

A World Without Work

1. Intro: Imagine a future where machines replace human workers. At first, they replace assembly-line workers and burger-flippers. (They've ALREADY done this, in fact.) Then they replace warehouse and shipping workers, truck drivers, taxi drivers, etc. (They're presently doing this.) Then cashiers, store clerks, restaurant servers. Then farmers, doctors, lawyers, nurses, care-givers, computer programmers. Even teachers, therapists, scientists. ...And so on, such that all (or nearly all) work is done by machines.

What will this world be like? Is it a good world, or a bad one?

Clarification: Obviously, if billions of us are out of a job with zero income, then this would be a pretty terrible world. People would be starving in the streets for lack of money. But let us imagine further that, in this future world, robots grow our food, build our homes, etc., and fairly distribute these goods to us all, so that all of our basic needs are taken care of, for free.

[Note: It is plausible that in such a world, a few ultra-billionaires (or trillionaires?) would control the robot work force, reaping all of the benefits for themselves while billions struggle to scrape by, having been replaced by automated workers. Danaher simply says that this is the sort of dystopian future that we must be vigilant to prevent, and vaguely gestures at something like a [universal basic income](#) as one potential solution.]

2. Work: Good or Bad?: So? Would life in such a world be any good?

Work Is Good? Here's one view: Work is a vital part of human flourishing, as a source of meaning and development. Without it, we risk idleness, boredom, depression. Work is the source of many goods, such as:

- Cultivating skills, and excellence
- Contributing to society
- Providing a sense of community
- Providing social status

So, wouldn't a world without work lack a crucial part of what makes life meaningful?

Objection: Can't all of these same goods be achieved by other means (e.g., volunteering with charities; or hobbies and other leisurely activities)? If so, then even if we admit that work IS good for the above reasons, it still seems that *NON-work is even BETTER*, because we could still have the goods, but without the badness of work. (See below)

Work is Bad? Aren't there a lot of ways in which work is pretty awful? Consider:

- Many people hate their jobs
- Many jobs are degrading, humiliating (e.g., cleaning toilets, bathing the elderly)
- Many cause high stress, anxiety, mental illness (e.g., legal work)
- Some are physically terrible, or risky (e.g., sweatshop labor, coal mining)
- Some is exhausting, taxing (e.g., manual labor, field labor)
- Many workplaces are rife with sexual harassment, etc.

So, work is actually bad, and we would be better off without it.

Objection: First, as we've noted, there are also tons of GOOD qualities that work can have. Second, the bad features listed above are all specific to particular jobs or workplaces. These don't entail that work itself is *intrinsically* bad, or that ALL work *must* be bad. In fact, the features above might give us even MORE reason to welcome some degree of replacement by automation. Degrading jobs like cleaning toilets, exhausting manual labor, dangerous mining, repetitive assembly line work, etc., can all be done by robots, freeing us up to do more meaningful, better things.

Work is Intrinsically Bad? Yet, some bad features do seem to apply to ALL work:

Ask yourself: What if you don't WANT to work? Is that an option? What will happen?

Answer: No. You will starve. In short, in our present society, work is essentially **mandatory**. We HAVE to do it to survive. (Sure, there are welfare programs, but they only provide you with aid if you've demonstrated that you're *unable* to work.)

The mandatory-ness of work seems bad for three reasons:

- (1) For starters, **it makes society non-neutral regarding what kinds of lifestyles people may choose to pursue flourishing and happiness.** For instance, if your version of the pursuit of happiness involves engaging in unpaid activities such as watching sunsets, smelling flowers, watching birds, eating delicious meals, raising your children, etc., then I have some bad news for you: The present structure of society will not allow you to pursue happiness in this way. You must work instead.
- (2) Second, **it limits human liberty/autonomy.** Consider: The thing of greatest human value is probably time. It's a limited resource, and it's a pre-requisite to all things that are good. But, work tends to monopolize our time. There's the work itself, the education required before you can do it, not to mention in today's world we're

essentially ALWAYS “on call”, expected to be reachable. Thus, **work takes the lion’s share of that thing which is most valuable to us—time**, limiting our freedom.

- (3) Third, a world where work is mandatory is, in some sense, **exploitative**. Imagine that you are starving and near the brink of death. A rich person comes along and offers you \$1,000 to do something you really do not want to do – for example, have sex with them, or give up your spare kidney. What choice do you have? You must do it if you want to live.

Note that in this example, the rich person has actually *benefitted* you with their offer. That is, they’ve made you better off than you otherwise would have been, had they not come along. (For, otherwise you would have DIED!) And yet, there’s something morally objectionable about their offer, isn’t there? For, despite the fact that accepting their offer benefits you in some way, they nevertheless (a) are taking advantage of your desperation for personal gain, and (b) do not seem to truly have your consent. (For, how can you really, freely, consensually AGREE to something when the alternative is death? Consider, for example, signing a contract at gunpoint.) Offers that have these features are instances of **exploitation**, which is unjust.

