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# Worthy Work and Bowie's Kantian Theory of Meaningful Work

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## 8. Worthy work and Bowie's Kantian theory of meaningful work

**Joanne B. Ciulla**

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Over the years, Norman E. Bowie has applied Kant's ethics to several aspects of business ethics, but the one that I find the most compelling is his Kantian theory of meaningful work. He writes about it in his book *Business Ethics: A Kantian Perspective* (1999) and in an article 'A Kantian theory of meaningful work' (1998a). Bowie's writing in this area demonstrates how Kant, perhaps more than any other philosopher, offers the most stringent and lucid account of what a moral employer/employee relationship should look like. Kantian ethics also provide Bowie with a foundation for explaining his idea of meaningful work. Bowie is optimistic about the ability of corporations to provide meaningful work. For example, in his paper 'Empowering people as an end for business' (1998b), he argues that 'the primary purpose of business is to provide meaningful work for employees and if managers focus on this goal, business will produce quality goods and services for consumers and profits as beneficial by products' (Bowie 1998b, p.106). I think that this might be true, but achieving it requires managers and businesses to take an extraordinary leap of faith to practice and sustain this goal over time.

In Bowie's review of my book, *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work* (2000), he criticizes me for not defining meaningful work and offering suggestions on what organizations can do to provide meaningful work (Bowie 2002). In this chapter, I will compare and contrast Bowie's and my perspectives on meaningful work. The main difference between our theories rests on the implications of positive and negative freedom for organizations. Unlike Bowie, I am skeptical of the ability of corporations to actually provide meaningful work; however, like Bowie, I agree that there are moral conditions that increase the potential for people to find meaningful work in organizations. The chapter begins by examining Bowie's Kantian theory of work. It then uses some historical examples to show why the dynamics of freedom and power in the employer/employee relationship are often a zero sum game. To this end, I discuss the distinction between meaningful work and – what I believe is a more realistic goal for corporations – worthy work.

## 1. BOWIE'S KANTIAN DESCRIPTION

Bowie's Kantian argument for meaningful work is a bold one. He writes: 'My argument is that at this point in human history within the context of business the possession of meaningful work is necessary for respecting humanity as an end in itself. Thus, on Kantian grounds there is a moral requirement that the corporation provide it' (Bowie 1998a, p.1083). This argument hinges on what Kant means by the autonomous will, which entails both negative and positive freedom, and Kant's maxim of treating humanity as an end in itself.

Bowie starts by examining what Kant says about work. Kant tells us that work is necessary for self-development and self-efficacy. He writes, 'If he earns his bread, he eats it with greater pleasure than if it is doled out to him' (Bowie 1998a, p.1083). Kant has an interesting attitude toward spending and saving money. Money not only meets our needs, but it provides independence. Kant says you do not have to be talented to be thrifty, 'an errant fool can save and put money aside; to spend one's money with refinement on pleasure needs knowledge and skill, but there is no cleverness in accumulating by thrift' (quoted in Bowie 1999, p.68). As Bowie notes, Kant's attitude on spending and saving is surprising for someone raised in the shadows of Luther and the Protestant ethic, but it makes sense if we look at Kant's life. According to Manfred Kuehn's biography of him, when Kant was a financially strapped student, he had to depend on the help of friends (Kuehn 2001, p.115). For example, when Kant needed an article of clothing repaired, one of his friends would lend him his clothes and then wait in Kant's apartment while Kant went out in the borrowed pair of pants or shoes. Friends would also collect money to buy Kant clothes when he needed new ones. After Kant became a popular teacher and started making money, he became a snappy dresser whose maxim, according to Kuehn, was 'it is better to be a fool in style than a fool out of style' (Kuehn 2001, p.36).<sup>1</sup> So Kant seemed to think that meaningful work had moral, psychological and practical value, all of which contributed to personal autonomy, freedom and enjoyment of life. Bowie maintains that, for Kant, a well-paying job and the things that it buys help provide self-respect.

