement. The latter type of instances have been referred to by this tradition as

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<sup>39</sup> Karl Marx, “Comments on James Mill” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, pp. 227-28.

<sup>40</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973, p.448.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p.488.

“labor,” namely, work pursuant to covering the basic necessities of life. Marx conceives of the distinction between labor and work as implying a distinction between unfreedom and free self-realization. He says: “the realm of freedom, in fact, first begins where labour that is determined by need and external expediency ceases [...]. Beyond it begins human development of powers, which counts as its own end, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can flourish only upon that realm of necessity as its basis.”<sup>42</sup> Marx understands work broadly, as those activities that will bring the development of human powers and will therefore make the individual truly free. In the face of this understanding, there are grounds to believe that at the center of Marxism is a specific conception of the good life as one of active self-realization. This means that a life of self-realization is considered morally superior to other types of lives. This superiority can be understood in terms of the welfare that self-realization brings about (gratification derived from an achievement) and in terms of the autonomy that it signifies for the individual, that is, the capacity to live according to her own criteria of value.<sup>43</sup>

In the following sub-sections I will challenge each one of the three assumptions about self-realization and work associated with the existentialist view. I will argue that the three dicta are short of philosophical as well as psychological validity.

### **2.1. Work as Conducive to Self-Realization**

Understanding work as activities that bring about self-realization leaves no room for scenarios that do not fit the definition of labor but neither fit the Marxian definition of work. In light of this fact, when challenging the over-inclusiveness of the existentialist understanding of

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<sup>42</sup> Marx, *Capital III*, p.959.

<sup>43</sup> Elster, “Self- Realization and the Marxist Conception of the Good Life”.

work, one is *ipso-facto* challenging assumption number One, namely, that work invariably brings about self-realization. Marx's reliance on this assumption is due to his conflating of two distinct ideas, I claim. The first one is the idea that work should be made conducive to self-realization. The second idea is the belief that work invariably brings about self-realization. The former is a desideratum while the latter is (supposed to be) a factual statement. Because of this confusion, Marx ignores analytical work-related categories that render the analysis of self-realization less simplistic than he made it appear. Let me elaborate

Most of the activities we ordinarily think of as work do not include tasks conducive to self-realization, but they neither imply activities motivated by sheer necessity. The Marxian dichotomy between "work" and "labor" does not make room for activities that are not total drudgery but neither total bliss. In other words, work can be non-conducive to self-realization but still quite bearable. I think it is this analytical category that Marx did not see. He says that work is not mere amusement, and the example of the composer is a perfect illustration: His work is highly conducive to self-realization but it is hard enough as to prevent enjoyment, most of the time.<sup>44</sup> But what about non drudgery-work that is not conducive to self-realization but which still demands some degree of effort that precludes amusement? This kind of activity escaped Marx's typology. To bring the point home, let us analyze an example.

In academia, one is normally required to engage in teaching activities that will generally take away time from original, self-designed research projects. However, when teaching, one can be really worried about being a good, clear, and organized lecturer. This objective may produce anxiety and worry due to the desire to perform well. In being a good teacher, it is important that one is capable of conveying knowledge clearly and engagingly. Some people may not fully

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<sup>44</sup> *Capital III*, p.123.

enjoy this challenge. Those people may also know that a life devoted to preparing lectures in detriment of their own research will not offer them the opportunity to use their talents and skills in the most meaningful and original sorts of ways. Yet, the fact that they are not experiencing self-realization when teaching does not imply they are not exerting serious effort, which is qualitatively different from the effort exerted in burdensome, routine-like, degrading work.

Free from the obligations that we usually associate with job holding, people might find self-fulfillment outside the sphere of work even if they have a quite bearable type of job. What is more, employment may be an instrument for achieving self-realization in a realm other than the job. Some people may work primarily to sustain their leisure interests. Predilection for this approach to life is evoked in Aristotle's celebrated phrase "the end of labor is to gain leisure."<sup>45</sup> According to an Aristotle-inspired view of leisure, non-work related activities are not necessarily free from structure and discipline, but they are free from obligatoriness because they are not a means to securing survival. According to this view, leisure is freedom from the necessity of being occupied to make a living.<sup>46</sup> In this sense, it is a matter of complete, unqualified free choice. Thus, one could think that the defining components of Aristotelian leisure are "perceived freedom" and "intrinsic motivation" (it is engaged in for its own sake not for the sake of ulterior goals such as money).<sup>47</sup> Leisure, according to this approach, can be described as "getting away from everyday trivialities to something that matters for the person."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ethics, p. 264 (section 1177a22).

<sup>46</sup> Sebastian De Grazia, *Of Time, Work and Leisure*. New York: Anchor Books, 1972, p.14.

<sup>47</sup> John Neulinger: "Leisure: A State of Mind that All Desire but Few Achieve" in Hillel Ruskin (ed), *Leisure*. Jersey City: Associated University Press, 1984.

<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Telfer, "Leisure" in John Gemmill Evans (ed), *Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Problems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 163.

