Discussion

In Spring 2012 the Faculty of Laws at University College, London staged a conference on the subject The Right to Work. At the request of the organizers, David Wiggins opened the proceedings with the philosophical reflections that follow. The proceedings themselves will be published later in the year as The Right to Work: Legal and Philosophical Perspectives, edited by Virginia Mantouvalou, London: Hart Publishing, 2014.

Work, its moral meaning or import

DAVID WIGGINS

1.

Before lawyers, political scientists and other experts settle down to the questions awaiting them of rights and the putative right to work, I am to say something about work itself – its moral meaning or import. Such is the behest of the organisers. But, proceeding by indirection, I shall reach that destination by a detour.

Long before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) asserted a right to work and a right to just and favourable remuneration for work, the Virginia Declaration of Rights (1776) and the American Declaration of Independence (1776) each asserted a human right to the pursuit of happiness. ‘All men are created equal, they are endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights . . . among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’ No one is uninterested in happiness, or the right to pursue it, but how does the pursuit of happiness connect with work? Well, if you look hard enough, you will find one part of an answer to that question in Aristotle. Or so I shall claim.

Aristotle says that happiness is activity of the soul in accordance with virtue in a complete life. In order to understand this properly we must gloss virtue. To judge from Book 1, Chapter 7 and Book 2, Chapter 6 of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle thinks that the arete or virtue of a human being is the disposition by whose exercise that
being carries out the *ergon* that is proper to man and engages in activities and acts of the soul that arise from reason (1098a14):

We state the *ergon* of man to be a certain kind of life and this to be activity or actions of the soul applying a rational principle . . . the *ergon* of man is the good and noble performance of such activity or actions.

So the next thing we need to know is what *ergon* is. Traditionally, *ergon* is translated as *function*. But can we really say that man has a function? In this connection, Aristotle suggests that man is to his *ergon* as a flute player is to flute-playing, a builder to building, an eye to seeing, a hand to the things that we do with a hand, a foot to walking or running. Our difficulty here is that, as explained in terms of function, none of these analogies is very illuminating or even plausible. It is not as if Aristotle is party to the thought that man is to be compared with a cog or spindle in a machine, or compared to a limb or an organ that serves some larger creature or organism. Aristotle is no more party to such thoughts than we are. Nor, moreover, is it easy to model virtue in a human being on the functional or technical or executant goodness of a craftsman or musician. That was the other idea Aristotle had. But, you can’t be a builder without possessing some training, skill or aptitude; and it is hard to conceive of a builder or musician in the complete absence of the framework that creates such roles, crafts or métiers. You can, however, be a human being or *anthropos* without having any special skill or aptitude at all. Nor is any particular framework presupposed to simple human beinghood.

Before we throw up our hands or simply let go of Aristotle’s conception of the pursuit of happiness, let us make an experiment. In the spirit of Richard Bentley who was prompted when studying the Homeric hexameter, its prosody and metre, to supply the letter digamma, a disused letter of the archaic Greek alphabet, to certain words at certain places in Homer’s text, let us restore digamma, as Bentley did, to the word *ergon*. At once we catch sight of an Indo-European root. As it figures in *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 1, Chapter 7, isn’t *ergon* what in English we call *work* and the Germans *Werk*? A human being pursues the human good that is happiness, Aristotle will now appear to suggest, by doing the *work* (as we may now say) that is proper to a human person. Loosening the tie to Aristotle, one might say we pursue happiness by doing well the work that is proper to the particular person we are, given our abilities, our reasonable predilections, our situation and our commitments. It is by
doing this well that we pursue true happiness. It is in doing that sort of work that a man or woman has a life worth living.

Or so one might aver. But at this point in the argument it becomes necessary to allow for the evident fact that our everyday conception of work – the calling, occupation or employment by which one earns one’s living etc – embraces less than the whole of ergon as Aristotle understands ergon.¹ What a shame it would be though, given the huge portion of life that is consumed in labour, to see their imperfect fit as amounting to the total separateness of workaday labour and the human happiness that Aristotle seeks to understand by reference to the ergon that is proper to any creature with the phusis of anthropos.

What is to be expected of human activities or action that come with (meta, as Aristotle says) a rational principle? Well, in extenso, we may get the hang of what this means by reading Aristotle’s account of human life in its involvement with vice or virtue, with base or noble, injurious or useful, and painful or pleasant. Acts or activities that apply what he calls a rational principle aim at something worthwhile by drawing upon faculties and dispositions whose exercise gives pleasure (a distinctive, associated pleasure) to the doer and enlarges also – here I reach beyond Aristotle – the doer’s understanding of the realities we inhabit. That is to say that the exercise of these faculties or dispositions affords both practical understanding of those realities and the satisfactions that we attain by learning to wrestle or struggle with them.

On these terms – with or without their culmination in Hegel’s further claim that it is only by man’s own work that man can leave his image upon the world or attain to full consciousness of himself as a free agent – engagement with the human ergon, taken as I am suggesting we take this, must be as important to a person as anything can be to him or her. In one way or another it will embody or embrace or organize most of everything (but not of course everything) that means anything for him or her.² Not least it will shape our understanding of life, leisure and repose, and mould our aspirations for the calling or

¹ Nor (one should one remark) do the virtues as Aristotle conceives them correspond exactly either in extension or in conception to those recognized in moral philosophy as we now have it.