The next step in Bowie's argument is to unpack what he thinks Kant means by freedom and humanity. Bowie bases his characterization of meaningful work on Kant's notion of positive freedom but he says negative freedom is also a necessary condition for it. Negative freedom is freedom from constraints on our ability to make choices. Hence, Bowie says that negative freedom is necessary for meaningful work in that people should be able to freely choose their employment and have autonomy on the job. He defines the Kantian idea of positive freedom as 'the autonomy persons have to be a law

unto them' (Bowie 1998a, p.1085). Drawing on Thomas E. Hill's analysis of Kant, Bowie constructs a picture of what Kant means by humanity in the phrase 'treat humanity as an end in itself'. He says it is the capacity to act on reason based as principles of prudence and as hypothetical imperatives; the ability to set goals, accept categorical imperatives, understand the world, and reason abstractly.

The final ingredient to Bowie's definition rests on Kant's imperfect duties to develop one's talents and to come to the aid of others. Bowie believes that these duties imply that we must go beyond simply respecting the humanity of persons and treating people as ends. In the second part of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant says that we have an imperfect duty (meaning we do not have to do it all the time) to be concerned with our own well-being and the happiness of others, which includes their physical and moral well-being. Bowie equates this duty with promoting the positive freedom of others. Bowie's final definition of meaningful work begins with negative freedoms:

Thus, meaningful work is work that is freely entered into, that allows the worker to exercise her autonomy and independence. Then it moves to positive freedoms: that enables the worker to develop her rational capacities, that provides a wage sufficient for physical welfare, that supports the moral development of employees. And finally, it goes back to negative freedoms: and that is not paternalistic in the sense of interfering with the worker's conception of how she wishes to obtain happiness. (Bowie 1998a, p.1087)

There is an inherent tension between the positive freedoms in the definition and the last set of negative freedoms. How does a company develop employees' rational capacities and support their moral development without interfering with employees' choices on these matters? Bowie acknowledges this problem and turns to Onora O'Neill's explanation of beneficence to resolve it in his definition of meaningful work. O'Neill (1989) says that the duty of beneficence is about a balance between love and respect. On the one hand, we should care about the things that make a person happy. On the other hand, we should not impose our views on what they should do to be happy. This is all well and good, but when we apply this to the workplace, it seems difficult, if not impossible. If employers have an obligation to supply workers with meaningful work, on Bowie's definition, they would have to have a point of view about happiness, human development and morality. And this point of view would inevitably interfere with some employees' choices. Even the most enlightened employer would have a difficult time providing and sustaining Bowie's notions of freedom. At best, employees would have what Lewis White Beck calls 'empirical or comparative freedom', where employees are not coerced, and may be free and autonomous today, but not tomorrow (Beck 1987).

## 2. NEGATIVE FREEDOM AND POWER

One of my concerns with Bowie's definition of meaningful work centers on the classic philosophic problems with positive and negative freedom. If we look at positive freedom as designating the content of meaningful work, or what makes work meaningful to people, then negative freedom is the form of meaningful work, or the conditions needed to find meaningful work. Bowie's account focuses more on positive freedom, and he bolsters his account with examples of admirable business ideals from companies such as Hewlett Packard and Miller Furniture. I place a greater emphasis on negative freedom, first because it is a precondition for positive freedom, and second because of the power differentials that are an inherent part of the employer/employee relationship.

The relationship between employers and employees influences the meaning of work – especially work that is done for a wage. This relationship is usually one of unequal power and it causes problems for both parties. Employers or managers have always faced the temptation of forcing their will on employees. Employees throughout the ages have struggled to maintain their personal autonomy and dignity at work. The principle of freedom is at the heart of this relationship and fundamental to how we think about work – freedom *to* work, freedom *at* work, and I add freedom *from* work (in the case of unwanted overtime, and calls, texts and emails during supposed 'free time').