Leisure may involve activities that require great effort, concentration, gratification delays, and many other things that we usually associate with time spent on the job.<sup>49</sup>

Aristotle, whose thought inspires contemporary formulations of serious leisure, was a philosopher of happiness. For him, as well as for many others of his time, happiness was the end of life. But happiness for Aristotle is not amusement and entertainment, and is not to be measured in terms of utility or welfare. A happy man, for Aristotle and Seneca<sup>50</sup> – the two great theoreticians of leisure in early and later Antiquity-- is a man that cultivates his mind and political virtues. This view of leisure is too restrictive, however. Some people may find true meaning in life by surfing, climbing mountains, or setting world records in scuba diving. Allusion to the cultivation of human powers, not necessarily those of the intellect and rhetorical art, characterizes contemporary visions of serious leisure, as already mentioned supra. I think this revision should be welcomed in the name of modern freedom and diversity.

Aristotle's and Seneca's conception of leisure as non-obligatory, non-useful, intrinsically desired activity is similar to Marx's later turn towards a view incompatible with the existentialist definition of work. Unlike Marx' thought on work up to the *Grundrisse*, reaching its height in the *German Ideology*, later Marx's thinking evolved towards the idea that human freedom has as its fundamental premise the shortening of the working day. With the growth and expansion of technology, he believed, capitalism in spite of itself would create disposable time; reducing work time to a minimum and thus giving everyone free time for true self-development.<sup>51</sup> Marx went even further in generalizing that freedom is beyond the realm of material production. He said that "[t]he realm of freedom really begins only when labour

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<sup>49</sup> Sociologist Robert Stebbins' formulation of "Serious Leisure" fits this image perfectly. See his "Serious Leisure: A Conceptual Statement" *Pacific Sociological Review*, 25, 1982.

<sup>50</sup> Seneca, *De`Otio*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>51</sup> See Karl Marx, *Capital I*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976, part 3, article X.

determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper. Just as the savage must wrestle with nature to satisfy his needs, to maintain and reproduce his life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all forms of society and under all possible modes of production.”<sup>52</sup> It is evident that early Marx, up to the *Grundrisse*, espouses a glorification of work as different from labor, which is virtually non-existent in his later writings (with the exception of the *Critique of The Gotha Program*) where the emphasis lies on time off work as the source of real freedom for the individual.<sup>53</sup> In the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx affirms that “work is not only a means to life but itself has become the prime want of life.”<sup>54</sup> This fascination with the high nature of non-denigrating work fades in all his other late works, however.

The main idea that underlies the existentialist view of work is that time can only be spent working in pursuit of excellence or wasting our human capacities to do so, hence, going in detriment of our very humanness. But this is a very demanding and unrealistic vision of how human beings distribute their time and put their skills and inclinations to use. It goes implicit in the existentialist vision of work that people will enjoy working because they relish developing the capacities through which they can create and produce.<sup>55</sup> The joy derived from work is independent of the associated benefits or byproducts of working. However, it is conceivable that people, especially in current times, do see in work advantages external to the final result of

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<sup>52</sup> Marx, *Capital III*, p. 958-9. See also *Grundrisse*, p. 704-6.

<sup>53</sup> Diemut Bubeck, *Care, Gender and Justice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 37. Bubeck offers an interesting interpretation of the tension between earlier and later Marx’s position regarding work. According to Bubeck, the turning point in Marx’s thought arises with his immersion into political economy. This introduces for him the distinction between necessary labor time and time for free all round development (corresponding to necessary labor and surplus labor respectively). This tension has not always been recognized in the literature.

<sup>54</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, in David McLellan (ed), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 21.

<sup>55</sup> Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 82-5. Elster argues that Marx’s productivist ethos is narrow in that it excludes activities which do not produce a final durable material outcome but are still self-realization conducive (i.e, performative arts). Note that Marx did not see this and relied on a merely ‘tangibilist’ view of self-realization. This is clear from his emphasis, along his oeuvre, on the value of production and the transformation of nature.

work.<sup>56</sup> These advantages can be summarized as follows: 1) provision of income, 2) regulation of life activity, and more specifically, regulation of daily activity, 3) identification with the work-role, that is, identity-creation; 4) social interaction, and 4) provision of social status and prestige. It is simplistic to assume, as the existentialist view of work appears to do, that people are naturally drawn to work regardless of the side-effects of working. Even for intrinsically motivated people, the external benefits of work can be a *sine qua-non* condition for engaging in it.

One could surely argue that my analysis is incorrect since under a communist society – the type of ideal society Marx envisioned-- people’s preferences regarding the side-benefits of work would be different in the absence of capitalistic motivations. Indeed, there is reason to believe that the desire for income and social recognition would be lessened in a society of strong communitarian sentiments. However, it is not so clear that other side benefits of work – such as social interaction and a feeling of personal usefulness, to name a few -- will disappear under communism. It remains an empirical question to determine whether intrinsic motivation at work cannot be overshadowed, or enhanced, by extrinsic motivation.