² For a variant upon this, see Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness, Chapter 1 (two pages from the end of the chapter): ‘I don’t like work – no man does – but I like what is in the work, – the chance to find yourself. Your own reality, – for yourself, – not for others – what no man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, never tell what it really means.’
David Wiggins

occupation by which we shall subsist and get the necessities of life itself.

It is most of this and more that one hears when, at the moment of his final defeat, Shylock cries out to Portia, Antonia and the Duke of Venice:

Nay take my life and all, pardon not that.
You take my house when you do take the prop
That doth sustain my house: you take my life
When you do take the means whereby I live.

If there is a right to work it is not a right like any old other right. It is a right to something momentous.

2.

One who agrees to speak about the ethical meaning of work might be expected to say something about its religious significance. Given limitations of time and competence, let me simply offer two remarkable utterances from the closing chapter of Simone Weil, The Need for Roots:

Death and labour are things of necessity and not of choice. The world only gives itself to Man in the form of food and warmth if Man gives himself to the world in the form of labour. But death and labour can be submitted to either in an attitude of revolt or else one of consent. They can be submitted to either in their naked truth or wrapped in lies . . .

Man placed himself outside the current of Obedience. God chose as his punishment labour and death. Consequently labour and death, if Man undergoes them in a spirit of willingness, constitute a transference back into the current of Supreme Good which is Obedience to God.

If you prefer this over the quasi-Aristotelian account I have offered of the meaning of work – if you prefer to meditate here upon the person who undergoes labour and death in a spirit of acceptance – you arrive by another route at something not altogether alien to the conclusion that we reached before. On both accounts, the power and the possibility to do proper work is something that is central to the life and being of a human person. To have no work to do – to find nothing one can do that makes any difference to anyone or anything – is among the very worst things that can befall someone, even if he or she can escape starvation. There is, however, at least one notable difference

480
between the Aristotelian and the Weilian outlooks. One who acts in
the spirit that Weil enjoins upon us has to accept whatever labour pre-
""""sents itself and be ready to adjust his or her expectations and putative
satisfactions to the way things have to be. They must deploy their
talents as best they can wherever it falls to them to labour. For
others that may be more difficult. What these others may look for
(in something of the spirit still of Aristotle, see Rhetoric 1367 a32)
is work or occupation which, however hard it presses upon them, is
not felt as any constraint or external compulsion upon them. In the
world as it is they will often lament the shortfall between the work
they find to do and the ideal we have described, according to which
work at once reveals reality and places demands upon the their best
powers and faculties. Something important will disappear from the
world when human beings no longer even lament this shortfall but
simply acquiesce in it.

3.

Anticipating now the deliberations that will preoccupy your confer-
ence, I cannot pass over the question (framed in terms of the everyday
conception) what if there is no work? You will decide, I am sure,
whether, even then, you want to say that there can be a right to
work. Deferring to the experts on that matter, the thing that I am
eager to say concerns not so much the right as the special strength of
the demand (however that is to be described) that there be some pos-
sibility, some opening, some opportunity or other, for each and every
one of us to engage and engage cheerfully in labour that makes some
however slight difference to something that we can care about and by
which we can also sustain our own being and that of those who
depend on us.

Suppose now that the government of a given country constantly
encourages Taylorist research into ways of dispensing so far as
humanly possible with human labour and assiduously promotes
automation, robotics, IT, and all other means there are to uttermost
productivity. Suppose that this government is so obsessed also with
the economic theory of comparative advantage – and so taken up
with the increase of GDP that is promised by unrestricted free
trade and the struggle for the survival of the (globally) fittest – that
it applies free trade policies not only without regard to humane
animal husbandry, the long-term fertility of the soil or the long-
term resilience of the country they govern, not only without regard
to the effects of such a policy on the life and livelihoods of countless

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819114000151 Published online by Cambridge University Press
previously more or less contented citizens, but also without regard to the distributional effects of its policies. A government of this sort inflicts a mortal injury. Even if the losers could be compensated for the harms they suffer, we know by now (2012) that even in material terms they never will be. Indeed in many cases there is difficulty in the very idea of compensation. For everything that I have tried to spell out quasi-analytically is known to almost every human being on the level of feeling and of amour-propre; and in amour-propre (as Rousseau so clearly perceived) lies one other ineradicable need. Such is the power and significance of the idea of a human being seeking out a place and an occupation where what they are and want to be is part and parcel with what they do. On what terms could a rational person possibly want to accept something quite else in exchange or compensation for that?

A government of the sort I have described disregards the most important kind of duty a government can have – a momentous negative duty not to ignore the risk of doing what I am representing as a fundamental harm to its citizens. The strength of this condemnation does not depend on whether we want to say that the human need to work can amount to a right to work. Let us bear always in mind the awful possibility that not every morally momentous demand can be harmlessly or plausibly transposed, or transposed without significant loss, into the language of rights.

New College, Oxford
OX1 3BN