Bowie's conditions for negative freedom include being able to choose one's work and have autonomy on the job, which I assume means choose how to do your work while at work. This raises the question of what kinds of choices employees actually have in both areas? John Locke, perhaps unintentionally, illustrates one problem with freedom to choose one's job. He says 'the subjugation of the needy does not begin with the consent of the Lord, but with the consent of the poor man, who preferred being his [another person's] subject to starving' (Locke 1970, p.187). So, it is wrong for an employer to enslave a needy person, but it is not wrong for the needy person to choose to be a slave or indentured servant. Are the two choices *really* that different? This is like the employer who says to a single mother of a child with a life-threatening condition, 'If you don't like working here you are free to leave', or 'if you don't like the working conditions here, then you shouldn't have taken the job in the first place'. This woman who depends on her employer for income and health insurance, has the freedom to choose, but little to chose between. It is not clear how Bowie would account for this case. When it comes to work, everyone has freedom of choice, but not everyone has viable options. Kant might deride this weak notion of freedom as 'freedom of a turnspit' or a notion of freedom that is inadequate for personal autonomy (Kant 1996, p.218).

Employment always has some built-in constraints on freedom. Perhaps a

better way to think about it is that we own our labor and we own our freedom. Freedom, like labor, is something that we can barter for a wage. Most paid employment involves some loss of freedom for employees – at a minimum, they are usually not free to show up or leave work at anytime that they want. There is a sense in which most people sell their time to earn a living. When you sell time, you sell the freedom to use it as you want. Karl Marx realized that employees are not really paid for what they produce. He said workers receive compensation for their loss of freedom at work, not for the product they make (Marx 1993). Here freedom means a restriction of their liberty to do or not do or say certain things during the time that they are working. Usually when we take a job, we implicitly or explicitly agree to do it when, where and how our employer wants it done. For instance, consider a receptionist's job. He has to sit at the front desk all day, greet people and answer the phone. He has negative freedom to the extent that, in principle, he can get up and go anytime he wants, but his job requires that he give up the freedom to come and go when he pleases while at work. A fundamental part of his job rests on *being there* and not exercising his freedom.

The idea that wages are compensation for loss of freedom leads to some odd conclusions. Would this mean that the less freedom a person has on the job the more he or she should get paid? Quite the contrary, jobs with more freedom often tend to signal higher status and pay more. As people move up in their profession and organizations, they are sometimes rewarded with more discretion over their work. Often the more constraints on freedom, the lower the salary. So, the amount of freedom people have at work serves as an indicator of the value of a person's work in the marketplace. Employers may explicitly or inadvertently give more negative freedom to valuable employees and not worry about the other positive freedoms such as rational development and moral development that Bowie includes in his definition of meaningful work.

Two sources of power potentially enhance employees' autonomy, or positive and negative freedom at work. The first is to possess expertise, knowledge and skill at doing the job in a way that benefits the employer. This can be anything from being a brilliant computer programmer or a talented trader, to a great surgeon or a highly skilled craftsman. The second, which is usually ignored or discounted in the US, is to join a collective association of workers or a union. Here it is useful to draw on political theory to understand how unions contribute to employees' autonomy. Isaiah Berlin argues that while positive and negative freedom is necessary for autonomy, they yield opposite notions of political systems. Political liberalism assumes that negative freedom, or the absence of external constraints, is freedom of citizens and businesses *from* the state. Bowie's discussion of meaningful work tacitly assumes that business is free from outside constraints. Corporations would voluntarily

create conditions for meaningful work, not necessarily from a good will, but for instrumental reasons of making employees work better. Ideally, the corporation would constrain itself from being paternalistic or interfering with employees' conceptions of happiness, but there is nothing to guarantee this.

If we take negative freedom seriously as a component of meaningful work, why would it preclude us from applying the same liberal principle that applies to the state and business to employees? We would then argue that negative freedom requires some mechanism for keeping corporations from interfering with employees' freedom. Since the liberal position would not want the state to constrain business, and the market cannot really do the job, one remaining option would be constraints on business constructed by employees, such as unions. It is curious that liberal political philosophy is rarely applied to constraints on workers. When we look at the history of work in America, we see how emphasis on negative freedom in the early days of industrialization led to enlightened management thinking about meaningful work that favored positive freedom over, and sometimes as a counterweight to, negative freedom.