## **2.2. Self-Realization as a Human Need**

It is now time to explore a second assumption underpinning the existentialist view of work, namely, the idea that the individual invariably needs to experience self-realization. That individuals deploy a tendency, from early on in life, to want to develop certain distinctively human potentialities is a psychological truth. One of the most glaring differences between non-human animals and humans is that the latter possess the determination – not just the instinct-- to

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<sup>56</sup> David Macarov, *Incentives to Work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1970.

put their abilities to use. They also entertain, typically, a desire to improve or refine the command of skills and abilities they already have. Rawls' reference to the "Aristotelian Principle" evokes this datum of human psychology. To reiterate, the principle reads as follows: "Other things being equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities) and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized or the greatest its complexity [...]"<sup>57</sup>

Idleness is not gratifying, normally, when it is not accompanied by periods of active engagement in pursuits that require the expenditure of intellectual, physical, or other kinds of energy. But however necessary this break from idleness is for the individual, it does not follow that self-realization based on a search for excellence will enter the picture. Despite the obvious attractiveness of self-realization – if achieved it is the source of enormous satisfaction -- there are various circumstances, one could think, under which people might shy away from it. These circumstances include adaptive preferences, risk aversion, and myopia.<sup>58</sup> The existentialist view of work assumes that absent these distorting mechanisms, individuals would normally choose self-realization. However, distortions of psychology do not exhaust the reasons why the individual might avoid excellence, I contend.

Self-realization as the pursuit of excellence is one among many other (fundamental) goals that individuals may seek in life. Other pursuits may include stability of employment, profundity of relationships, parenthood, the welfare of others, diversity of life-experiences (i.e., as in traveling), and many others. It is imaginable that people decide to develop and exercise certain capacities well before their point of excellence and still consider themselves self-fulfilled --non frustrated. We are familiar with the possibility that people will eliminate from their preference-

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<sup>57</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971, p.426.

<sup>58</sup> Elster, "Self-realization in Work and Politics...", p.107.

rankings those options that they can not avail themselves of in order to avoid frustration, as Elster correctly explains. But this is not necessarily the only reason behind a decision not to strive for self-realization, I wish to suggest.

In the face of scarcity of time (finitude of life) and conflict of fundamental life-goals, a decision not to pursue self-realization may reflect a well-informed choice, one that is not prompted by the impossibility to attain excellence due to lack of motivation or talent. Such a decision may neither reflect weakness of will or myopia (the impossibility to delay gratification). Think of the following example to bring the point home.

Amadeus has a talent for music which would surely make him into one of the best composers in the history of music composition.<sup>59</sup> He loves music and would certainly enjoy developing this capacity no matter how strenuous such effort might be. Additionally, he does not face major constraints regarding opportunities and resources. Amadeus, however, has a strong desire to form a family and wants to take an active part in the rearing and upbringing of his children. This task would be made almost impossible if Amadeus decided to become a world-renown composer, since music would require that he stays away from his family for long periods of time. Amadeus has a strong preference – which has been stable over time—for being physically close to his offspring. In this example, Amadeus is at a crossroads, since he is experiencing a conflict of life-goals. If he could only live two lives – one wholeheartedly devoted to music, and the other one devoted to family! But the truth is, obviously, that he has only one life. (As far as we know with certainty). In the face of this fact of reality, it is misleading to claim that a person who is well-disposed towards facing the gratification delay and the risks of self-realization is falling prey to adaptive preferences or myopia if she declines to

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<sup>59</sup> Assume that he realized this late, in early adulthood, but his talent is so magnificent that it doesn't matter that he is not a child.

strive for self-realization eventually. Amadeus' hesitation about self-realization is reflective of his reluctance to bear other types of costs, namely, the costs of foregoing other achievements and experiences that he values as much, or more, as he values self-realization. This type of costs I call *life-opportunity costs* of self-realization.

The example above should serve to illustrate that a decision not to pursue excellence may be due to an authentic and rational desire that competes with a preference for self-realization. Of course, this dilemma does not deny the psychological truth that individuals typically have a need to break from idleness and put distinctively human capacities and skills to use.<sup>60</sup> Amadeus, after all, will probably want to have a career in music even if he does not become one of the best composers world-wide. But given that his decision may be due to a legitimate (non-distorted) preference for a competing life-value, it remains an empirical issue to establish whether, at the end of his days, Amadeus will be able to say that he has lived a truly fulfilling life. All seems to indicate that he will be.<sup>61</sup>

In this regard, self-fulfillment can be understood to encompass two slightly different things: it can refer to self-realization conceived of in the technical Marxian/Elsterian way, or it can be understood as a combination of achievements and states which do not necessarily include the *utmost development* of our human capacities. The idea here is not that people who take the

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<sup>60</sup> The human need to break from inactivity is referred to by Gottfried Leibniz in his *Nouveaux Essais*: “j’*e* trouve que l’inquietude est essentielle a la felicite des creatures”, he says (cited after Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, p.85). Adam Smith echoes this position in *The Wealth of Nations* when he claims that human health needs “the suspension of tranquillity”. The latter is understood as the satisfaction that goes into overcoming obstacles and shaping results as we desire (cited after Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 611). Tibor Scitovski alludes to this human need to break from rest as the need for “stimulus satisfaction”, and he presents psychological evidence of its role in human motivation. See his *Human Desire and Economic Satisfaction. Essays on the Frontiers of Economics*. London: Wheatsheaf Books, 1986, especially, pp.20-30.

