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life. But what is meaningful work?

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Anna Oakes

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*With talk of quiet quitters and pressure on employers to create a space where we can bring our whole selves to work, work is still work. Some of it's great. Much of it can feel meaningless. It'd be easy to think that the events of 2020 and beyond caused us to **wrestle with our relationship with work**, but these questions about the meaning of our work have been around for awhile. Even Henry David Thoreau questioned his own work.*

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In a journal entry from June 11, 1855, Henry writes, “After four or five months of invalidity and worthlessness, I begin to feel some stirrings of life in me.” Almost half a year of worthlessness. Workdays come and go, time passes on, and it is easy to let it pass you by without making a meaningful mark. Henry, the consummate worker, the one we can look to in understanding the meaning of work, often fretted about its potential worthlessness. We suspect that this fretting is, at least in part, what kept him on the move.

We appreciate that framing meaningless work in this way sets it up as a “first-world” problem. At least most first-worlders get to choose which job to work and how to live with it.

The drudgery of work

Thoreau held that there is a distinct difference between meaningful work and meaningless drudgery. Work involves a definite objective and vital interest on the part of the worker. Drudgery, on the other hand, is neither interesting nor directed to an end in view or imagined. Forced tasks, jobs that one is compelled to do, run the very high risk of being meaningless for the sole reason that they are not freely chosen.

In addition to the fact that social and political forces often dictate it, the meaning of work is subjectively felt. What might be meaningful to us (we both like to take old toothbrushes to the grouting of our tubs) might be utterly meaningless to you. There might be some consensus in modern corporate America that holding meetings-about-meetings is not the best possible use of time. Still, philosophers need to keep open the possibility of an alternative universe in which one would find “meetings-about-meetings-about-meetings” perfectly satisfying.

Identifying problematic tasks

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- Saying the same word, 'spaghetti,' for three years straight

For most of us, these tasks would transgress the LUI, and we might do our best to avoid them based on their meaninglessness. Thoreau was onto this and judged many tasks he encountered in his society as potentially problematic.

In “Life without Principle,” Thoreau describes “a coarse and boisterous money-making fellow in the outskirts of our town who is going to build a blank wall under the hill along the edge of his meadow.” Why is this money-making man doing this? Thoreau explains: “The powers have put this into his head to keep him out of mischief.”

The work, in other words, was useless except for keeping the man out of trouble. This boisterous wall-building fellow asked Henry to help him; “he wishes me to spend three weeks digging there with him.” Thoreau considered his options. If I do this, most will commend me as an industrious and hard-working man; but if I choose to devote myself to certain labors which yield more real profit, though but little money, they may be inclined to look on me as an idler. Nevertheless, as I do not need the police of meaningless labor to regulate me and do not see anything absolutely praiseworthy in this fellow's undertaking any more than in many an enterprise of our own or foreign governments, however amusing it may be to him or them, I prefer to finish my education at a different school.”

Supporting apologia

More than anything, Thoreau avoided jobs with weak supports that are difficult to justify beyond mere monetary accounting. Each of us is given such a small amount of time in life that we are tasked with giving a good account—what the ancient Greeks called an apologia—of the duties we perform. And Thoreau was enough of a

philosopher to believe that any reasonable account of work requires supports or

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humdrum, routine, and mindless. Indeed, even the most meaningful undertakings, like Thoreau's experiment at Walden in deliberate living, can become commonplace. After resigning his post in the woods, he explained, "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route and make a beaten track for ourselves."

The experience of getting in a rut at work was one that Thoreau knew well, not because he subjected himself to so many stultifying jobs, but because he was almost preternaturally sensitive to the inner rhythms of life, perhaps, especially his own; he was, at the very least, when life and work began to lose its zest and significance.

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