### 3. AUTONOMOUS WORKERS

Industrialists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had to contend with what amounted to an 'attitude problem' of skilled American labor. American-born workers were very protective of their autonomy – they wanted to do the job *their* way and at *their* pace. Industrialists wanted control over production. Workers at this time were neither 'docile obedient automatons' nor were they 'upwardly mobile individualists' (Montgomery 1979, p.9). They collectively worked with pride and skill to maintain control of production – for they realized early that it was this control that was the key to their dignity and relative freedom. In the contest for control over production, employers had to discover new ways, ones that did not openly conflict with basic American principles of freedom and equality, to assert control over workers. What eventually emerged from this, in one of the most democratic countries in the world, are some of the least democratic workplaces among industrialized nations today. As David Ewing notes, most Americans leave their constitutional rights at the door when they go to work (Ewing 1978).

Let us consider this model of autonomy of industrial workers in the late 1800s. They organized themselves along the lines of craft guilds. The iron rollers of the Columbus Iron Works kept excellent records of how workers practiced their craft between 1873 and 1876. They worked in 12-man rolling teams that constituted a union. The team negotiated the quantity of iron they would roll, how long it would take to roll it, and their fee rate. They then

decided what portion of pay each member of the team should get. Essentially, the boss, or owner, bought the equipment and raw materials and sold the product. The actual management of production was up to the team. For the past hundred years or so, management theorists have been rediscovering the benefits of teamwork; however, unlike most teams in organizations today, this team was designed, organized and run by the workers.

The team had almost complete autonomy on the job. The iron rollers trained their own members and instilled values related to the team and the work. A strong moral code gave the iron rolling teams their sense of autonomy. The first and most important part of this code was that workers only do the amount of work agreed upon by the union, which was called the 'stint'. Employers were always trying to make employees work faster. Most workplaces had a stint and workers who failed to maintain it by doing too much or too little were ostracized. Those who upheld the stint earned reputations as 'good men' and trustworthy masters of the trade. The worker restriction of output symbolized 'unselfish brotherhood', personal dignity and 'cultivation of the mind' (Montgomery 1979, pp.11–13). The stint was important because it gave workers control over the amount of time that they worked. Businesses at this time were often erratic and, if given the chance, owners would run factories around the clock and then shut them down for months at a time.

Another interesting part of the working man's moral code was the way that they protected their autonomy with what was called a 'manly bearing toward the boss'. This popular expression in the nineteenth century was an honorific signifying dignity, respect and egalitarianism. A person earned this honorific by refusing to work while the boss was watching. It is useful to reflect on the difference between only working when the boss is watching and not working when the boss is watching. They are both gestures of defiance, but one is about keeping one's job and the other is about protecting one's autonomy and dignity. The first means, 'I do not want to work, but I will, because you are watching'; the second means, 'I will work because *I* want to, and not because you are watching me'. Employers may not have treated these men as ends in themselves, but these workers acted as if they were ends in themselves. This was not the case for unskilled workers who were not part of a group or union.

Unions for unskilled workers were arguably the most important development in the history of work. For the first time, unskilled labor was given an independent voice and power in the employer–employee relationship. This was particularly important as mechanization slowly deskilled the work of craftsmen. Founded in 1869, The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor, or the Knights of Labor, was the first such organization in America. Anyone over 18 who worked for wages could become a member (except for African Americans, Asians and women in its early days). The union had a point of view on positive freedom and morality. But 'no person who either



sells, or makes his living from the sale of intoxicating drink, can be admitted' (Bimba 1968, p.173). Eventually the Knights of Labor joined forces with skilled labor and formed the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Samuel Gompers served as its first president from 1886 to 1924. Unlike his European counterparts in the international union movement, Gompers did not want to overthrow the capitalist system. He believed that the purpose of a union was to address the balance of power between employers and employees so that employers received a 'fair' return on their capital and employees received wages that enabled them to make a decent living (Bimba 1968, p.167). In short, this union went a long way in addressing some of the conditions that Bowie prescribes for meaningful work; however, the unskilled, physical labor of AFL members does not seem to match what people think of when they think of meaningful work. Nevertheless, the AFL aimed at increasing negative freedom for employees and in doing so decreased negative freedom for employers – sometimes preventing businesses from innovating and cost cutting, and sometimes putting them out of business altogether. While unions improved their members' wages, benefits and autonomy in the workplace, they also imposed their own constraints on their members.