<sup>61</sup> Assuming stability of preference, of course. If Amadeus were to change his preference five minutes before dying, making self-realization more desirable than closeness to offspring, the overall evaluation of his life would be negative. But the different evaluation has nothing to do with the value of self-realization vis-a-vis other kinds of fulfillment, but with his specific change of preference. The change of preference could have occurred in the opposite direction: someone concerned with self-realization throughout his life “realizes” at the moment of death that he has led an unfulfilling life because he did not have children.

second view of what a self-fulfilling life is are conformist –although it is *possible* that they are – but that they *might* entertain a world-view that is not fundamentally guided by excellence-oriented values.

The manner in which the exercise of a capacity is carried out while aiming at self-realization implies a dynamic of purposeful, outcome-oriented activity for which delay of present gratification is usually necessary. The result of this effort is typically examined according to the quality and nature of a given distinct *product*.<sup>62</sup> The goal that this type of exercise serves is precisely reaching a final concrete accomplishment. In contradistinction, the manner in which a capacity is exercised while aiming at self-fulfillment *that is different from self-realization* does not imply an outcome-oriented view. The goal of the individual in this case is not necessarily the finishing of a distinct product but – typically—the achievement of a certain state of affairs, which may bring about satisfaction, gratification or happiness. In certain cases, such as consumption, it is sheer satisfaction and gratification that is ultimately sought by the agent. But consumption is not the only alternative to self-realization. Another sort of self-fulfillment derives from states of affairs which we are (central) participants to such as meaningful relationships. This last form of self-fulfillment is different from consumption in that it is engaged in not for the sake of the resulting satisfaction that but for the engagement *in itself*.

There is a third category of activities conducive to self-fulfillment but not to self-realization. For lack of imagination, I call them *agentic-non-self-realizationist activities*. These are activities that lie between self-realization and mere consumption. They are activities that require the engaging uses of our distinct capacities and skills – in a way that mere consumption does not

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<sup>62</sup> This product does not necessarily have to be a tangible good, it may imply merely intellectual, or artistic, finished projects.

-- but which do not necessarily direct those abilities towards excellence. These activities, although they might be aimed at finishing a given project, are not aimed at giving the final product the distinctiveness that is implied by a process of self-realization. The example of the teacher given above is one illustration of this scenario. He strives to hone his communication skills, which is in itself valuable, but he does not exercise his talent for developing original and insightful research when he is merely teaching—a talent that (we assume) motivates his becoming a university professor in the first place. Other examples of this category could include any activity that is not mere drudgery but that requires some engaging type of exertion on our part, rendering it desirable, and possibly enjoyable many times. If the engaging exercise of our powers does not necessarily have to amount to self-realization, it is plausible that the human need to break from idleness is fulfilled without the pursuit of excellence, which blatantly contradicts the existentialist assumption that all humans need self-realization.

### **2.3. The Good Life and Self-Realization**

We come now to the third assumption made by the existentialist view of work. This assumption sustains that self-realization is required by an ideal of the good life. Is this assumption sound? I think not.

A life of self-realization may be regarded as good on various grounds. The most common reasons are welfare and autonomy.<sup>63</sup> By self-realizing, the individual experiences profound gratification. Self-realization is also good because it makes the individual truly autonomous in that it implies an independent and free choice of life-style, even if it does not bring about welfare but frustration or anxiety. Valuing self-realization on the basis of welfare and autonomy could be regarded as part and parcel of a rational choice-model of self-realization. According to this

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<sup>63</sup> Elster, “Self-Realization”.

model, the individual is morally free to choose which path towards self-realization is most suited to her preferences. Her choice is purely self-regarding.<sup>64</sup> This model attaches value to self-realization on account of the latter's being chosen by the individual. The rational choice model of self-realization, then, evinces the utmost respect for individuality. It seems natural to suppose that a self-realized life is closely related to the individual's own (freely chosen) development. Free development is what gives value to self-realization in this picture. A life in which free development is achieved and sought is a "good life", in consequence.

John Stuart Mill echoes the rational conception of self-realization in chapter Three of *On Liberty*. He refers to self-realization construed as "individuality of powers and development" and speaks of it as having intrinsic worth, as deserving regard in its own account. For Mill, the highest and autonomous development of the individual's powers – what he calls *originality*—is the object on which people should keep their eyes so that they can lead a truly happy life, which is only possible by cultivation of the higher pleasures, namely, those satisfactions not associated with animal instincts. In this view, self-realization is synonymous with "the good life" because it paves the way for profound well-being and self- growth.<sup>65</sup>

The rational choice model of self-realization can be distinguished from the view holding that individuals have a duty to attain self-realization. Immanuel Kant is one exponent of this position. As he expresses:

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<sup>64</sup> Alan Gewirth, *Self-Fulfillment*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, chapter 2.

