

## **THEORIES OF WORK AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR WORK VALUE: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF WORK ETHICS**

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### **Abstract**

Philosophy always enjoins us to, at one point or another, pause to reflect upon our lives. Such questions as these are philosophical questions - Why do we do the things we do? Why do we work? Why do we even need to work? Why do we choose the kind of work we have chosen? These are some questions that we always need to ask ourselves and others. However, our concern here relates to work. Thus, this study employs the method of analysis to examine and therefore analyse the nature of work as it relates to mankind; is work a necessary endeavour in the life of mankind? What is the value of work to mankind? These questions emanating from philosophical quest to comprehend mankind and work will in turn lead us to x-ray and analyse different theories of work especially as they affect the value attached to work as well as the output resulting from work. The study also examines some ethical issues at work places which are as a result of divergent values that are attached to work by different individuals. The study finally discloses that peoples' understandings of work affect the value they attach to work which in turn affect their work output or productivity.

**Keywords:** Theories of work, work ethics

### **Introduction**

It is somewhat a general belief that it is in the nature of mankind to always work. What is, and what ought to be, the nature of work and what values are served by working? Apart from producing goods and services, providing employment serves as the most important social functions of work. Work is regarded as an important and in fact, an integral part of human life. Everyone wants, to be busy doing one thing or the other. Even children too; they are always busy with their hands. This demonstrates that they too desire to work. If this is the case, why is it that still, the very idea of work suggests drudgery, toil and something to be avoided if possible? This is the ambivalence that greets the nature of work so that even though work can be exalting, uplifting, fulfilling it could also be degrading, tedious, troublesome etc.

Regarding the nature of work, Aristotle recognized work as necessary for the good life in the sense that one must work in order to live. For Karl Marx, work

has the potential to express our very humanity but in modern capitalist societies at least, work is alienated from this end. Understanding the nature of work is very crucial because it affects individuals' and institutions' attitudes towards work. The way an individual sees work affects his/her behaviour at work place. It also has a role to play in the employer-employee relationship.

### **Some Major Theories of Work**

Generally, work is understood in terms of a job and employment. This way, it is viewed as a means to an end. For instance, a means for attaining an income with which to satisfy some needs and desires such as buying food, paying for rent, paying bills, enrolling in school, living a comfortable life, etc. Following this mean-ends idea of work, it is rational that people will cleave for work that provides a higher pay.

However, in life we see some persons who have chosen a lower paid work. When this kind of thing happens, some people question the rationale behind such seemingly irrational choice. The important thing it goes to portray is that there are different ideas about work as there are different people and that earning income is not all there is in working. There is more to it than ordinary eyes can see when it comes to value of work. Thus, the value people attach to work has to do with their conception and perception of work which goes a long way in having a lot of implications in work output. This paper examines the theories of work, namely;

1. Conventional theory/model
2. The human fulfillment theory/model
3. The liberal theory/model

**1. The Conventional Theory/Model:** This theory conceives of work as an endeavour that must be endured. This is so since the very understanding of work here is that work is difficult, arduous and laborious. This theory perceives work as having negative connotation. The essence of this conventional view is that “work is something to be avoided whenever possible and endured when we must”<sup>1</sup>. There are two versions of this theory, viz: **classical version and hedonistic version.**

a. **Classical Version:** This version is traceable to classical Greek thought, which holds that there are higher and more meaningful activities than work so that work should be avoided in order that man should pursue those higher values. This version sees man as an intellectual being and work as a physical thing. This means that the very nature of work contradicts the nature and essence of man; work diminishes the human nature and potential. “This classical version postulates that work is meant for slaves and not for civilized

people”<sup>2</sup>. In shedding light to the classical view, the Roman philosopher, Plutarch opines that “Gentlemen enjoy the contemplation of the sculptor’s master pieces, but he would never himself use hammer and chisel and get covered with sweat and dust”<sup>3</sup>.

Still corroborating the views of the classical version, a twentieth century philosopher, Hannah Arendt, in her book, *The human condition* submits that: “In the modern age, laborers are about to be freed from the fetters of labour and this society no longer knows these higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which this freedom would deserve to be won”<sup>4</sup>.

**b. Hedonistic Version:** Hedonism suggests that pleasure is the most important thing in life. Hedonistic version of the conventional theory sees work as a necessary means for obtaining life’s pleasures. Work is necessary only if it is the price we must pay for enjoyable and pleasurable life. However, it did not specify what marks out a pleasurable life; instead it holds that it is left for individuals to choose whatever ends they so desire.

The philosophical implication of the conventional theory which embodies both classical and hedonistic trends is that work has no value in its own right, it is simply a necessary price that must be tolerated to achieve other ends.