#### 4. POSITIVE FREEDOM AND THE CORPORATE VIEW OF MEANINGFUL WORK

By the middle of the twentieth century, management theorists identified the problem of work in large corporations as alienation. For most people, the work was boring and they often did not see the final product of their labor. Industrial organizations uprooted people and disconnected them from their families and community life. Prominent business theorists were confident that corporations could solve the problem of alienation. Elton Mayo even believed that corporations could 'mend the torn fabric of society' (Gabor 1998, p.5). In his groundbreaking book *The Concept of the Corporation* (1946), Peter Drucker argued that the corporation was *the* representative institution of society because it was best suited to fulfill the aspirations and beliefs of the American people – what was 'good for General Motors' really was good for America. Drucker made two observations about the problem of meaningful work and alienation. First, 'It is not monotony and routine which produces dissatisfaction but the absence of recognition, of meaning, or relation of one's own work to society' (Drucker 1946, p.157). He then went on to say that we would not solve the problem of alienation by giving workers more benefits, security or wages. 'We will only solve it when we give workers the responsibilities and dignity of an adult' (Drucker 1946, p.157). Meaningful work, then, was primarily about the social and moral qualities of the workplace, not the partic-

ular work that one did or job design. Drucker wrote: 'a man who works only for a living and not for the sake of work and of its meaning, is not and cannot be a citizen' (1946, p.158). Drucker sends mixed messages. He seems to defend a worker's dignity, but he does not seem to see a tie between autonomy on the job or the wages one earns as a part of meaningful work. His argument is about dignity, recognition, meaning and the ties of work to society, but not necessarily about freedom, unless that's what he means by the word 'adult'.

It is ironic that in Drucker's first book, *The End of Economic Man*, written in 1939, he blamed fascism on the collapse of the economic man. He said that European capitalism had failed to prevent fascism because economic freedom led to inequality. The fascists seized on this idea and reasoned that if freedom interferes with equality, then people have to give up freedom (Drucker 1939, pp.78–80). The same could be said for the communists. Isaiah Berlin offers a similar indictment of positive freedom, which he defined as the ability 'to pursue one's own goals in life' (2002, p.178). He said that it could be a dangerous ideal, especially if the meaning of it focuses more on the collective. It could even lead to totalitarianism if leaders or the state decide that they have a better understanding of positive freedom than individuals do. One might offer the same caution about any collective notion of positive freedom, regardless of whether it comes from a state, a corporation or a labor union.

Most ideas of freedom and autonomy entail theories of human nature and the self. If the state believes that some people are blind, ignorant, or corrupt, then Berlin says:

I am in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or their societies, to bully, oppress, torture in name or on the behalf of their 'real' selves, in the secure knowledge that whatever is the true goal of man (happiness, performance of duty, wisdom, a just society, self-fulfillment) must be identical with his freedom – the free choice of his 'true', albeit often submerged inarticulate self. (Berlin 2002, p.180)

Berlin adds that you cannot interfere with the negatively free self because it is not a person with real needs and wants, but 'the real man within, identified with the pursuit of some ideal purpose not dreamed of by his empirical self'. He goes on to say, 'the "positively free" self, can be inflated into some super-personal entity – a state, a class, a nation, or the march of history itself, regarded as a more "real" subject of attributes than the empirical self' (Berlin 2002, p.180). According to Berlin, positive and negative ideas of freedom divide the self in two:

the transcendent dominant controller, and the empirical bundle of desires and passions to be disciplined and brought to heel. This divides the self into self-abnegation (self-denial) in order to attain true independence and self-realization, or total self-identification with a specific principle or ideal in order to attain the selfsame end. (Berlin 2002, p.181)

It is interesting to note, again, how the political implications of positive and negative freedom are rarely applied as cautionary notes to well-meaning employers and management theorists like Mayo and Drucker.