<sup>65</sup> A conceptual tool along the lines of John Stuart Mill's "Harm Principle" should act as a check on the content of the activities conducive to self-realization, however. The purpose of this association is to prevent what could be considered as morally (and, secondarily, legally) prohibited ways to achieve self-realization because they inflict unacceptable harm on others. What counts as unacceptable harm cannot be dealt with in detail here, but for elaboration of the notion of a "Harm Principle", see John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in John Gray (ed) *John Stuart Mill: On Liberty and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. See, also, Joel Feinberg, *Harm to Others (Moral Limits for Criminal Law, volume I)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

“[An individual] finds in himself a talent whose cultivation could make him a man useful in many respects. But he finds himself in comfortable circumstances and prefers to indulge in pleasure rather than to bother himself about broadening and improving his fortunate natural aptitudes. But he asks himself further whether his maxim of neglecting his natural gifts, besides agreeing of itself with his propensity to indulgence, might agree also with what is called duty. He then sees that a system of nature could indeed always subsist according to such universal law, even though every man (like South Sea Islanders) should let his talents rust and resolve to devote his life entirely to idleness.... But he cannot possibly will that this should become a universal law of nature or be implanted in us as such a law by a natural instinct. For as a rational being he necessarily wills that all his faculties should be developed, in as much as they are given him for all sort of possible purposes”<sup>66</sup>

In Kant’s view, cultivating one’s talents is an imperfect duty to oneself since, as his reference to the case of the Islanders shows; it is morally possible to conceive of a world in which nobody cultivates their powers and talents.<sup>67</sup> This means that the system of morality that guides human conduct, according to Kant’s system of ethics, does not deny the individual permission *not* to develop her talents and powers. However, the cultivation of talents is a general human inclination that lies deep seated in people’s psychological make-ups, and for this reason should be pursued as a matter of obligation to oneself. We are constituted in a way that we necessarily desire certain things, claims Kant, and thus we would contradict ourselves if we

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<sup>66</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, translated by H.J. Paton. New York: Harper & Row, 1964, section 423.

<sup>67</sup> See Gary Hochberg, “The Concept of ‘Possible Worlds’ and Kant’s Distinction Between Perfect and Imperfect Duties”, *Philosophical Studies*, 26, 1974, for an explanation of the difference between perfect and imperfect duties in Kant. Basically, as Kant himself puts it, “some actions are of such a nature that their maxim cannot even be thought as a universal law without contradiction” [perfect duties]. “In others, this internal impossibility is not found though it is still impossible to will that their maxim should be raised to the universality of a law because such a will would contradict itself” (quoted in Hochberg, footnote 4). The idea here is that although the action may not be immoral it contradicts a human basic inclination so that it is inconceivable.

willed as a universal law any maxim that might thwart the pursuit of those intrinsically human desires. For Kant, it is our duty to avoid this contradiction.<sup>68</sup> It is well known that Kant's normative edifice rests on the idea that passions and inclinations are to give way to impartial reasons in the determination of our conduct. However, Kant is ready to make one exception to that rule. The basis for this exception is, I believe, the fact that the human inclination to develop talents has independent moral worth. But in the face of this assessment, one may well wonder what the practical difference between Kant's view and the rational choice-based understanding of self-realization actually is.

The notion of a duty to oneself is, at best, paradoxical. The general wisdom is that one is faced with a duty towards someone because that someone is believed to have a right, or a claim, against us, which requires from us that we engage in some line of action that will affect that person. For example, I have a duty to provide for my infant son, in my capacity as his mother, and he has a rights-based claim against me that I provide for his nourishment and protection, for as long as he is not able to do so for himself. We can also think of similar examples that reflect duties and rights acquired consensually, via contracts or promises. In either case, this is the classical Hohfeldian view of the relationship between duties and rights. This conception highlights the fact that for every right there is a correlating duty.

On a less narrow conception of the relationship between rights and duties, we can also have a duty to do, or refrain from doing, something without there being a corresponding, specific, rights-bearer who is the object of the actions or omissions that discharge the duty in

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<sup>68</sup> It may seem rather contrary to Kant's whole system of thought to link any duty whatever to the particularities of human passions, instincts and inclinations, but this is a contradiction in Kant's own formulation of his philosophy. Kant refers to imperfect duties when he refers to an obligation to develop talents.

question. More abstract entities such as the “community” or planet “Earth,” for example, may be considered legitimate beneficiaries of general obligations that regulate people’s actions: It is reasonable to believe that people have a duty to protect the environment or to support democratic institutions and pay taxes as members of the human race and as responsible citizens respectively.

But the notion that we can be bound by a duty to ourselves presents new conceptual complications. Do we also have a claim against ourselves that we discharge the duty? If we do not, does that mean we do not have a right to do what the duty mandates, in this case, develop our talents? This conclusion appears to make little sense since it is quite uncontroversial that, under normal circumstances, people’s freedom to employ their talents and body-parts in the ways they deem best should be protected, provided no (relevant) harm to others is done in the process.