Similarly, it seems that, in instances where the alternative is starvation, homeless, or death, and where you really would prefer NOT to work, an employer’s offer to employ you in exchange for life-saving money is (at least to some extent) exploitative. [*Do you agree?*]

Conclusion: In short, a world without mandatory work would lack all of the terrible features listed above, it would increase human liberty, return to us our valuable resource of time, and would cease to be exploitative. In addition to *lacking* these *bad* features, such a world would also *have* all of *goods* of the things that we would pursue and achieve with our new-found freedom and time.

3. What is the Meaning of Life?: So, what goods would we actually be able to achieve in a world without work? To answer that, we’ll first have to answer, What makes life good, or meaningful? ...Easy. This section will be really short.

Actually, this is notoriously one of the most difficult questions that philosophers ask. But, answers fall broadly into one of three categories. Let’s start with the first two:

- (1) **Subjective Views:** Whether a life is meaningful or not is determined *subjectively*, or by certain subjective states, such as happiness. In short, your life is meaningful so long as you’re happy, or satisfied, or so long as you *believe* that it is.

- (2) **Objective Views:** Whether a life is meaningful or not is determined by whether or not it has certain *objectively* good features. For example, perhaps your life is meaningful so long as you make the world a better place; or become a morally good person; pursue intellectual growth or achievement; have aesthetic experiences appreciating beauty; and so on – and these things are good for you *regardless* of whether or not you personally value these things.

Objections to Subjective Views: Danaher gives two counter-examples.¹

- (a) **Sisyphus:** Consider the story of Sisyphus, damned forever by the gods to roll a boulder up a hill, only to have it fall back down again. Over and over, for eternity, he rolls it up the hill, if rolls back down. He rolls it up, it rolls back down. But, now imagine that Sisyphus **LIKES** rolling the boulder up the hill. He is **HAPPY**, or **FULFILLED**, or **BELIEVES** that what he is doing is meaningful. On the subjective view, it would follow that his life **IS** good, or meaningful. Yet, there doesn't seem to be anything meaningful about it. His existence seems pointless; meaningless.
- (b) **Wireheading:** Danaher asks us to imagine that, in the future, there are machines that you can hook up to which simply stimulate the brain to give one a perpetual sense of happiness, or fulfillment. Imagine that I shove you into such a pod, where you spend the rest of your days in euphoric bliss, drooling. On the subjective view, I have made your life vastly better, and more meaningful. Yet, that seems false. [*Do you agree?*]

Objection to Objective Views: Imagine that we took a happy Sisyphus, and **FORCED** him to achieve the objective goods. We make him learn, and hone his intellectual and reasoning skills; we make him learn to recognize and appreciate beauty; we make him do good things, and make the world a better place. But, all the while, he **HATES** every

¹ The Subjective View: Tangential question: Does working make one's life subjectively better or worse? We might think that work makes people's lives worse, subjectively, since most people report that they are unhappy with their jobs, or that they would prefer not to work.

Happier at Work? However, studies show that people often achieve subjectively preferable states of happiness, focus, achievement, and so on more **AT WORK** than they do in their personal lives.

Danaher rejects this, citing the fact that work simply takes up so much of our time, and when we're **NOT** working, most of us are simply too tired to pursue anything subjectively pleasing. Society is essentially structured presently such that most of us can only find fulfillment, focus, happiness, achievement, etc. *at work*. But, imagine that we did **NOT** have to work. Then we'd really be free to pursue whatever we wanted.

People Aren't Good at Finding Happiness? The critic then suggests that people aren't actually very good at finding happiness on their own. Even though they report that they don't like working, once they stop working, they complain that without work, they are bored, or depressed, and unhappy. (Danaher calls this "the Paradox of Work".) People need work to provide structure and incentive to their lives so that they can be motivated to actually achieve things. [*My brainstorm: Does work – as well as child-rearing – largely serve as a **DISTRACTION** for most people, saving us from being faced with the task of answering the question: What makes life meaningful? During the pandemic, many of us were left with a lot more time to ourselves, and were finally forced to grapple with this difficult question. Answering it can be quite difficult, and even depressing. Are people "happier" working merely because they get to escape the discovery and pursuit of what is truly meaningful?*]

Danaher thinks this is overly paternalistic, favoring that people continue working "for their own good". Surely lots of us are fully capable of finding meaning, happiness, and fulfillment on our own. Also, if some people **DO** need motivation, we can use technology to provide that for us – we already see that kind of motivation to achieve non-work things through things like social media and the gamification of apps, and so on.

second of it. According to the objective view, we have made Sisyphus's life BETTER. Yet, intuitively, it doesn't seem like the now-miserable Sisyphus is living a very good or meaningful life. [*Do you agree?*]

Because of the above objections, many philosophers opt instead for a HYBRID view, which is a combination of the two views above:

- (3) **Hybrid ("Fitting Fulfillment") Views:** Simply put, your life is good, or meaningful, so long as you achieve the objective goods, AND those happen to be the very same things that make you subjectively happy, or fulfilled.