Bowie would agree with Drucker's case for meaningful work and socially responsible corporations. Drucker said the means that we use to strengthen the corporation and make it more efficient should also promote the realization of the aspirations and beliefs of our society (Drucker 1946, p.134). Both Bowie and Drucker are a bit too sanguine about giving profit-oriented and inevitably self-interested corporations the heady responsibility of determining and filling human aspirations. Drucker believed that corporations, as representative social institutions, have to keep their promise to live up to society's values and aspirations. But there are two primary stumbling blocks to corporations delivering on these promises. Using management techniques and organization theories honed during World War II, large white-collar organizations began to mold their employees into *their* image of the ideal corporate citizen. Each company had its own image. The good corporate man (they were mostly men in those days) was not always the good family man and community man. Later criticisms of organizational life charged corporations with constructing a 'social ethic' that legitimates the interests of the corporation against personal interests and undermines the autonomy or freedom of the individual (Whyte 1956). So, the first stumbling block is that corporations rarely hold ideals of positive freedom that conflict with their self-interests. Even firms that hold Bowie's belief that 'if you treat employees as ends, profits will follow', will not continue to do so if that belief does not lead to profits.

The second stumbling block is the structure of corporations and their operation in a global economy. As Louis Brandeis pointed out in his article 'Other people's money', written in 1914, and Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means argued in their classic from the 1930s *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*, it is difficult for corporations to behave responsibly when the people who own the firm (stockholders) do not run it and the people who run the firm (managers) do not own it.<sup>2</sup> The problem is even more complicated today. As we have seen in the recent global financial meltdown, businesses are affected by the actions of seemingly unrelated events and industries in the global marketplace. Sustaining a business and keeping promises to employees about work arrangements and job tenure is, at best, challenging, and at worst, impossible.

In short, there are three reasons why I do not think that corporations can provide Bowie's conditions for meaningful work. The first is the problems of positive and negative freedom in a workplace. As discussed earlier, negative freedom is often a zero sum game between employers and employees. Second, I am very skeptical of the ability of businesses to determine the positive freedoms such as supporting moral development and developing rational capaci-

ties, without being self-serving or paternalistic. Third, even if corporations were able to meet Bowie's conditions, it would be very difficult to sustain them, because of the externalities of a global economy and competitive pressures that make it difficult to keep commitments to employees.

## 5. WHAT WORK MEANS

So, while I agree with Bowie that corporations can provide some of the conditions for meaningful work, I do not think that they can provide meaningful work. This is not to deny or discount the importance of organizational initiatives such as job enrichment, flextime or other measures that make work more interesting, convenient or fair. Nor am I arguing against the moral standard that Bowie sets for the employer–employee relationship. If anything, I think that corporations should aspire to Bowie's Kantian standards. My argument rests on the variability of what people find meaningful about their work. The range is so broad, that Bowie's definition provides conditions that are neither a necessary nor sufficient for meaningful work. Even if a corporation lived up to the standards set by Bowie, one could easily imagine people who still did not find their work meaningful.

A better way to understand meaningful work is to look at it in terms of what work means to different people based on the kind of life that they live. Here are some of the things that work means to people.

1. My work means money that I can use to buy and do what I want.
2. My work means self-efficacy.
3. My work means that I am independent.
4. My work means belonging to a group.
5. My work means that I help other people.
6. My work means that I provide a useful product.
7. My work means that I use my discretion to apply my knowledge, creativity and skills to a set of challenges.
8. My work provides self-development.
9. My work is my identity.
10. My work is my life.

Notice that Bowie's definition implies many of these things, especially if the employer does not interfere with an employee's conception of happiness. Just because work means some of these things to a person, does not mean that the person has meaningful work. Meaningful work usually falls into three broad categories: the actual work a person does (i.e., teaching or carpentry), their contribution to the work that an organization does (i.e., the

military or a charity), or dedication of one's life to work as a calling (i.e., a priest or missionary). Meanings 1–4 exemplify the personal benefits of working, but do not necessarily indicate that a person finds her work or her part in the organization's work meaningful. Most employers would, at a minimum, want their employees to have work mean 5 and 6, but getting employees to do this may be tricky and involve interfering with their beliefs, values and conceptions of happiness. Meanings 7 and 8 are what Bowie seems to have in mind for meaningful work itself, whereas he includes 1 more as a condition for it. Meanings 9 and 10 can have a very positive meaning, as in 'I am first and foremost a parent' or 'my life's work is finding a cure for cancer'. In the hands of business, they could also be very negative as in 'I am a janitor and that is all I am' or 'I have to work 60 hours a week and I have no life'.