The foregoing excursion seems to suggest that the notion of a duty to oneself is logically implausible if we reject the idea that one has a claim against oneself that one does what it takes to fulfill the duty. One is the bearer of a right against oneself, in this picture, but this is a circular idea. To avoid this apparent contradiction, alternatively, it could be argued that one has a duty towards humanity, qua member of it, to develop one’s talents, because doing so enhances everybody’s lot by producing general advancement and knowledge that can be applied for society’s benefit and enjoyment. It is this last line of reasoning that appears more adequate, for the classical conceptualization of duties that correspond to specific rights loses all logical meaning when applied to “oneself” as object and source of the duty.

Note that I am not arguing that good X cannot be both a duty and a right. The suffrage is both an established right and a civic obligation in countries such as Australia, Argentina, and Brazil. The law in these countries contemplates sanctions for citizens who are found unwilling to express their political preferences via the vote in election day for unjustified reasons. In the case

of compulsory suffrage, we could say that the individual has a right against the government, or the state, to exercise political participation, but this right coexists with a duty towards the state, or the community, to do so, barring disabling circumstances such as physical distance and old age. The case of a putative right-duty to exercise one's talents meaningfully is of a different nature, however, because the source and object of the duty is the same agent, that is, oneself. Thus, the complication appears to reside in this fact-- not in the fact that a given good can be both a right and a duty (the compulsory suffrage example shows that the parties involved in that scenario are two: the citizen and the state or community).

Thus, as mentioned before, we could take a consequentialist route and argue that a duty to oneself is grounded on the ulterior effects that fulfilling that obligation would have for others. The idea that individuals with aptitudes for the medical sciences should strive to develop those talents with an eye to enhancing the community's welfare echoes that principle, for example. Less tangible effects may also be foreseen. Artistic talent may be fostered and supported under the premise that full-fledged creativity will result in a more culturally rich, interesting, and diverse world, which we have reason to desire.

There is a different way to go about the "problem" of duties to oneself which is not focused on consequentialist considerations; yet, it solves the logical difficulty of making the agent the source and addressee of a duty. This alternative route could propose that some irreparable moral loss will accrue upon the individual if she fails to "flourish" via the honing and use of her natural abilities and powers. The classical philosophers, most notably Plato and Aristotle, share with Kant a non-consequentialist justification of duties to oneself. In their defense of virtue as personal excellence, they adamantly defend duties "of the soul" to develop one's skills and talents; and "duties of the body" to avoid harming our physiques such as through gluttony or

drunkenness, or through suicide.<sup>69</sup> The rationale behind non-consequentialist justifications of duties to oneself seems to lie outside of the individual and society, on a realm of independent moral value. Things that have traditionally been argued to be intrinsically valuable include high talent, true friendship, beauty, literary quality, mathematical mastery, and enduring relationships, to name a few. “Intrinsic worth” is the value that a thing has “in itself.” The thrust of the intrinsic value ideal is that X is valuable because the existence of X is good *for its own sake*, in *its own right*. The literature on intrinsic value is too abundant to analyze here, and one has to accept that the concept of intrinsic value is not devoid of ambiguities and obscurity, at least if not treated with sufficient rigor. But the point I wish to make is that some talents and aptitudes, and their products, may be valuable because they do not derive their goodness from anything other than themselves.<sup>70</sup>

Viewing the development of one’s talents as a duty to oneself may actually reflect the fact that we attribute intrinsic worth to those potentialities. The line of reasoning proposed would seem to be that it would be morally reproachable to forgo the opportunity to bring such worth to life via our actions. Does this mean we have a duty to do so? Not necessarily. It could mean, though, that we would be acting unwisely, from the perspective of virtue, shall we say, if we wasted the chance to create such value. We would be incurring a moral loss, as a matter of speaking, by being so wasteful. This loss, or missed opportunity, could be paralleled to many real-life losses. The comparison I want to draw at this point is this: One’s failure to develop

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<sup>69</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 5, Plato, *The Republic*, book 2 and 3

<sup>70</sup> One important line of attack against the ideal of intrinsic value is that nothing can be valuable with independence of who finds the object valuable. In other words, value is not an independent realm of ethics, things have value because people value them, their worth exists insofar as there are people that appreciate the object or good in question. (There is no Platonic world of objective Ideas or unchanging Forms, as the classical criticism inspired on R.M Hare’s philosophy would have it, or as J.L. Mackie’s “Error Theory” would validate). This argument is not necessarily inconsistent with the notion of intrinsic worth, on closer inspection. People may value something intrinsically or instrumentally. The former implies that they will ascribe worth to something regardless of consequences or effects. The latter implies that consequences will be key to determining the value of a good or thing. The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation perfectly echoes this point.

one's talents in a meaningful way could be thought akin to a situation in which one fails to rescue a masterful and unique work of art from a derelict, flooded, building -- an environment which will surely help disintegrate the work of art in a matter of hours. Not developing our talents would be a moral loss in a similar way as losing the valuable painting forever would be, when one could have done something to prevent such loss (for example, by entering the building and recovering the piece).

But, as it may appear obvious to some at this juncture, there are various reasons why the individual may opt to lose the painting. Perhaps she had to catch a plane to be present at her daughter's wedding. Maybe she had to drive her neighbor to the hospital after he suffered a devastating heart attack. These exceedingly trivial examples should point to a not so trivial conundrum: people sometimes have to choose among (prima facie) equally valuable and desirable ends in life. In the face of this (apparent) parity-of-(intrinsic)-worth-dilemma, how are we to determine what particular end we should pursue? There is no apparent ethical basis to assert the existence of a duty to go for one but not the other, in many cases.