**2. The Human Fulfillment Theory:** This theory conceives of work as the primary activity through which humans develop their full potentials as human beings. Both conventional and human fulfillment theories believe in human potentials. However, conventional theory holds that work hinders that potential. On its part, human fulfillment theory holds that work develops that potential. “Man has a natural *teleos* so that the good life is life spent developing or fulfilling that *telos*”<sup>5</sup>. To better comprehend this theory we can turn our eyes to comparing work and unemployment, more precisely, the psychic implications of unemployment. They include: loss of self-esteem, loss of self-respect, stress, anxiety, depression, isolation, lack of focus and direction, etc. On the other hand, work provides the opposite, namely: high self-respect, stable mental and physical health, friendship, sense of purpose, sense of direction, etc.

It is good to mention here that the human fulfillment theory acknowledges that not every work contributes to the development of human potential. It is only the proper kind of work and the proper kind of workplace that can do that. The theory also holds that the individual and their work exist in a reciprocal fashion. Individuals exercise control and mastery over their work and work in turn shapes and builds the individual. Under this theory, the question every worker should ask is not ‘what will this work do for me?’ (as it is typical of

conventional theory) but, ‘what will this work do to me?’ That is, what kind of person will I become by performing this work? This is while bearing in mind that work that does good things for me can do bad things to me. In making a distinction between good and bad work, E.F. Schumacher has this to say:

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 to development, no element of beauty, truth, or goodness.<sup>6</sup>

Another sharp distinction between good work and bad work is contained in Karl Marx’s concept of *Alienation*. This concept suggests that good work draws out the potential in human whereas bad work represses it. Marx’s *alienation* is understood as a result of work preventing full development of human potential. Man is separated from their true selves (their potentials), from the products of their work, from the creative process of work itself and from their very essence of social creatures.

Philosopher Al Gini, one of the proponents of Human Fulfillment theory, in expatiating upon this theory submits thus:

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 identical 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.<sup>7</sup>

**3. The Liberal Theory:** This theory emerged to serve as a middle ground between the earlier mentioned theories. Like the conventional model, liberals hold that individual workers are at liberty to choose the ends or *raison d’etre* for their work. They still maintain that individuals choose to work for many reasons and so may willingly accept undesirable jobs simply as a means to earn income. However, they deny that there is a single human end which work serves.

Again, like the human fulfillment theorists, liberals believe that human beings can be greatly influenced by their work. They equally are of the argument that ethical assessments of work should be made on the basis of how work affects workers. Incidentally, they part company with the fulfillment school when they specified the grounds for such assessment. Thus, whereas human

fulfillment model bases judgment or assessment on some version of what makes a good and meaningful human life, liberals makes the judgment in relation to how work affects workers ability to make free and autonomous decisions about their own life.

### **Rights of Employees/Workers**

Work is one of the most important and highly valued human activities mainly because it is necessary for so many other central human goods. That means that work is indispensable and inescapable.

However, for most people it is something that is controlled by others while others control their own working lives. This fact points to a real vulnerability especially on the part of workers. This is why, in Ethics of Work, it is recognized that workers should be protected by rights that impose duties on others (especially the employers) to respect their interests.

For purposes of exactness, these rights have been categorized into three namely:

- i. Legal Rights
- ii. Contractual Rights
- iii. Moral Rights
- iv.

**i. Legal Rights:** These are those rights that are granted to workers or employees on the basis of legislation or judicial rulings. Some of these rights include right to a minimum wage, right to equal opportunity, right to bargain collectively as part of a union, right to fair hearing, right to due process etc. In effect, legal rights set the basic legal framework for employer-employee relationship.

**ii. Contractual Rights:** These are those rights that accrue to employees on the basis of contractual agreements with employers. Contractual right is narrower in scope than the legal right. This is because it differs from one work place to another even under the same legal setting. It equally differs from employee to employee. For instance, a particular employee might have a right to a specific health care package such as paid holidays, pension funds and such likes which other workers under the same work establishment might not have.

**iii. Moral Rights:** The human person is a special creature that occupies a special place. Therefore, should not be treated as a means to an end but as an end in itself. Thus, “moral rights are those entitlements to which employees have a claim independent of any legal or contractual factor”<sup>8</sup>. Such rights follow from the respect owed to employees as human beings. These rights are based on reason.

## Conclusion

The various theories of work as have been explained suggest that the way people view work really affects their performance in whatever work they have taken. For instance, if someone chose a work to build and develop himself through the work, there is every likelihood that the person will choose to remain in the work irrespective of the pay or earning. Same applies to those who chose a particular work simply because of the pay. This kind of person is likely to not put in his best to the work. As a result, the work suffers as there is every reason to have low productivity. The only interest for this kind of person is his pay. He is not necessarily interested in developing or building himself through his work. What is more, he is not interested in keeping to the ethics of work. All he is interested in is his pay. Most of these people believe that one does not need to work hard but rather work smartly. There is a whole lot of negative implications of this kind of belief system. One of such implications is – do not work hard as long as you can pretend to be working hard and as long as you get paid. One can therefore imagine what the work environment will be like if every worker is to go with this kind of negative attitude towards work.

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