Fortunately, our lives consist of all sorts of activities that we consider work, but which fall outside the economic definition of work for pay, such as volunteering, hobbies, traveling, and learning new things. When we redefine meaningful work to be work that has meaning in our lives, then the duty of a corporation to fill it seems unrealistic. Different things will be valuable to different people at different times in their lives. The social meanings and moral values of work vary over time for cultures and individuals.

## 6. MEANINGFUL WORK AND WORTHY WORK

I am not ready to assume that meaningful work is a purely subjective phenomenon. That is why I agree with Bowie's Kantian approach to work but I do not think that it describes meaningful work. It is a theory of what I would call worthy work or work that is worthy of human beings. As Bowie liked to quip, 'When philosophers don't have anything to say, they make a distinction'. So it is with some self-consciousness that I make a distinction between meaningful work and worthy work. Meaning is something that a person finds. It is subjective. Worthy work is work that is morally and/or aesthetically valuable. It is objective.

The British designer William Morris focused on the personal and aesthetic aspects of worthy work. In today's terms, we might say that he was concerned with job design. In a letter Morris wrote: 'Over and over again I have asked myself why should not my lot be the common lot. Indeed I have been ashamed when I have thought of the contrast between my happy working hours and the unpraised, unrewarded, monotonous drudgery that most men are condemned to' (quoted in Thompson 1977, p.309). Appalled by the thick smoke and ugly buildings of industrial England, Morris made proposals for beautifying the workplace with gardens. He railed against the ugliness of manufactured goods and the de-skilling of labor. Morris thought the machines should save labor but

not take over 'the thinking hand'. The aesthetic value of work itself comes from the satisfaction of producing goods that were useful and beautiful.

One of Morris' most interesting insights into the meaning of work was his description of 'worthwhile work'. Morris said work can be either a 'lightening to life' or a 'burden to life'. The difference lies in the fact that in the first case there is hope while in the second there is none. According to Morris, it is hope that makes people want to work and makes work worth doing. He says, 'Worthy work carries with it the hope of pleasure in rest, the hope of pleasure in our using what it makes, and the hope of pleasure in our daily creative skill' (Morris [1885]1985, p.21).

The concept of hope is a useful one for understanding the necessary conditions for a good job. It would certainly fall under Kant's idea of positive freedom. In the Protestant work ethic, work holds the hope of salvation and it does not matter what kind of work it is. Morris' characterization of worthy work is about a certain kind of work. Worthy work is objective even if the notion of hope is subjective, in the sense that hope is a potential that is based on the conditions of work. For example, not everyone gets to use the object that they make. But Morris' point is that if they did, they would take pleasure in using or owning it. We might say the same thing by using a kind of Golden Rule for service. People who hold service jobs ought to be able to do their job in the way that they would like it done if they were the customer or client.

Morris' idea of worthy work is objective, in the sense that most people would like to have jobs that offer adequate leisure, create useful high quality products and services, and offer chance for people to exercise their skills. Work is worthy *because* there is some real or potential good in doing it. The most worthy jobs are those that have worthy purposes. They are jobs in which people help others, alleviate suffering, eliminate difficult, dangerous, or tedious toil, make someone healthier and happier, aesthetically or intellectually enrich people, or improve the environment in which we live. All work that is worthy does at least one of these things in some big or small way.

While there are many jobs that people deem worthy of expending their time, effort and ingenuity on, not all people will find such work personally meaningful. Worthy work has a purpose that most people can see is good in some way. There is an obvious moral logic to it – that is, helping others is good. These are similar to 'pro-social values'. This fits with the research done by social scientists on task significance. Experiments in this area attempt to measure whether employees perform their jobs better if their task is given a meaning that most people would agree is good or important. As some researchers have pointed out, it is difficult to tell if the significance of a task is the cause of an employee's improved performance or the effect of it (Mathieu, Hoffman and Farr 1993). Employees may find their work worthy

because it is supposed to help someone, or because they see how what they do helps someone, or because others recognize that the work they do is worthy.