There is, however, something to be said about the reasons behind our choices, more generally. Our intuition should tell us that failing to recover the painting because we did not feel like going out in the rain points to a deficiency of character, or motivation, that is difficult to reconcile with the notion of intrinsic value. In the same vein, our failure to develop our talents because of laziness or love of vacuous idleness should indicate the presence of some moral deficiency on our part. This deficiency is reflected in our failure to appreciate the importance (and act on that appreciation) of that which we are foregoing or bypassing.

On the basis of the already argued, can we not say that we *ought to* develop our talents provided we are not discouraged from doing so by the right reasons (i.e., by the pursuit of

equally valuable ends)? We would be morally irresponsible by not doing so, but it would be contradictory to assert that we are obliged to ourselves to do it. If anything, it would be more adequate to think that we have a duty to the “ideal of perfection,” or “the ideal of high value”-- if something of the sort could be conceived of. But this suggestion is different from the idea that we are obliged to do anything *because* our human nature demands it invariably, irrespective of other ends and goals in life. Of course, it is common knowledge that duties may conflict with one another and still be equally stringent on us. But my point here is that we don’t really have a duty to ourselves to develop our talents (that is, to reach for self-realization). We could be accused of being morally neglectful or wasteful when not doing so is due to a failure of character or motivation on our part, however.

The foregoing line of thinking is in contradiction with an established view holding that we have a duty to develop our talents on account of our condition as rational, reflective beings, capable of higher-order achievements. This is the approach of the classical philosophers, taken up by later mainstream Western thought (of which Kant’s thinking forms part). This logic centers on the fundamental idea that reason makes humans distinctive vis-a-vis non-human animals, and grounds, among other duties, an obligation to develop one’s characteristically human potentialities and aptitudes. Our human nature invariably demands the fulfillment of powers consistent with reason, as opposed to instinct-propelled behavior or action motivated by lower desires or “appetites.” In this picture, a duty to develop one’s talents is a duty to oneself *qua* rational agent. But the rational agent cannot give up the correlating right to develop her powers and release herself from the obligation to exercise her reason. This release is not a matter of voluntary choice. The individual’s having both the duty and the right “does not derive from some contingent or optional decision, desire, or transaction of his; it derives rather from the

rational aspect of himself whose criteria are central to his capacity-fulfillment and are independent of his decisions or desires.”<sup>71</sup> The conception of reason evoked here is an independent criteria of rationality that is blind to subjective factors, at least to those factors that may instill in the agent a desire not to follow his reason.

I object to the above conception of duties to oneself because it ignores the logical fallacy noted before, namely, the impossibility of conceiving of the self as an object and source of a duty simultaneously. But most centrally, the traditional emphasis on human reason as originator of an obligation to oneself ignores the possibility that the individual is faced with a conflict of ends. In ignoring this last possibility, the rationalistic conception of human nature is also stubbornly oblivious to the capacity for informed and reasoned *moral choice*, also characteristically human.

Going back to Kant’s notion of an “imperfect duty” to develop one’s talents meaningfully, the fact that a given human inclination or talent is considered valuable does not imply that any particular way in which such inclination is actualized is also valuable. It follows from Kant’s logic that uses of talents which cannot be generalized consistently with universal moral laws must be rejected. If I decide to train and exercise my particular powers in a way that could not be extendable to everybody doing the same thing without risking moral chaos, my self-realization cannot be seen as fulfilling the test of universality, and is therefore ethically unjustifiable. An illustrative example is a scenario in which I decide to put my masterful surgical aptitudes to work with an eye to killing people. Imagine how morally problematic a world in which I will not be judged harshly for doing this would be, a world in which my deviant actions are deemed ethically acceptable for anybody else to engage in as well, if they so desired.

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<sup>71</sup> Gewirth, *Self-Fulfillment*, p. 137

Kant's theoretical edifice rests on the ideal of a moral community in which each member "would act in such a way that if all other members acted in this way, then a community of free and equal members would result in which each member would, as he realizes his own purposes, also further the aims of his fellow members."<sup>72</sup> Thus, unlike the rational choice view of self-realization, the duty-based approach is condemnatory of any such actions that, no matter how effectively conducive to self-realization, are disruptive of harmonious human cooperation.<sup>73</sup> According to the duty-based approach to self-realization, we cannot sustain that a life in pursuit of self-realization is reflective of the good life *simpliciter*. The duty-based view employs a criterion different from self-realization, strictly, to assess the goodness of a life.

Defenders of the existentialist view of work such as Marx would adhere to a position along the lines of the duty-based approach to self-realization. My intuition is that they would not approve of self-realization that is in tension with the ideal of community and harmonious cooperation. It is an important aspect of Marx's thinking that collective self-realization will come hand in hand with individual self-realization under communism.<sup>74</sup> But Marx did not think of the possibility that individual self-realization and collective self-realization go in different directions. He was too concerned with making his defense of communism well-rounded.