Imagine that Sisyphus actually became super happy pursuing moral, intellectual, and aesthetic goods. It really does seem like THAT life is far more meaningful and much better than the life of Sisyphus happily rolling a boulder up a hill for eternity, doesn't it?

Conclusion: Okay, so, perhaps the best and most meaningful life is the one where we achieve the objective goods, and are made happy and deeply satisfied by doing so. Is this more likely in a world *with* work, or *without* it?

Some worry that, for the objective goods that we can pursue (e.g., intellectual discovery, doing moral good in the world), eventually machines will be BETTER at achieving them. Like, robots will likely become better at performing surgery, or teaching; and A.I.'s will probably be able to cure cancer, solve world hunger, etc., better/sooner than we could. In short, if machines become advanced enough to take WORK away from us, they might remove us from the pursuit of goods altogether. For, even if WE are the ones who originally build or program the machines, Danaher says, **we will become sufficiently detached or removed from the objective goods that they achieve.** Their achievements will be THEIR achievements, and not our own, severing us from any meaningful connection to those goods.

Reply: Maybe, but won't we still have art? The ancient Greek philosophers believed that there were three fundamental goods to life: **goodness, truth, and beauty.** So, even if machines become better than us at solving moral problems, at intellectual discoveries, increasing knowledge, and so on, we'll still have the pursuit of beauty, right?

Not so fast. It is quite plausible that machines will ALSO become better than us at producing the most enjoyable music, or poems, or books, etc. So, we might ask:

- (i) Would we still be motivated to produce art in a world where machines did it better?
- (ii) Would we *enjoy* or *appreciate* art as much if we knew it were produced by machines?

Consider: Imagine that you discovered that your favorite book, or song, or painting or whatever was actually produced by a very clever artificial intelligence. Would you still have the same aesthetic appreciation for it? For instance, of Shakespeare, philosopher James Lenman writes,

“Imagine learning that you have been tricked: Shakespeare is the name of a fancy computer and the Complete Works on your bookshelf is an improbably successful experiment in computer-generated literature. ... How would you feel about these works now? Will you take the book ... down from the shelf and discard it in disgust or will you go on valuing it just as you previously have?”

If you would answer ‘No, I won’t still value it the same’ – would you? – then, maybe we could still have meaningful aesthetic experiences in a world where even art was outsourced to machines?

[Alternatively, perhaps we would still be motivated to produce – and appreciate – *human-made* art? Is a part of what makes art good the fact that it helps us to RELATE to others in this shared human experience? To CONNECT, to SHARE, to acquire some sense of INTIMACY. (To see this, contrast with your feelings if you learned that your CAR was built by assembly line robotics. Would you care?) If so, then perhaps there would still be some unique aesthetic role that only humans could fill? Might also *sports* fall into this category of aesthetics – both physical sports and other games as well?]

Conclusion: Even if it turns out that we COULD still have meaningful aesthetic experiences in a world where work and all other goods were outsourced to machines, **Will that be enough?**

4. Become Cyborgs?: Finally, Danaher suggests that the worries above would dissipate if we INTEGRATED ourselves with technology (e.g., brain chips). Then, we could be PARTICIPANTS in the problem-solving that algorithms do, etc. It wouldn’t be a world where A.I.’s achieved all of the goods independent of us. No **us versus AI**. Rather, it would just be US, with the power of advanced A.I. integrated into our own biological brains. Would this restore the appropriate connections between us and the good?

(One critique: Extended mind thesis says our minds are ALREADY integrated into technology, since it is a part of our extended mind. But Danaher is dubious of such a thesis. Also, it’s not clear that achieving things with one’s “extended mind” are very meaningful. For instance, “solving” a math problem with a calculator doesn’t seem to be meaningful in the same way as solving it with my brain, even if the calculator IS in some sense a part of my mind.)

Another suggestion: Perhaps we could escape this physical world, and live out our existence in a virtual reality? Is it possible to pursue meaningful experiences in a VIRTUAL environment? (Danaher agrees with Nozick's conclusion about the Experience Machine, and says 'No'. Do you agree?)

[Brainstorm: I sometimes suspect that it is (instrumentally) good for us that we have several innate bodily pressures and drives – e.g., hunger, thirst, the need to sleep, or go to the bathroom, sex drive, etc. – because these things (especially the first two) regularly ENSURE that we will get off our asses and go DO things. Is it possible that, without these needs, some of us would just enter a sort of stasis, where we perpetually do nothing at all? If so, then does the mandatory-ness of work ALSO serve this function for us? Is mandatory work instrumentally good for ensuring that we aren't idle? Danaher dismisses this, suggesting that, without work, people would clearly still be motivated to do other things – but is this true? What do you think?]