In one study, Adam Grant looked at all of these possibilities. He found that the amount of calls and money made by students who were asked to solicit donations from alumni increased when they were exposed to scholarship students who had benefited from such fundraising (Grant 2008). In doing so, Grant made the students' task a more worthy one, but it would be a stretch to say that the intervention produced meaningful work. The distinction that I have been making between worthy and meaningful work is analogous to what Grant describes as the debate between job design researchers and social information processing researchers. Job design researchers talk about meaningful work as objective parts of the job – Bowie's argument and the Kantian concept of negative freedom would fall into this camp. Social information processing researchers think that the meaning of a job is subjective and based on 'socially constructed personal interactions' (Grant 2008, p.109). Their characterization emphasizes psychological differences between people (personality traits such as conscientiousness, etc.) and various social influences.

## 7. THE LIGHT OF MEANING

I think meaningful work rests on the psychological differences, social influences and the infinite philosophic perspectives that autonomous human beings might have. My own characterization of meaningful work stems from an observation made by the philosopher Aldous Huxley. He said discovering meaning is not like finding something that is passively waiting for us. Values and meaning are out there but they are 'lit up' by the focus and attitudes that people bring to life (Huxley 1949, p.128).<sup>1</sup> In other words, only certain explorers find meaning because of what they bring to the search. I think that everyone is capable of finding meaning and value in their work, but few are able to animate and 'light up' those meanings alone. The late Robert C. Solomon used to call this the 'Debby Boone "You Light Up My Life" condition of meaningful work'.

Bowie is right that people should be paid fairly, treated with respect, given interesting work, and have a chance for self-improvement. It is likely that if they are treated this way, they will produce better goods and services for their employers. Nonetheless, as I have shown, the conditions of positive and negative freedom necessary for a fully autonomous will are difficult to attain and sustain in a corporation. The variety of hopes, dreams, abilities, personalities and circumstances of the autonomous wills that go to work every day, make identifying the criteria for meaning daunting. Work that is worthy of the Kantian self, should be work that enhances one's negative freedom to seek

happiness and meaning either inside or outside of the corporation. We have a pretty good idea of the factors that make work morally and technically worthy, but whether people find worthy work meaningful is and ought to be up in the air if people are indeed autonomous wills.

Meaningful work must be morally worthy work, and I agree that it is most likely to be found in the morally worthy organizations that Bowie describes. The corporation cannot engineer meaningful work, but Bowie is right that meaningful work tends to flourish among people who are treated with dignity. Organizations do not have a moral obligation to provide meaningful work; however, they do have an obligation to provide work and compensation that leaves employees with energy, autonomy, will and income to pursue meaning at work and outside of work. Corporations cannot and do not create meaningful work. They are simply places where one might find it. The objective element of meaningful work consists of the moral conditions of the job itself, but due to the variety of ways that humans find meaning, this is a highly desirable but not necessary condition. As Victor Frankel shows us, because we have autonomous wills, humans have an amazing capacity to find meaning, even in the hell of a concentration camp (Frankel 2006).<sup>2</sup> If people can find meaning under such circumstances, then perhaps there are not even necessary, let alone sufficient, conditions for meaning in work.

In conclusion, I do not think that the corporation ought to supply meaningful work because I do not think that they can do it. I do, however, think that they should try to live up to Bowie's Kantian ideal. Instead of a theory of meaningful work, Bowie offers us a compelling description of a corporation that is worthy of employing the Kantian self and perhaps a good hunting ground for finding meaningful work. Bowie's theory sets a high standard for corporations, because it appreciates how difficult it is for employees to find meaning when they are not treated like human beings.

## NOTES

1. Kant even had a theory of how to pick the color of clothing. The colors of one's dress should follow the flowers. 'Nature does not create anything that does not please the eye; the colors it puts together always fit precisely with each other' (quoted in Kuehn 2001, p.115).
2. See Morton Keller, 'The Making of the Modern Corporation' (1997).

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