My reference to Kant here was surely summary and simplifying. But my intention is not to illuminate the reader on Kant's thinking, but to draw her attention to one particular application of his thought to the issue of self-realization and morality. Thus, although Kant's system of ethics warrants more analysis than given it here, the thrust of his thinking applied to

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<sup>72</sup> Kant refers to this moral community as the "Kingdom of Ends". See his *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986, p.39 (section 433).

<sup>73</sup> In the face of this, the scenario in which self-realization does not prevent cooperation but it neither fosters it would seem to be allowed in the Kantian framework. However, Kant talks about the (diffuse) duty to work for the wellbeing of other fellow members of society, which would indicate that non-socially beneficial self-realization that is neither socially harmful is immoral. For a position defending the thesis that self-realization *cum others* is morally required, see Norman Care "Career Choice", *Ethics*, 94, 1984.

<sup>74</sup> See Elster, "Self-Realization in Work and Politics..."

the question of whether personal self-realization is indicative of goodness should be clear. Indeed, my claim may be perfectly stated without alluding to Kantian concepts of ethics and morality. Let us see how.

As Gewirth brilliantly argues, whether a life of self-realization can be judged good will hinge on a criterion of self-fulfillment that is located in the objective goods and values that persons can achieve by developing certain potentialities. In this vein, for example, Hitler may be said to have achieved the feeling of self-realization, but he would not have achieved the type of universally valuable capacity-based self-realization that renders a life worthwhile. This is so because the object of Hitler's aspirations were, from an objective standpoint, execrable evils.<sup>75</sup>

Many values that make a life overall good have an objective status that is independent of preference. This is the simple (Kantian) point I wish to make. This objectivist approach does not detract from the value of subjective preferences, but it limits the latter's power to contribute to goodness. Relevant desires are not overlooked, but they are subject to strict critical scrutiny. This moralized stand, moreover, does not detract from the value that self-realization has on account of its beneficial impact on the individual, strictly (as Elster paradigmatically argues).

My understanding of what makes a life good encompasses a perspective that goes beyond what is good (desirable) from a strictly individual point of view. However, it does not ignore that a life cannot be good if it is not good according to the agent's judgment in the first place. I believe that a very thin form of moral perfectionism is in order at the time of assessing the goodness of lives. That is, a series of other-regarding reasons are to enter into the evaluation. It should be borne in mind, nevertheless, that my view does not imply the rather demanding conclusion that devotion to others is what invariably makes a life good. Rather, my view holds

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<sup>75</sup> Gewirth, *Self-Fulfillment*, p. 15

that certain consequences upon (and intentions toward) other individuals certainly jeopardize goodness. To what extent and in what ways cannot be developed here for reasons of space.

The exercise of autonomy that goes with (the search for) self-realization is usually seen as desirable because it is associated with a self-directed life. However, the exercise of autonomy may not be always for the best or even for the good.<sup>76</sup> Whether this will be so will depend on the *wrongfulness* that the acts of the autonomous agent reflect. “A tyrant, for example, is so much the worse a person for acting autonomously. Had he little or no control over his behavior he would not be judged so harshly. Yet, whether he acts autonomously or not when he arbitrarily restricts freedom makes no difference to our judgment of the wrongfulness of his acts”.<sup>77</sup> From this and many other similar examples it is clear that self-realization may add disvalue on some account of what is (morally) permissible.

The type of morality that rejects actions that negatively affect others may spring from a communitarian logic focused on common ethnic, religious, or nationality ties, but it may as well reflect a universalistic view such as Kant’s, for which common humanity constitutes community. I cannot elaborate on this point here, although it is altogether pertinent. In any case, the assertion that a life of self-realization alone is an example of “the good life” is too normatively premature in the absence of a broader analysis of the nature of the ends (and means) in the framework of which self-realization takes place for each individual (if it does at all).

#### **2.4. Conclusion**

In this article I provided a formalistic understanding of work as remunerated activity, and I spelled out the analytical form of the constraint that employment imposes on the individual.

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<sup>76</sup> For this idea, see Robert Young, “The Value of Autonomy”, *Philosophical Quarterly*, 32, 1982, p.43.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

I provided reasons why an economic approach to work is preferable to existentialist notions: it allows us to notice a type of limitation that is not related to the quality of work as such, but to the necessity to make a living through it, and the behavioral adjustments that this encourages, many of which are detrimental to independent human development and tranquility.

My definition of work is helpful in letting us see that the sort of self-fulfillment that meaningful work theorists associate with work can be found outside the sphere of employment. I suggested the abstract possibility that self-realization is found in “serious leisure.” I also claimed that self-realization is not a human need for all. I refuted two more requirements contained in the approach holding the opposite view, as exemplified by (early) Marx. First, I argued that work understood as activities conducive to self-realization is too broad a stipulation; and that work does not invariably lead to self-realization even when working conditions are acceptably satisfying. Secondly, I defended the thesis that a life of self-realization is not necessarily an index of ‘the good life’. Interestingly, I made all these claims without questioning the deserved praise that self-realization enjoys as a human good.